

Billboard to spread fentanyl awareness unveiled in Waukesha

‘The game has changed with fentanyl,’ one parent said

By Hunter Turpin
Special to The Freeman

what we live every single day, it will all be worth it.”

WAUKESHA COUNTY—Drivers in the four lanes of traffic traveling west on I-94, near Highway 16, will now pass 17 faces, all faces of Wisconsin residents killed by fentanyl. These 17 individuals represent the growing number of people dying each year to fentanyl poisoning, as well as the movement working to end these deaths.

This digital billboard calls fentanyl “America’s new f word,” as many people do not know about its dangers, organizers said — dangers that prompted Waukesha County officials to declare fentanyl a community health crisis on Monday.

“We hope this billboard shows these normal, beautiful kids’ faces and it starts discussion,” said Erin Rachwal, a planner of the billboard project who lost her 19-year-old son, Logan, to fentanyl. “(Losing a child) is a nightmare. If we can save one family, which I know we have, from living

Fentanyl is a synthetic opioid, 50 to 100 times stronger than morphine, that can be added to many other drugs such as heroin, cocaine and counterfeit pills without the knowledge of those consuming them, the CDC says. This is illegal, per Wisconsin state law, and makes deaths from fentanyl different than a drug overdose.

Rachwal founded the Love, Logan Foundation with her husband Rick after their son passed on Valentine’s Day in 2021. She began working on the billboard project in June after meeting with the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA). The foundation partnered with Saving Others for Archie (SOFA), another local group founded by Lauri Badura after her son passed in 2014, a time when fentanyl-related deaths were less common and less known, Rachwal said.

“It’s very important that these loved ones of ours, that their story is being told because they don’t have a



A new billboard along I-94 in Waukesha County showcases 17 people who were killed by fentanyl.

Photo courtesy of Erin Rachwal

voice anymore—theirs was taken from them,” said Echo Potter-Steinke, a parent whose daughter, Macie, 33, is featured on the billboard. “Getting this billboard together is like the start of giving a voice to the voiceless.”

Planning for the billboard, which will move around the state, included fundraising and gathering information about those who would be featured, which Rachwal said led to getting to know each family.

“It was honestly a very emotionally extensive, long, drawn-out process behind the scenes, for me specifically,” she said.

The digital billboard will change throughout the day. About half the time it will display all 17 faces with the

hashtag “justknow,” which is a hashtag started by the DEA to spread awareness of fentanyl. The other half will be spent cycling through each of these 17 people, eight of whom were from Waukesha County. The families didn’t know that their loved one would have their own slide and were surprised when the billboard was unveiled.

“Tears, big time tears. They were so grateful and so taken back by it, and for us to watch that was just so rewarding,” Rachwal said.

The mission

At the forefront of this billboard’s message is bring awareness and understanding to an issue that is not talked about enough and has misconceptions surround-

ing it, parents said.

“This is about having a conversation, it’s about awareness,” said Jessica Lukas who lost her 20-year-old son, Carter to fentanyl. “These are everyday, average kids...that’s a big part of this message.”

Rachwal encourages parents to talk about these issues with their children the same way they would about the dangers of crossing the street or strangers.

“Everything is being laced and kids are so desensitized to pills, we take allergy pills, painkillers..., and by the time these kids are 13, 14 years old they are not scared of pills,” she said. “To go to a sleepover, to just feel a little better cause they’re depressed or anxious which is a big part of today’s teen’s

world, taking a pill is not scary to them and they don’t know they’re playing Russian roulette. That’s exactly what happened to Logan.”

Rachwal spoke at a Waukesha County press conference Monday where county officials, in partnership with Washington County, said they are beginning directives to stop fentanyl deaths. The unveiling of the billboard was not coordinated with the county’s actions, planners said.

“I could not be more proud to live in this county,” Lukas, who attended the conference, said. “I am so proud that we have the guts to make an issue of this and to stand loud and proud and bring it to everyone’s attention and to actually take action.”