

Son's death motivates parents to help others

Posted by [tjhagen](#) July 05, 2009 21:52PM

Editor's note: This is the first part of a two-part series on substance abuse.

In the year since 24-year-old "KC" Meara kissed his mother good night, thanked his father for their just-ended family vacation, played with the family dog and then injected himself with a fatal dose of heroin in his basement bedroom, Kevin and Maryann Meara have collected a life's worth of mementos.



Cie Stroud/For The TimesMaryann Meara of Hamilton, meets with Paul Tessine, her husband Kevin (foreground) and other members of City of Angels: Children of Addiction, at her dining room table. The Mearas lost their son Kevin (in framed photo) to heroin and the group was planning an August 1 fundraiser called "Rockfest."

There is the painting that depicts the tattoos of KC, or Kevin Caley, as he gazes down from the clouds. There are the many songs he wrote in his journal, collages of pictures and poster boards full of notes from friends and students who knew him at work and at play.

Some of these are lovingly arranged in the family's dining room, placed to catch the eye of any guest. Yet some visitors to the Meara home recently have been handed a less-obvious tribute: a business card bearing KC's picture and his father's name.

The cards, stacked on a side-table opposite the small memorial to the family's lost son, represent perhaps a more-meaningful gesture than any of the room's other features.

Since KC's death last summer, Kevin's duties as PSE&G account manager have not been his only occupation.

Thrust by their son's abuse of alcohol, prescription-pill OxyContin, and later, heroin, into the miserable world known by people whose loved ones struggle with addiction, Kevin and Maryann were confronted with glaring gaps in the treatment of substance abuse in Trenton and its suburbs.

Like other parents in similar spots, the pair struggled to react to KC's problem. Only after their son's death, as the family was peppered with calls from worried parents seeking advice, did they begin to understand why it was so difficult to find the help their son needed.

The lack of an "identifiable process" for many families is a deficiency they hope to change.

"In our son's case, we along with a lot of parents, (are) just going from day to day," said Kevin Meara, who is also a Hamilton councilman. "I only started to understand the system after he died and other kids were coming to us for help."

After word of two more overdose deaths swept Hamilton last November, Kevin Meara began asking counselors, volunteers and legal experts about the "system."

What he heard, he found unacceptable: "No one could identify the process of, if someone had a problem, what do you do?" Kevin Meara said. "There wasn't a clearinghouse of any sort ... (The system had) horrible cracks."

"The support network can be improved, the communication can be improved, the amount of money that's going towards it can be increased," Kevin Meara said. "I've never complained ... I'm in it too short of a time to complain. I'm just saying it's got to be easier. There's got to be more awareness out there of how to get people help quicker."

The Mearas have since joined other people who want to address a drug problem that stretches to the quiet suburban streets of Mercer County from Trenton's most run-down corners.

Local statistics on drug use are slim and sometimes outdated, but those available indicate a real predicament.

Overall drug use appears to have remained relatively static -- federal statistics show the number of New Jersey residents annually admitted for treatment of heroin addiction, for example, has held above 20,000 since 1993.

Troubling trends have also emerged. The number of state residents treated for addiction to opium-derived prescription drugs like the OxyContin that hooked KC increased nearly sevenfold between 2000 and 2008.

Individuals under the age of 25 made up about 12 percent of that group in 2000 but accounted for nearly 40 percent eight years later.

"All you have to do is scratch the surface, and you just find this whole undercurrent out there that you just walk by ... every day -- you never knew," Kevin Meara said.

KC, a 2002 Steinert High School graduate, had struggled in the past with alcohol, but his problems with other drugs first became clear to his parents in 2006, when he confessed an addiction to OxyContin and entered outpatient treatment.

"He said to me, 'I didn't even realize I was addicted until it was too late,'" Maryann Meara recalled. "Just taking pills, feeling good, popping one at a party and then, all of a sudden, it was something he had to have."

The usage and treatment made life more difficult. KC struggled at work, broke up with a girlfriend, and eventually hit what his dad called a "downward spiral" during which he started using heroin.

"KC used heroin for a very brief time. Only about six weeks that we know of," Maryann Meara said.

He also voluntarily sought help for his drug problem. But the 24-year-old lived in an Elizabeth treatment center for less than three weeks before leaving with anxiety issues in mid-June.

Kevin Meara was devastated when his son quit the treatment program. "It took everything out of me."

Afterward, KC accompanied his family on a planned trip to Disney World, then told his parents he was meeting a friend and took one of the family cars immediately upon their return.

"He was gone for 20 minutes, (and) when he came home, I felt good about that," Maryann Meara said. "I had all my eggs in my basket and everything was good."

But instead of visiting friends, he bought heroin. His mother found him kneeling and motionless on his bedroom floor the next morning.

In seeking professional help for KC, the Mearas had relied on experienced friends and word-of-mouth. Maryann in particular wonders what more could have been done.

