

Families refuse to bury the truth about heroin

Former heroin addicts and family members speak during a town hall meeting held by state Rep. Dan McNeill to address the heroin epidemic on March 30 at American Club Pavilion in Coplay.

[Laurie Mason Schroeder and Pamela Lehman, Contact Reporters](#) Of The Morning Call

Seventh in an occasional series on the heroin epidemic.

LEHIGH VALLEY — Jenna Souders' obituary in The Morning Call was sweet yet sad, much like the 23-year-old west Allentown woman who died in June of a heroin overdose, her mother said.

"A beautiful baby, an adorable little girl and a beautiful young woman, she suffered with the disease of addiction which took her life at such a young age," the obituary read.

Melissa Souders chose the wording herself, deciding against phrases she'd seen in other young people's obituaries such as "died suddenly." Souders had never hidden her daughter's addiction and she wasn't about to start as she prepared Jenna's funeral.

"That's what happened," Souders said. "She overdosed and she died, and we needed to talk about it."



[As the country grapples with how to reverse an alarming trend in heroin overdoses, The Morning Call is taking a deeper look at how opioid addiction is affecting families and communities in the Lehigh Valley in this occasional series of stories.](#)

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Mentions of drug addiction in obituaries remain rare, but more families are pushing past the shame to write honest accounts of overdose deaths. The exercise can be cathartic for those who see public acknowledgment as a step in stemming the opioid epidemic. Fueled by cheap and easy access to heroin and prescription opiates, drug overdoses have become the leading cause of accidental deaths in the United States.

So widespread is the reach that nearly 1 in 2 Lehigh Valley residents has a direct connection to the epidemic, according to a Morning Call/Muhlenberg College poll released in June — 43 percent said they "personally know" someone who has been addicted to heroin or another opiate.

Despite those numbers, heroin addiction still carries a stigma, prompting many families to choose coded language in a loved one's obituary. But things are changing.



When Jenna Souders died of a heroin overdose in June, her mother decided to be upfront about her addiction in the obituary. (CONTRIBUTED PHOTO / THE MORNING CALL)

Katie Falzone, vice president for operations at Legacy.com, a website that hosts obituaries for 1,500 newspapers and 3,500 funeral homes nationwide, has seen a "significant spike" in obituaries with mentions of both addiction and overdose. In 2014, 13 Legacy obituaries mentioned the terms, she said, and in the first nine months of this year, 58 included them. Obituaries in Ohio and Pennsylvania topped the list for such mentions, she said.

Across the country, more than 265,000 people died from opioid overdoses between 1999 and 2014, federal statistics show. The number of Pennsylvanians who died from such overdoses rose 23 percent to 3,383 between 2014 and 2015 alone. The numbers have made opioid addiction a priority for legislators and Gov. Tom Wolf, who oversaw a rare joint legislative session last week on ways to combat the problem.

Families have helped bring the need to the forefront, said state Rep. Michael Schlossberg, D-Lehigh, who noted that the mission has united Republicans and Democrats.

"Heroin was such an under-the-radar issue," he said. "What actually helped people become aware of the heroin epidemic was when parents started talking in obituaries about the way their child died."



[Pennsylvania ranks eighth in the rate of deaths from heroin, but third behind California and Ohio in total number of heroin deaths, with 2,744 in 2014, according to the latest U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention mortality data. That data also show there were 47,055 deaths in the 50... \(Eugene Tauber\)](#)

Psychotherapist Jason Boyko, clinical coordinator at Lehigh Valley Physician Group Adult and Pediatric Psychiatry, said parents talk about it because they feel robbed or cheated.

"What they really want is their loved one to be remembered and honored just like everyone else," he said.

But because drug addiction is still a relatively taboo topic, he said, "some may feel they can't mourn openly because of the shame associated with it."

"What I share with my patients is if you love someone well and want to mourn them well, you need to be able to share them," he said. "This is a way to be authentic."

