

Community

By Steve Cronin

Unsuspected... ing rise in heroin ennsylvania

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Deadly batch of heroin has killed 23

By Lee Mitchell | News Staff Reporter
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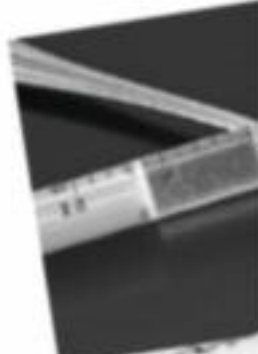
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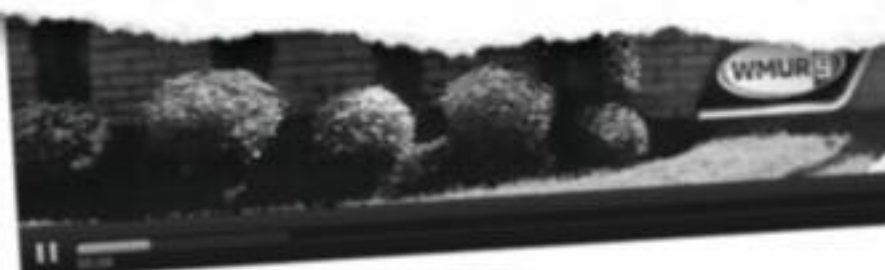
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SJS

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Phaneuf Funeral Homes noticing trend in overdose deaths

First Oct 08, 2015

...passed away in Manchester on April 16, 2015,
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MANCHESTER, N.H. — At Phaneuf Funeral Homes, they're facing a new and very...
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As Heroin Deaths Rise, Funeral Directors Fight to Raise Awareness

George Fiske had a decision to make.

His 22-year-old son, Lance, had died of a heroin overdose the night before. Now, the local newspaper was on the phone, asking if the Brockton, Massachusetts, funeral director would comment on the death.

“They asked if I wanted to say anything,” Fiske said. “I said ‘Call me back in a few hours.’”

When the reporter called back, Fiske was ready with more than a short comment. He told the full, heartbreaking tale of his son’s addiction and what it is like for a loving father to have to bury his middle child.

“I just wanted to make his death meaningful,” said Fiske, who owns Funerarias Multi Culturel in Brockton. “I just wanted to maybe, hopefully, help someone else.”

Lance Fiske died in August 2009, when few people were talking about the nation’s growing heroin epidemic and the terrible toll it was taking on families and communities.

While Fiske’s story attracted a lot of attention and got people talking, it did little to slow heroin’s fatal march across the land. Heroin deaths in the U.S. hit 10,574 in 2014 – more than five times the number of heroin-related deaths 10 years earlier, according to the National Institute on Drug Abuse.

And, as the death toll has risen, so have the number of people fighting to raise awareness of what is happening. Among those on the front line are a number of funeral directors who have gotten tired of burying young people before their time and feel compelled to take action.

“Somebody has to do something to stop it,” said Jim Sass, whose funeral home in Milwaukee has put up billboards warning that heroin kills. “We are not out to save the world, but if we can save one life, it’s worth it.”

It makes sense that funeral directors are alarmed at the drug’s impact on their communities. They deal with the victims of fatal overdoses on a day-to-day basis.

Newspapers rarely report on individual overdose deaths, so it’s easy for communities to overlook them. While the obituaries of most overdose victims don’t go into detail about what caused the death, funeral directors usually know the stories of the people they are serving and how they died.

“We had a boy this year who was 20, and in 2013 we had a funeral for his sister, who was also 20. Both of them died the same way – both in their bedrooms. How do you think those parents feel?” said Mark W. MacDonald, co-owner of MacDonald Funeral Home in Marshfield, Massachusetts.

MacDonald is so alarmed by the number of heroin deaths in his area, he’s begun stocking his funeral home with the heroin antidote Narcan and is working to get other local businesses to follow suit.

“We have to go into prevention mode,” MacDonald said. “We have to try to prevent these overdoses.”

A Father's Fight

For Fiske, the battle against heroin began long before his son's death. George Fiske isn't sure when his son's drug addiction began – probably in high school with some stolen Oxycontin, he said. However, when the boy couldn't get the prescription drugs anymore, he turned to the cheap and easy-to-obtain high of heroin.

When Fiske realized his son's problem, he acted. Father and son moved to the Cape Verde Islands off the west coast of Africa, where Fiske opened a funeral home.

"I basically got him out of the states to get him away from the drugs," Fiske recalled.

At first, the plan seemed to work. Lance Fiske helped with the funeral home. He enjoyed the tropical island. Pictures show him smiling and suntanned on a beach.