"As a parent, you have guilt," adds Kevin Meara. "Did you do the right thing? ... But from the minute I was kneeling over my son in his room, I just felt to kind of give it to God and say, 'This is what we're dealing with.'"

"I'm more aware of what's going on now around me, and I was never one to say 'no' if I could help someone," he continued. "It just seems like there's more people asking for help right now."

The business cards on the Mearas' table were printed in response to those cries for assistance.

They bear the name "City of Angels, Children of Addictions," a brainchild of family friend Paul Tessein.

Tessein, a recovering addict -- 22 years clean -- who lives in Hamilton, had worked closely with KC in his recovery effort. Now he talks about how the death has spurred more action than he could have imagined.

Founded this year, City of Angels has about 20 members, including an always-active handful of recovering drug abusers and concerned citizens.

They act like a team of substance-abuse consultants, on call when families like the Mearas or youths like KC don't know where to turn.

"One of the things that we want to do is prevent people from falling through the cracks, and give them a place, a resource center, that they can come to," Tessein said. "Not only them, but their families."

And to hear the members tell it, they have not suffered from a shortage of demand.

Even a brief talk with Tessein and other volunteers yields tearful tales of area youths in dire need of treatment.

Three City of Angels members recently discussed two male Steinert High School grads, 19 and 23, addicted to OxyContin but dismissed early after 7 days at a local treatment center because an insurance company wouldn't foot the bill. The men are now at a treatment center in Maine.

They recounted the story of a 21-year-old female Steinert High School grad who overdosed on prescription pills minutes after Tessein found her, by chance, crossing a Hamilton street.

Tessein left her at a local hospital, but she was discharged and apparently raped sometime before 10 the next morning, he said. The girl recently returned from a treatment center in Florida, and the City of Angels volunteers still keep close tabs, driving her to doctor appointments and wondering what might have happened had they not stepped in.

Members of the group, which is working toward nonprofit status, say they are available at all hours. Some have accommodated young addicts in their homes if they needed a safe place to sleep and paid for dinner or clothes when necessary.

While there are a litany of programs to help drug abusers, the current system "is not a complete program," said Joy Tozzi, a former Hamilton school-board member and co-founder of the group. "I don't think there is anything else like" City of Angels. Floral-print dressThe group has provided a way for Kevin Meara, who Tessein said has been invaluable as a consultant for parents, to remember KC.

Pain lingers, but the Mearas smile now as they remember KC's love for music or the promises he made on his final night -- to cut the grass and make a rare appearance at his sister's soccer game.

There was "not a mean bone in his body," Maryann Meara said.

Besides their work to establish City of Angels, the Mearas meet regularly with an informal group that has been dubbed the KC Meara Foundation -- a roundtable of guidance and substance-abuse counselors, lobbyists, legal professionals and politicians talking with the goal, as Kevin Meara put it, of "testing the system."

"That helps us identify where the gaps are" and decide how to help close them, he said.

So many problems and ideas have popped up that even establishing the group's mission statement has been a challenge.

Kevin Meara talked about the lack of a rating system for treatment centers, for example, that might have helped his family make their choice.

Developing a more-accessible source of information about how to respond to substance-abuse crises is another potential goal.

"There's a system out there," Kevin Meara said. "You have to know how to use it."

Asked about larger aims, Kevin Meara admitted, "I don't know where I'm going with all this."

"I just know that every day in my mind, I see my son's viewing. And my wife standing there in a floral-print dress with her shoes off after standing there for seven hours" greeting well-wishers and "never moving from that spot. ... I don't want to see other mothers in that position. All I know is that just to sit here and do nothing is not going to help that."

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larryghost says...

The first step for every parent is the difficult challenge about talking about a loved one addicted to drugs. The drug companies market compassion for diabetes, high blood pressure, HIV, etc., but when a person succumbs to the disease of addiction by way of one of their addictive products that person is loathed and deserving of little respect.

I urge all who want to learn more on how to bring a greater awareness to the root cause of the growing problem of addiction to search for Ban OxyContin.com. There are at least a 1000 comments concerning OxyContin and it is my hope that eventually a media outlet or public official will bring support to the endeavor. The over marketing and overselling of addictive drugs under the guise of pain relief must come to light in this country. Will it be the City of Angels -who is able to finally spearhead a National Movement that is needed. Larryghost

Posted on 07/07/09 at 7:28AM

NancyNAABT says...

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This confidential system TreatmentMatch.org helps connect people to doctors providing buprenorphine treatment. The free 24/7 service lets patients reach out for help anytime with privacy.

Patient registration is fast. A short list of questions helps match patients to physicians. All information is confidential residing on a secure server. Once the application is done, emails are sent to physicians. The System then allows the physician to contact patients confidentially by email.

For information visit www.naabt.org

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