

A Mother's Crusade

After her son and his friend died of methadone poisoning, Brenda Hoffman got involved with a NOPE Task Force chapter in Lassen County, Calif. She speaks frequently about the growing number of deaths associated with abusing methadone and other painkiller pills.

By Leon Fooksman



When Brenda Hoffman discovered her 15-year-old son Alan and his 17-year-old friend Stephen Draxler dead in her family's bunkhouse, she saw no signs of foul play or drug paraphernalia near their bodies.

But she learned later that there was a silent killer -- methadone.

Like many parents, she thought methadone was a liquid dispensed at clinics to keep heroin addicts clean. She didn't know that starting in the late 1990s; it was prescribed in pill form to relieve discomforts from ailments like arthritis and cancer.

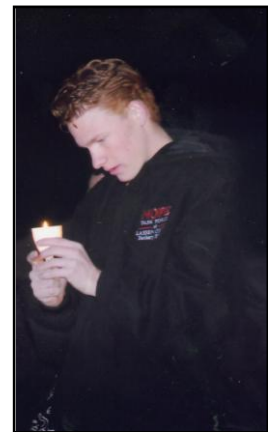
Her son's death turned Hoffman into an overnight activist in her northeastern California town of Susanville in Lassen County.

She helped start a NOPE Task Force chapter, recruiting her younger son to speak to students and their parents about being a pallbearer at Alan's funeral.

"By talking about the death of his brother, he opened the line of communication for many other students," she said.

She is a regular speaker at NOPE (Narcotic Overdose Prevention & Education) presentations at schools and civic groups.

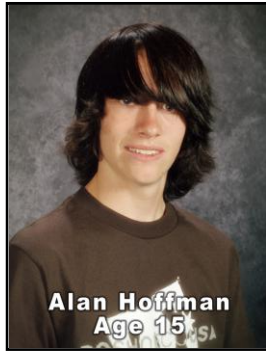
A technician at Lassen Community College, Hoffman shares the stage with police officers, drug counselors, and other anti-drug advocates. She tells students and their parents about the dangers of trying painkillers like methadone, even once. She also stresses calling 911 or an adult if a friend is found unresponsive following drug usage.



The message is getting through in the rural community of 33,000 residents, she said. Last year, not too long after a NOPE high school presentation, several students rushed to get help after finding their friend unconscious. The friend, who had taken pills hours earlier, was flown to a hospital and survived.

In the nearly four years since Alan's and Stephen's deaths, about 4,000 students have heard the presentations in Lassen County, Hoffman said. The chapter, formed in 2007, also participates in NOPE's annual drug awareness vigil in October.

For Hoffman, the public speaking has been a healing mechanism. She said every time she steps in front of youths and tells Alan's story, she can almost feel his presence.



“Alan’s death is helping people learn about drugs,” she said. “The students sit there during the presentations and think about the last party they attended and they wonder if they could have died too.”

Hoffman has made a priority of educating students and their parents about the popularity of methadone.

Annual amounts of methadone sold to pharmacies for filling prescriptions jumped from nearly 400,000 grams per year in 1997 to nearly 5 million in 2005, according to research by Ladies’ Home Journal, which published an article about Hoffman’s tragedy.

At the same time, a growing number of accidental deaths were being attributed to the drug.

The Department of Justice's National Drug Intelligence Center reports that between 1999 and 2004 the number of poisoning deaths to which methadone contributed annually nearly quintupled, from 786 to 3,849, the magazine reported.

Alan and Stephen took two to three 40-milligram tablets of methadone before their deaths, which is as much as 48 times the recommended amount. They experimented with the drug following a homecoming football game.

“This was an accident. They never thought they’d die from this,” Hoffman said. “We still have plenty of people who don’t understand what these drugs can do to you.”

If you value NOPE Task Force’s commitment to preventing drug overdoses, please consider a voluntary payment to support the organization. Donate at www.nopetaskforce.org/donations.asp

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