

Tragedy becomes cautionary tale

A family tries to turn a son's overdose death into a wake-up call.

By Chris Tisch, Times Staff Writer

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Bonnie Blake left the casket open for the kids to see Andy. Andy Blake, her stepson, had died on April 7, 2006, from a lethal mix of Xanax and cocaine. He was 22. "I thought that was just going to make them all wake up," Bonnie says. It didn't work.

More than 150 people packed the funeral home, but some of Andy's friends were taking the same drugs that killed him.

"I don't even think several of those kids even remember being there, that's how bad they were," Bonnie says. "Because they all came stoned out of their minds."

Bonnie had another worry. Another son, 17-year-old Matthew, seemed headed for the same fate as his older brother.

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The Blakes would not strike you as a family that lost one son to prescription drug abuse and were on the verge of losing a second.

They live in a six-bedroom house in an impressive subdivision across the road from the home of former NBA basketball player Matt Geiger, the largest house in Pinellas County.

Bonnie, 48, is a psychiatric nurse. Her husband, Rollie, 52, is a regional manager for a vending company.

When they married in 1995, Rollie had three children from a previous relationship, and Bonnie had two. The kids were all under 16.

The Blakes suspected Andy started smoking marijuana around 16. They found marijuana plants in the side yard and in his room, and they repeatedly told him to quit.

Unbeknownst to them, Andy also had become hooked on prescription drugs, an addiction that escalated during his high school years.

Andy's drug use caused him troubles after high school. He spent most of his money on drugs and struggled to pay rent on his Tarpon Springs apartment. He was arrested several times, including for disorderly intoxication and DUI.

On a Sunday afternoon in the spring of 2006, Rollie took Andy on a boat ride on Lake Tarpon.

Rollie let Andy drive. The wind was blowing his hair. He smiled and laughed. He told his father he wasn't using drugs anymore.

"He's Andy. He's the kid I always knew," said Rollie, recalling that day. "Seeing the look on his face as he drove the boat, he had a glow. And I thought it was one of those great father-son days."

Later, friends told police Andy was in the throes of a two-week drug binge.

On April 6, 2006, Andy bought about 20 Xanax pills. He partied all night and drove to a gas station to buy beer the next morning. The attendant noticed Andy slurred his words and wobbled on his feet.

Several hours later, a friend came to Andy's apartment and found him dead on his couch.

A baggie filled with Xanax lay on his chest.

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Andy had unknowingly introduced Matt to drugs six years earlier. Matt was a sixth-grader when he snuck into Andy's room and found a few Somas, a prescription muscle relaxant. The pills made Matt feel "euphoric."

By high school, Matt was buying a myriad of drugs -- mostly prescription painkillers and amphetamines -- from older kids.

"It's amazing how available things get to kids when they hit high school," Matt says now. "You find it all over the place. If a kid gets knee surgery and gets pills, he'll sell them."

Matt dropped out of school. Each day revolved around one thing: getting high.

When Andy died, Rollie Blake told Matt to stop.

Matt told him: "I can't. The pain is too much."

The day before the viewing, a friend of Matt's dropped off 40 Valiums. Matt went on a binge.

His parents called police to take him to the hospital. When officers showed up, Matt dashed into the woods. Rollie had to drag him out.

Drug dealers started coming after Matt. One day, Bonnie had to fish \$85 out of her purse to pay a debt to a dealer who had threatened the family.

"For a year we had very few nights where we slept very good," Rollie says, "because we thought every night something was going to happen to him."

Matt says there were times he almost did die: "Sometimes you take too many and then you realize half way through this thing, 'My God, I'm really sick. I can't focus, my heart's beating out of my chest.'"

Matt, who had been arrested on DUI and drug charges, was sent to rehabilitation after he violated his probation.

At home, his parents endured their first Thanksgiving and Christmas without either son.

Matt realized in rehab that drugs had numbed him to his brother's death.

"Over time, I realized that was a smack in the face and I just wasn't sober enough to realize it," Matt says.

Since rehab, Matt says he has had one bad week. A girlfriend broke up with him, and he used. His money disappeared, his face sank in, he woke up sick.

"I think I needed that period to kind of bring me back to reality and say this is never going to be a successful way to solve problems," Matt, now 19, says. "This is never going to make you feel better than when you're sober."

The Blakes hope their sons' experiences help others. It's the same hope Bonnie had when she ordered Andy's casket kept open.

The reality, though, is that two kids who knew Andy have since overdosed and died.

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