Through obituaries, families can share stories and spur action by requesting donations to groups that are tackling the issue. That's been the case with another once-taboo topic — cancer. While it wasn't always the case, obituaries now often cite a person's "brave fight with cancer" and request donations to arm hospitals and organizations in the battle.

That's what happened. She overdosed and she died, and we needed to talk about it. — Melissa Souders, mother of heroin addict Jenna Souders

"A lot of people in the community will rally around the cause of fighting cancer in that person's honor, and we do see an increase in donations," said Matt Eichelberger, a communications manager for the American Cancer Society.

Talking about cancer has led to awareness and prevention, he said. Families caught up in the opioid epidemic are hoping the same will happen with drug addiction.

They aren't obligated to list a cause of death in obituaries. But Northampton County Coroner Zachary Lysek said some families use the death notice as a cautionary tale, "an attempt to help others."

Bracing for news

Joe Cavallo's obituary in September noted the 53-year-old died after "a long battle with drug addiction." The decision, said his brother Jim Cavallo, deputy police chief in Moore Township, was made matter-of-factly by their mother. Donations went to a homeless shelter in Easton that takes in many whose lives followed the same course as Joe Cavallo's.

"Heroin is responsible and should get the credit for his death," Jim Cavallo said.



For help overcoming addiction:

• Lehigh County Drug and Alcohol Administration: 610-782-3555

• Northampton County Drug and Alcohol Division: 610-829-4725; emergencies, 610-252-9060

• Malvern Institute Lehigh Valley: 124 Bridge St., Catasauqua, 610-403-8888

The agencies can help a person identify...

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Joe Cavallo's battle with addiction spanned 35 years, beginning in his teens. One of Jim Cavallo's first calls as a police officer was to his brother's heroin overdose after Joe was found unconscious in an alley in Bath.

He cycled from rehabs to hospitalizations to treatments and back to the street, Jim Cavallo said.

"What happened a hundred times is we'd open up and help him and we'd think, this is it. He's going to kick this, and boom ... Everything he said was a lie."

Joe Cavallo died alone and was found stripped naked in a vacant lot frequented by drug addicts and dealers on the outskirts of Philadelphia.

For several days, his body remained unclaimed because authorities weren't sure who he was.

For Jim Cavallo, his death brought a mixture of relief for what was and regret for what could have been.



Fourth in an occasional series on the heroin epidemic.

John Cramsey, the Emmaus area gun range owner arrested Tuesday at the Holland Tunnel apparently on his way to rescue a teenage girl in New York City, is hardly the only one who has been driven to extremes by the raging heroin and opiate epidemic.

... (Sam Kennedy)

"Now I don't have to worry about where he is and whether he is safe or not," he said.

Melissa Souders understands that worry. Her daughter Jenna was 13 when she started smoking marijuana and quickly jumped to harder drugs. Souders grounded her, drug-tested her, confronted her about drug paraphernalia found in her room. And she supported her through 21 stints in rehabilitation. But the lessons never stuck, Souders said.

Jenna graduated from Parkland High School in 2011 and aspired to be a makeup artist. She loved animals and once tried to revive a squirrel that had been hit by a car. And while her mother held out hope for Jenna, she prepared for news of her death.

It happened June 7 in a hotel room where Jenna had gone with another addict. The man called and left a message on Melissa Souders' phone directing her to [Lehigh Valley Hospital](#).

"So I went into the hospital and asked for her. From the look on the nurses' faces, I knew," she said.

More than 900 people attended Jenna's funeral and viewing. Souders stood in the greeting line for six hours. Many thanked her for opening up about Jenna's addiction in the obituary.

"I always told the truth about Jenna," Souders said. "People at work wouldn't say anything at first, but when we were alone they'd tell me about their own daughter, or nephew or grandchild who was using. They would ask me how I handled certain things."

That's why she addressed Jenna's addiction head-on in the obituary. So people would know. So people would ask.

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