

Vigil set for families of drug abuse victims

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JUPITER — Families who've suffered through drug-related deaths will get a chance to collectively commemorate their lost loved ones.

The Palm Beach County-based Narcotics Overdose Prevention and Education, a grass-roots substance abuse prevention organization, invites those affected by drug addiction, and the community at large, to a candlelight vigil at the Abacoa amphitheatre in Jupiter on Oct. 24 at 6 p.m.

NOPE is widely recog-

nized for its efforts to educate local youths about the dangers of narcotics abuse. Delivering high-impact anti-drug presentations at high schools across the state, its task force aims to eradicate narcotics abuse.

The organization was formed in 2002 with the aid of a federal grant based on alarming statistics from the Palm Beach County Medical Examiner's Office. These statistics showed that Palm Beach County had one of the fastest rising rates of drug overdose deaths in Florida.

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Recently, NOPE began training volunteers to expand its program to include college-level presentations at the University of Central Florida in Orlando and Lynn University in Boca Raton.

"We're very excited about our new recruits. Everything's moving forward," said Karen Perry, NOPE's executive director.

While education remains the organization's primary objective, NOPE's fundraisers have collected significant cash for its cause: their first gala raised more than \$270,000. The upcoming vigil is free to the public, but a generous sponsorship should help make the event a "heartwarming and beautiful event," Ms. Perry said.

Home Depot has donated materials for a large memorial wall on which NOPE plans to post photos

of the victims of drug overdoses.

"We're hoping everyone from the community will come to help out with what we want to accomplish. We want to bring addiction out in the open," said Ms. Perry. "Too often, people are too ashamed (of their addiction) and are left to suffer alone. Addiction is a disease. We want people to be treated with respect."

The vigil will begin with a video commemorating those who died in drug-related incidents. The video will pass through a collection of photos submitted by the families of the dead, as the Middle School of the Arts Bach chorus accompanies the proceedings with a memorial hymn.

Keynote speaker Gary Martin, a Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office detective and associate

dean of student Wellness at Lynn University, will join WPEC News Channel 12's Rick Blackwell in spearheading the ceremony.

Mr. Martin's speech will likely touch upon narcotics-related death rates in South Florida, he said.

Mr. Martin, a homicide detective, investigates hundreds of violent deaths each year.

"There were 218 drug overdose deaths last year in Palm Beach County. That's greater than twice the number of homicides," said Mr. Martin.

The candlelight vigil offers Mr. Martin a unique opportunity to share his expertise and raise awareness about narcotics use in Palm Beach County.

In hosting the vigil, NOPE hopes to not only honor the memories of the dead, but to educate the public to prevent future tragedies.