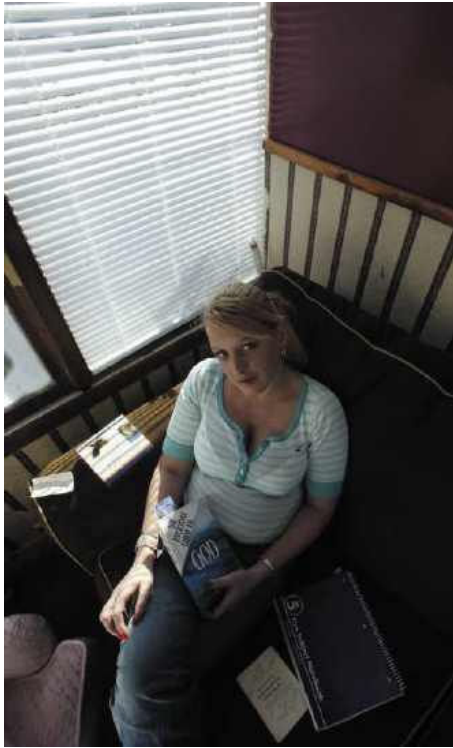


02/10/2008

## The addict next door

BY ROJA HEYDARPOUR  
STAFF WRITER



Gina Crawford reads and writes to help her in her life after years of addiction. Michael J. Mullen / Times-Shamrock

"The heroin being purer and the OxyContin coming onto the scene, that was what caused such a severe increase in the number of opiate addicts in the area," said Michael Donahue, administrator of the Luzerne County Drug and Alcohol Program who has been working in the field for over 25 years.

The accessibility of these substances and more pure heroin that can be snorted instead of injected dissolved the "junkie stigma" of the drugs. While the stigma has dissipated, the physical and emotional toll of the drugs has not diminished. As the effects of the opiates begin to fade, users suffer body aches many times worse than a severe flu.

"It's like being in the fetal position, just curled up," Kelly said of withdrawal. "You feel like that's what death is."

### A path through pills

Valente was working at Abington Manor, a nursing home in Clarks Summit, in 2000 when she injured the L4 and L5 discs in her lower back as she was lifting one of the patients. She was prescribed Vicodin for the pain.

"That's where it all started," she said. "I never got addicted to anything before."

Valente's family doctor prescribed the pills, and after a year of taking up to three a day, the Vicodin no longer numbed the pain. So she was referred to a pain management doctor who gave her Percocet, which was stronger, along with 20 milligram OxyContin pills, which were even stronger. All three are synthetic opiates with varying degrees of potency.

Soon, she heard that if she chewed or crushed and snorted the pills they would work faster. She chewed them at first, then began snorting them. As her tolerance grew, the relief receded.

"When you take these pills, you don't feel pain," Valente, now 42, said. "I had a lot of pain. In the meantime, I was getting addicted."

In 2003, there were complications with her insurance, and she could not get the pills anymore. Sickness set in, and she could not function. She called off from work. Harried and looking crazed, she went to a store, where she ran into a friend of a friend who told her she could help.

A couple of hours later, the friend showed up at Valente's house with a bag of heroin and told her it was virtually the same as the pills.

"I sat at my kitchen table for an hour and debated whether I should do this bag of heroin," she said.

After all, heroin is a street drug, she told herself. But it had been a difficult few years for her, filled with death and loss — her mother, her baby sister and her young nephew died, and her marriage was shaky. Plus, the withdrawal pains were becoming unbearable.

"I did it, and the sickness went away right away," she said.

Soon, she had a \$300-a-day heroin habit.

Easy to get

"Prescription drugs are simply available," said Michael Coyer, the toxicologist for Lackawanna County. "You go to the dentist, you get a prescription for 20 oxycodone — it's too many. Once those drugs aren't being used, they're just sitting there."

This phenomenon creates an environment that is ripe for misuse and diversion of the pills.

They can have effects similar to heroin when they are crushed, stripping the medicine of the time-release component that is the only barrier to extreme potency. Furthermore, individual levels of pain

Paralyzed by pain, Gina Valente opened her eyes each morning and snorted a line of heroin before brushing her teeth.

Then she cleaned, wiping down the large mauve-and-white kitchen of her North Scranton home, putting everything in its place. She let the dog out and went to work.

A typical school morning for Kris Kelly, a jock from Archbald, started with crushed OxyContin.

And Gina Crawford, a single mother from West Scranton, snorted a crushed painkiller to kick-start a day of cleaning, searching for drugs and sitting at home with the shades drawn.

A growing number of Northeastern Pennsylvanians struggle with addiction to some form of opiate.

The new addict is not necessarily a junkie fumbling with a needle in a back alley. More often, it's the working wife and mother, the popular kid at school or the young woman with a hard past who is an expert on illicit drugs, but naïve about the power of prescription medication.

"I felt strong, powerful, nothing in the world bothered me," Valente said.

It is impossible to compile an accurate count of opiate addicts in any given area, but between overdose deaths, records of people seeking publicly funded treatment and law enforcement statistics, an understanding of the situation begins to emerge:

n The number of people seeking treatment at state-funded centers in the Scranton/Wilkes-Barre metropolitan area has multiplied more than 40 times for heroin and nearly 20 times for synthetic opiate painkillers since 1992. The metro area includes Lackawanna, Luzerne and Wyoming counties.

n The number of drug-related deaths involving opiates in Lackawanna County has gone from two in 1992 to 37 in 2006, the most recent year for which records were available. Detailed records going back that far in Luzerne County are not available, but numbers have been on the rise.

n Arrest reports for opiate-related sales and possession have more than doubled since 2000, according to the Pennsylvania Uniform Crime Reporting System, though the records do not isolate opiates from some other drugs and numbers may be missing from smaller local boroughs.