"He was doing well," Fiske recalled. "But in the end he got involved with some Nigerians in the drug trade. I had to get him back home."

The family returned to Massachusetts, where Fiske opened Funerarias Multi Culturel, which specializes in arranging international funerals.

Lance Fiske helped at the funeral home. He was clean for the next 18 months. But then, one Sunday night he had a fight with a girlfriend. He took the cordless telephone into his bedroom while his father watched a Boston Red Sox game on television.

When George Fiske went to check on his son a few hours later, he discovered him dead, curled up in a chair with a needle nearby.

"A friend gave him something, and it was too much for him," George Fiske said. "It was heartbreaking, but that's the way it is."

Fiske was familiar with people at his local newspaper who published his funeral home's obituaries. That led to the interview, which led to additional coverage in other newspapers and on TV.

There were some successes – a doctor from Arizona called to say the story opened his eyes to the dangers



Left: Lance Fiske.
Below: George Fiske twice moved his business to try to help his son kick his drug problem.
(Photos courtesy of George Fiske)

of overprescribing painkillers. However, if Fiske thought then that talking about Lance's death would convince other addicts to give up heroin, he knows now he was wrong.

"My bottom line is that nothing has gotten better, it has gotten worse," he said. "The only way it is going to get better is if you charge these people (heroin dealers) with murder. The problem is, half the time they are only charged with drug dealing, and they get away with a slap on the wrist."

That's the message Fiske puts out when television crews and documentary makers contact him. Lance Fiske might have died six years ago, but the growing number of heroin deaths has kept his story in the news.

"It's just discouraging that it still goes on," his father said.

A Matter of Education

For funeral director John "Jack" Martin, owner of Dusckas-Martin Funeral Home in Erie, Pennsylvania, the battle against heroin overdoses is

fought one classroom full of teenagers at a time.

For the past 14 years, Martin has conducted a session on death and dying for local high school juniors. Over the last two or three years he's modified that talk so half of it focuses on heroin.

"The problem is terrible. Last summer I probably did about six funerals of students from around this area," he said. "I ask every class, 'How many of you know someone who is on drugs?' Almost everyone raises their hand."

Martin conducts his classes at his funeral home, and his presentation uses a scared-straight approach to warning about heroin.

"We talk about the major causes of death for teenagers. Accidents are No. 1, but now overdoses are almost there," he said. Martin takes the students into a room with a cold, metal table and tells them to picture a 21-year-old lying on it. "I say, 'He looks to be in perfect health, but he's dead,'" he said.

Local newspapers have covered Martin's classes. One paper ran a front-page story about him and that night he received three phone calls at home from addicts praising his efforts. That article also led him to getting involved in a local addiction support group.

In November, Martin distributed 100 Narcan kits and did training for parents whose children are addicts.

Martin feels like he's making a difference. He's heard from teens who say his presentations convinced them to get clean. He gets text messages from people after he speaks at the support group. He's been contacted by other school districts interested in sending their students to his presentation.

"I know I'm having an impact. It makes me feel good – not that I don't have enough work already," he said.

Hoping to Help

MacDonald began his Narcan program after responding to too many calls where people overdosed in the bathrooms and parking lots of businesses in the area he serves.

"We are tired of burying young kids. People get old and get sick after they live great lives – that's one thing. But we are tired of burying

young kids. It wears on us. It's our kids' friends who are dying from this, kids who have been in my house," he said.

MacDonald decided on the Narcan program after workers found syringes while cleaning his parking lot.

"It made sense to me to bring this to businesses that have large parking lots," he said. "Seconds matter in these cases, and any jump we can get on it before EMS gets there can help."

While some might be worried about liability issues for getting involved in an overdose, MacDonald said his state's Good Samaritan Law would protect him and his employees.

"I'm no more concerned than if someone was having a heart attack and I was to administer the paddles," he said.

So far, MacDonald has arranged for Narcan training for his employees and those of another area funeral home. Three businesses in his community have asked to join the program.

"The ball is starting to roll," he said. "People and businesses are saying this isn't a bad idea."

Delivering the Message

Arthur "Buddy" Phaneuf has taken to the airwaves to help battle

the problem.

The president of Phaneuf Funeral Homes & Crematorium in Manchester, New Hampshire, Phaneuf is also the host of the "Dying To Talk" radio show on WTPL-107.7 FM in Concord. He's been on the air since September and has already done a show and written a blog about the growing number of heroin deaths in his area.

Phaneuf figures his funeral homes handled more than 50 heroin-related deaths in 2015 out of its approximate 2,200 annual calls.

In addition to handling funerals, Phaneuf's funeral home has also had to respond to numerous calls for body transfers of heroin addicts who have been found dead.

"We have responded four times to the same rooming house in one year – three times it was the same room," he said. "It's really frustrating."

