

# Oklahoma families battle chemical demons: Michael Stewart

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Michael Stewart was good.

The hazel-eyed teen with a wide smile was a good student, brother, son and friend.

And he was a good customer for illegal prescription drugs. His neighborhood drug dealer would buy boxes of prescription drugs belonging to an older man and then pick them up from his mailbox, friends later told his mother. The dealer would divide and sell them to area teens.

"He was very good at hiding it," said his mother, Angie Stewart-Mazza. "From the outside you would never know."

Inside, he battled drugs and depression. Outside, he kept people laughing.

"We would be driving in his car and he'd dance to the music and be so goofy," said his little sister Emilee Stewart, now 19. "Always had me laughing.

"One night we were sitting outside on his truck and I remember telling him I wouldn't know what to do with myself if I ever lost him," she said.

The family's suspicions about Michael Stewart's addictions initially revolved around alcohol.

It all began one night when he was 15 years old and his cell phone accidentally rang his mother. She could tell he was at a party. When she drove by and saw kids with liquor, she slipped in and dragged him out. Back home he confessed he'd also been smoking marijuana.

During the next six months in drug rehabilitation and family counseling, Michael — the kid who was close to his parents, his sister's best friend, active in sports and church — revealed he'd tried numerous drugs.

"Just freaked out," Stewart-Mazza said. "I thought we were living the perfect life with the perfect kids."

She continued watching him closely. She read his journals, saw counselors and researched drug use.

"I thought as a parent I was really, really smart. I thought I was on top of things," she said. "I thought I was sneaky and nosy. And it wasn't enough."

She routinely searched for drugs in the backs of radios, speakers and other possible hiding places.

Michael Stewart didn't even share the depth of his drug addiction with his beloved sister, Emilee. She adored him and she told her parents whenever his drinking seemed uncontrollable.

"Michael said when he drank, he wasn't someone who could drink two or three and walk away. Everything he did was to the extreme," Stewart-Mazza said. "He would drink to the point of blacking out."

## His last party

Then one September morning around 9:30, a police officer rang the doorbell. The night before, Michael Stewart had been drinking and snorted three or four crushed OxyContin pills at a party, friends later told Stewart-Mazza. When his friends awoke around 7 a.m. he was unresponsive and they called 911.

Michael Stewart died of oxycodone intoxication around 7:30 a.m. Sept. 2, 2006, a medical examiner's report says. He was one of 42 Oklahoma teens who died from drug use between 2004 and 2006, state statistics show.

That morning's events play often in Emilee Stewart's head. She and their little brother,

Gage, were asleep at the time.

"My mom came running into my room screaming and crying hysterically ... telling me Michael was dead. I sat there bawling, in shock," Emilee Stewart said.

They went to Gage's bedroom to wake him with the tragic news. The normally stoic 10-year old sobbed and buried his head between his mother and sister as they all clung together in Gage's bed.

"His reaction killed me inside," Emilee Stewart said.

## A pall over the family

Depression hit the family. Gage wanted to surround himself with Michael's bedding and other belongings. For about six months, Emilee could rarely eat, fix her hair and makeup or go to school without falling apart.





"(I) Wanted to kill every friend that was in that house with him that night," she said.

The day Michael Stewart died, his family found methamphetamine in his pickup and among his belongings at the restaurant where he worked, Stewart-Mazza said.

"I truly believe that addiction is a disease and some kids can do drugs and walk away and others cannot," Stewart-Mazza said. "Michael could not. He knew it. He hated it and hid it well."

Emilee Stewart still struggles with losing him but understands hiding his addiction made sense to her older brother.

"I truly believe he didn't want to hurt anyone," she said. "And that's why he kept everything so secret."

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