The booming "opiate" class of drugs includes heroin, but also prescription medications such as Vicodin, Percocet and OxyContin, which in particular has changed the face of opiate addiction over the past 10 years.

are subjective and therefore difficult for doctors to objectively diagnose.

Coyer is particularly concerned for teenagers, who may take advantage of these strong pills lying around the house.

“It’s like stealing booze,” he said. Many teens, however, don’t understand the strength of prescribed pills, he said.

Kelly, now 21, started snorting OxyContin as a junior in high school. He already had been drinking heavily and smoking marijuana for years, but when given the chance to try OxyContin from a friend’s father’s medicine cabinet, he took it.

Soon he could not live without it, and he stole cash, checkbooks and even a PlayStation video game system from an old friend to support his habit.

“The trend that we saw that we thought was alarming was young adults dying from the OxyContin combination,” said Dr. John A. Consalvo, who was Luzerne County coroner last year.

Internet pharmacies and chat rooms also allow easier access to synthetic opiates.

“That’s the most frightening for us,” said Mary Martin, the director of CHOICES Recovery Program, part of the Wyoming Valley Health Care System.

“Teenagers can access the Internet and get anything.”

#### Big metros drive trend

The number of people seeking treatment at publicly funded facilities in the Scranton/Wilkes-Barre metropolitan area for an opiate addiction has risen sharply in the last 15 years, according to statistics gathered by the National Drug Intelligence Center, the drug information arm of the U.S. Department of Justice.

In 1992, 19 people sought treatment for heroin and 13 for other opiates and synthetics. By 2005, the most recent year for which records are available, the number of heroin addicts admitted to treatment skyrocketed to 820, and the number of people admitted for other opiate synthetics had multiplied to 245.

One of the reasons for the spike is basic economics, said Dennis Mehall, the units supervisor for the Mid-Atlantic Region of the National Drug Intelligence Center.

Northeastern Pennsylvania’s drug traffic is influenced primarily by the New York and Philadelphia markets. Heroin has been in those areas for many years, and as their markets have become saturated, some distributors have moved into the Scranton/Wilkes-Barre area.

Dealers can make more money selling drugs here. A bag of heroin would sell for \$10 to \$15 in New York or New Jersey, but it would go for up to \$25 here, experts said.

Eventually, the drugs reach rural and high-income areas, and younger and younger people begin to latch onto heroin and prescription opiates, too, Mehall said.

“We’re attracting bigger and bigger fish to the area,” said Francis J. Noonan, the regional director for the Attorney General’s Bureau of Narcotics Investigation and Drug Control.

Kelly, the young man from Archbald, would get his drugs from Paterson, N.J., or sometimes from New York City, simply because prices were so much lower. More often than not, his friends would go and bring it back. The bulk of Valente’s supply also came from New Jersey, she said.

#### Law enforcement key

Crawford started taking prescription pills when her daughter, Jasmine, was 1 year old.

She was 25 at the time, had been smoking crack cocaine for years and drinking heavily.

Her body ached.

Her neighbor suggested she visit a doctor in town who, word had it, was lax in doling out prescriptions. She started with Vicodin and Tylenol 4, which is a combination of Tylenol and codeine, another opiate. Half a year later, in 2000, she moved on to Percocet, and a year after that she was on to OxyContin.

An expert drug user, she once was proud of the fact that she could write a book on the intricacies of buying and using drugs. Still, she did not understand why she was becoming hooked. Despite her long history of drug use, she was naïve.

She became an educated consumer. She went to different doctors, emergency rooms and pharmacies to get what she needed.

“I would go visit other doctors and say, ‘Oh my teeth hurt,’” she said.

Jasmine remembered the routine, too.

“Or, ‘Oh, my stomach hurts,’” said Jasmine, now 8. “She was so good at making up stories when she was, you know...”

For years, daughter was mother. Jasmine learned to cook for herself and, on occasion, had to call 911.

The erratic lives they led, filled with strange men, drugs, alcohol and darkness, came to an end when Crawford was incarcerated and Jasmine was taken away, as she recalls, by a “blonde woman ... in a silver Jeep.” The woman was from Children and Youth Services.

“They put handcuffs on me and took me to jail,” said Crawford, “and I never wanted to do drugs again.”

Law enforcement officials have one of the few chances to break the cycle of addiction, experts say.

“I look at arrest as the point of interception,” said Judge Michael Barrassé, of the Lackawanna County Drug Court. “We’re recycling people is what we’re doing. In the prison, out of the prison. The insane people are us, not them.”

Crawford, Valente and Kelly, with their different backgrounds and stories, all have been involved with the drug court and are working hard to control their addictions as they teeter between staying clean and falling prey to the opiates they loved.

The pain and loss they have suffered is still very close to the surface as they concentrate on learning how to lead sober lives.

“I kind of don’t know how to be a kid,” Jasmine said as she combed her doll’s hair with her fingers, “but Mom is trying to teach me.”

DANIEL AXELROD, staff writer, contributed to this report.

rheydarpour@timeshamrock.com

141 South Main St. Wilkes-Barre • 570-823-7111 • [www.bartikowsky.com](http://www.bartikowsky.com)  
Since 1887 **Bartikowsky** Jewelers *Customer Appreciation Event* **PANDORA** Jewelry  
*February 8<sup>th</sup> & 9<sup>th</sup>*

©The Citizens Voice 2008