Phaneuf has also seen the financial toll the heroin deaths have taken on local police services and his own business, as he works to provide transfers and services for people who might not have a lot of money.

"You talk about the toll it takes on the family, but there is also an economic toll," he said. "There are a lot of impacts." •

U.S. Heroin Overdose Deaths

2001 – 1,779

2002 – 2,089

2003 – 2,080

2004 – 1,878

2005 – 2,009

2006 – 2,088

2007 – 2,399

2008 – 3,041

2009 – 3,278

2010 – 3,036

2011 – 4,397

2012 – 5,925

2013 – 8,257

2014 – 10,574

Source:

National Institute on Drug Abuse



Opening Up About Addiction in Obituaries

Thomas F. Parks was trying to deliver a brutal message to his daughter's circle of friends when he approved the first line of her obituary.

The Maine man didn't know he'd be telling her story to an entire country.

"Molly Alice Parks, 24, who most currently resided in Manchester, N.H., passed away in Manchester on April 16, 2015, as the result of a heroin overdose," the obituary read. The obituary went on to tell about Molly Parks' "fearless personality and her trademark red lipstick." It also discussed the "many bad decisions" she had made in her life.

"She fought her addiction to heroin for at least five years and had experienced a near fatal overdose before," the obituary said. "Molly's family truly loved her and tried to be as supportive as possible as she struggled with the heroin epidemic that has been so destructive to individuals and families in her age bracket."

Maybe it was the line that linked Parks' death to so many heroin victims. Maybe it was the heartbreak encompassed in those few words about her family's futile efforts on her behalf. Whatever it was, Parks' obit struck a chord. More than 70,000 people have seen the online obituary. Her death has been the subject of articles in newspapers and magazines around the country, including in *The New York Times* and *People*.

Molly Parks' obituary might be the one getting attention, but it is not an isolated incident. Across the nation, more and more families are stepping forward to insist their loved ones' obituaries clearly state that drugs played a part in their death.

It's not an organized movement, more of a grass roots response to the growing tolls that heroin and opioids are taking on communities.

"Years ago, when someone died of a drug overdose (the families) said they weren't going to talk about it. Now it has done a complete 180," said Arthur "Buddy" Phaneuf, owner of Phaneuf Funeral Homes & Crematorium, in Manchester, New Hampshire, which served the Parks family.

Phaneuf said he was surprised when one of his funeral directors showed him the Parks obituary – it was the first he'd seen that mentioned drugs as the cause of death.

While he was happily surprised the obituary ran as submitted, Phaneuf was shocked when the death notice went viral. So was Tom Parks.

"I never planned that it would go that far," said Parks, who works selling parts at a local Kenworth truck dealership near his home in Saco, Maine. "My plan was to reach Molly's friends that were using. I wasn't trying to reach the world. That's not how I work."

Since Molly Parks' death, Phaneuf's funeral home has handled three or four other drug-related deaths that included the cause in the obituary. Phaneuf has also seen families display anti-drug messages on marquees during memorial tributes for heroin victims.

This increasing openness can pose challenges for funeral directors.



All funeral home owners questioned for this story said they never try to discourage loved ones from including information about the overdose in the obituary – but neither do they encourage it.

They also don't get involved if the family clashes over what information should be in the obituary.

"We are not in the business of telling them to do it or not to do it," Phaneuf said. "If they want it, that's their choice."

Obituaries are not the only way people are using the deaths of heroin addicts to spread the anti-drug message.

John "Jack" Martin, owner of Dusckas-Martin Funeral Home, in Erie, Pennsylvania, recalled one funeral for a young addict when a group of the deceased's friends showed up at the viewing.

"You could tell some were users," Martin said. The friends then stood up at the casket and started telling their own stories of addiction.

Parks said he didn't know he would be at the forefront of a new movement to fight drugs when he helped write his daughter's obituary. He just knew he didn't want to hide behind the typically used phrase "died suddenly."

"When someone dies of a motorcycle accident, or a car accident or cancer, they put (the cause) in the obituary. When people die of addiction, they put in that they 'died suddenly.' We don't have a rash of young people who are dying suddenly," he said.

It isn't clear how effective these open obituaries are. Some, like Phaneuf, said while the obituaries are getting the message out, it might not be getting to those most in need of hearing it.

"I think it's effective in the family unit, but in the greater community? I don't know," he said.

Parks, however, said his daughter's obituary has helped people.

"I believe it has touched a lot of people in a lot of positive ways," he said. The family of one Portsmouth, New Hampshire, man reached out to tell Parks that they were inspired by Molly's obituary. They made sure to include the fact that their son died of an apparent drug overdose in his obituary, too.