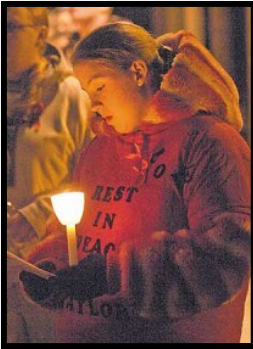




Saving Lives

Candlelight vigil draws attention to deaths from drugs and alcohol

Amanda Haverstick
The News-Dispatch



MICHIGAN CITY - A somber crowd gathered Tuesday night at Washington Park's Jaycee Stage to remember loved ones lost to drug- and alcohol-related incidents.

The candlelight vigil is the first public effort by the La Porte County chapter of N.O.P.E. - Narcotics Overdose Prevention and Education.

Beth Safirt, who organized the vigil along with her sister, Kim Wallace, and sister-in-law, Letha Safirt, said her son was the inspiration behind forming a local chapter. "I lost my son Brandon Benner on June 2 to a drug overdose," Beth Safirt said. "He was just 16 days away from turning 19."

"We felt it was something we needed to do," Wallace said.

Anyone, Safirt said, can lose someone to drugs and alcohol. "It happens to people just like you and I," Safirt said. "It doesn't discriminate. It affects everybody." Wallace added that drug-overdose victims don't fit the typical stereotype. "It's the person next door," Wallace said.



N.O.P.E.'s mission is to save lives through dramatic personal presentations about the deadly consequences of drug abuse, combined with ongoing efforts to influence anti-drug legislation and provide a resource for young people with substance abuse problems, along with their families. The organization was founded in 2004 in Palm Beach, Fla., in response to an alarming number of drug-related deaths.

Safirt said she hopes people will understand the need to educate children on the dangers of using drugs and alcohol. "In the future, our goal is to get into the middle and the high schools and have presentations," she said. "It's something I think this community really needs."

Not only do children need to be educated, Safirt said, but parents need education and resources. "Parents need to know where they can go," Safirt said. "I know I felt very alone and didn't know where to go or what to do. I'm finding by going public that more and more people are having the same problem - they don't know where to go either." Prescription drugs, Safirt said, are just as dangerous as street drugs. "They're just as addictive, if not more addictive," Safirt said.

Phyllis Spitler, one of the speakers during the vigil, lost her daughter, Manda, to a drug overdose in 2002.

"She was our only child. After we lost her, of course you want to curl up in a little ball and never move again," Spitler said. "We knew we had to do something." Spitler said they joined the



Community Action Drug Coalition and have raised funds to bring Pathways Family Center to Porter County. "We knew we had to do something for the youth in the community," Spitler said.

Wallace said their chapter of N.O.P.E. has been well received. The next step, she said, is raising funds.

"So far, it's really positive," Wallace said. "We've been welcomed with open arms."