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Two mothers share the pain of loss and a common mission

Cindy Harney and Ruth Lyerly carry more than mothers should.

They carry their own business cards and cell phones, invitations to events, photographs and stacks of official reports and personal notes.

They carry more, though.

They carry a burden, one they share in common.

Cindy Harney and Ruth Lyerly each lost a son.

A son old enough to graduate from high school, but too young to legally buy a beer.

A son lost to drug abuse.

When Garrett Harney of Sarasota failed to awaken from an alcohol and drug-induced stupor in August 2006, his bloodstream contained Percocet and Oxycontin. Before Todd Peurifoy of Bradenton turned a gun on himself, within earshot of his mother, Ruth, in May 2005, he had been under the influence of cocaine and marijuana.

Garrett was 20. Todd was 18.

Old enough to have grappled with drug addictions, too young to die.

Their mothers refuse to let them die in vain.

Cindy Harney and Ruth Lyerly still struggle, of course, with the memories of their sons' deaths. They can look people straight in the eye now when they tell their stories, but their eyes still produce tears and their voices still tremble.

But they are strong, they are friends and they are on a mission now -- together -- and they are slowly gaining allies.

Sit across a table from them, as I did last week, and hear them put a mother's warm touch on the cold statistics, and it's difficult to ignore their pleas.

Their pleas are for other parents who have lost children to drug abuse to come out of the shadows and join their crusade -- painful and difficult as that may be -- and for the rest of us to recognize the scope and the severity of the problem, especially the rising death toll related to prescription drugs.

During a 90-minute interview with Harney and Lyerly last week, only once did either woman display a sign of sarcasm or bitterness. "If this many manatees washed up dead on shore, people would be up in arms," Harney said.

Five manatees were found dead in Sarasota County last year, according to state wildlife records.

Sixteen people, between the ages of 15 and 25, suffered drug-related deaths in Sarasota County last year, according to a medical examiner's report.

(Add 18 more such deaths, in Sarasota County, of people in the 26-35 age range; plus 32 deaths of people from 36 to 45 years old; and, 43 deaths of people 46 and older.)

During the first six months of 2007, according to a more detailed report, 51 deaths in Sarasota, Manatee and DeSoto counties were directly linked to drugs such as Xanax, Valium, Oxycodone/Oxycontin and hydrocodone. (Those drugs were present in the bodies of another 32 people whose deaths were investigated by the medical examiner.)

Don't consider 2007 an anomaly. In 2006, the number of drug-overdose deaths in our region was 160 -- triple the number reported in 2001.

While illegal drugs such as cocaine and heroin are deadly, prescription-drug overdoses are steadily ascending the leading-killer lists.

Last week, I wrote about proposed legislation that would create a computer database to help doctors and pharmacists track prescription-drug abuse. The legislation -- now labeled House Bill 1011 -- isn't a panacea but it's worthwhile.

Harney, Lyerly and assorted medical associations support the bill but it's languishing in the Legislature. The mothers understand the Legislature might let them down, but they aren't quitting. Through their emerging group -- "Citizens Call for Action" -- and grass-roots organizations, they will sponsor a public forum on prescription-drug abuse (May 22 at the Sarasota Polo Club at Lakewood Ranch) and Florida's drug "czar," Bill Janes, is scheduled to attend.

If you want more information about the event or this mission, call Harney or Lyerly at 465-0030 or 256-5092.

If you attend the forum and care about the shocking toll of drug-related deaths, be prepared to be up in arms.

