

# Why are Maryland teens turning to heroin?

By Allison Eatough, Chesapeake Family Magazine

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Recovering heroin addict Conner Ostrowski grew up in what his mother calls a "stereotypical suburban household" in Anne Arundel County.

The former Linthicum resident is part of a close-knit family. He excelled in academics and athletics, consistently making the honor roll and wrestling for North County High School. And he dreamed of one day becoming a disc jockey and sound and lighting expert.

But four years ago, when Conner was 16, he injured his back during a wrestling match. Soon after, and without his parents' knowledge, someone shared a prescription pain pill with him. That's when his descent into heroin addiction began.

"It was one pill," says his mother, Andrea Wildason. "That's the danger. He took that pill and it was like magic."

Within two years, Conner went from popping Percocet to injecting heroin, four to six times a day.

Local leaders say addictions like Conner's are becoming all too common in Maryland, where the heroin epidemic is reaching record levels.

According to the state Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, 578 people died from heroin-related deaths in 2014 – up 25 percent from 2013 and more than double the number in 2010. While the majority of those who died were ages 25 to 54, more than 50 of the total deaths were those younger than 25.

"This thing is growing at an extremely rapid rate and killing people at a high rate of speed," says Anne Arundel County Executive Steve Schuh. "Heroin is plentiful and cheap and available everywhere."

More and more, parents say teenagers like Conner are turning to the drug after using opioid pain medications.

"It's a huge epidemic in the state of Maryland because it's cheaper to get heroin (than pills)," says Ginger Rosela of St. Leonard, whose son, Jake, died of a heroin overdose in 2013.

"Teenagers don't recognize the dangers of these drugs," Schuh says. "They think they can just casually use these compounds and not become addicted, but they can't."

In Anne Arundel County, 53 people died from heroin-related deaths and 32 from prescription opioid-related deaths in 2014.

To combat the problem, parents and leaders are forming anti-heroin task forces, holding regional summits and dedicating money and resources toward addiction treatment.

But they say the first step is educating parents about how widespread the epidemic is, why teens are getting hooked and where to go for help.

### **How the addiction starts**

Opioid-based medications like hydrocodone, found in Vicodin, and oxycodone, found in Percocet, are powerful drugs prescribed for people dealing with acute or long-term pain, says Michael Kidorf, associate director of Addiction Treatment Services at Johns Hopkins Bayview Medical Center.

The medications cause physical dependence and have high abuse potential, he says. Physical dependence progresses to addiction when a doctor stops prescribing the medication and the user then seeks the drug elsewhere, such as another doctor or a family member, he says.

"A large percentage of folks enter the portal to opioid addiction through pills," says Tim Altomare, Anne Arundel County Chief of Police. "There's kids in every high school in our county that are addicted to opioids in some way, shape or form."

Those who have a family history of addiction; a previous addiction to drugs like marijuana; or mental health problems, such as depression, anxiety or mood disorders, are more at risk for opioid addiction, Kidorf says.

Conner experienced anxiety as a teen. Alcoholism also runs in his family.

When Conner injured his back, Wildason was "adamant that he not have pain medication," she says. She sought relief for her son through non-opioid medications, acupuncture, chiropractic care and physical therapy.

But the drugs still found their way into his hands, she says.

Jake Paddy began using opioid pain medications at age 15 after surgery related to a bicycle wreck, says his mother, Ginger Rosela. Jake Paddy died of an overdose in 2013.

"I had no idea that this was possibly the start of the end," Rosela says.

Jake, a compassionate teen known for his love of animals, battled addiction to pain pills for years before dying of a heroin overdose in 2013 at the age of 23.

While teens like Conner and Jacob began using drugs to treat physical pain, others use them to escape academic, sexual and social pressures, says Joan Webb Scornaienchi, executive director of HC DrugFree, a nonprofit organization that works to prevent substance abuse among Howard County youth.

During the 2012-13 school year, HC DrugFree held 11 youth focus groups with Howard County high school students. When asked why students use drugs, group members resoundingly said, "To feel numb," Scornaienchi says.

And teens say they don't have to travel far to buy pills like Percocet, saying the drugs are readily available in their communities and even inside their schools.

"Teens say they can get anything they want, anytime they want," Scornaienchi says. Once the pain pills run out, it's an easy leap to heroin, Conner says.

"Heroin is stronger and cheaper than a prescription pain killer," he says. "A 15 mg Percocet costs \$20 to \$25 and will get you high for one to two hours if you snort it. For \$30 of heroin, you shoot it and get a stronger high for four or five hours."

### **Addiction warning signs**

Wildason witnessed her son change after he started using.

"He was not taking an interest in things that normally interested him," she says.

The typically chatty teen became isolated, his grades slipped to C's and D's, and he began stealing from his brothers.

"He started spending time by himself, in his room," Wildason says. "Then his friends started to change. People he was going out with I'd never heard of before."

Rosela says her son began having dramatic mood swings.

"One minute he was happy, the next he was angry," she says.

These behaviors are common among teenage drug abusers, says Katherine Bonincontri, president and executive director of Pascal Community Services Intercept, which provides treatment for patients with mental illness and substance abuse problems in Anne Arundel County.

Other signs of drug abuse include small pupils, slurred speech, sedation, euphoria, shallow or slow breathing and analgesia, or feeling no pain.

Suspicious of Connor's behavior, Wildason searched his room for signs of drug use. What she found devastated her: a bag of Percocet and a bag of Cymbalta, medication prescribed to treat everything from depression and anxiety to chronic muscle and bone pain.

"Our whole world started tumbling out of control," she says.

### **The long road**

Andrea Wildason and her son, Conner Ostrowski, celebrate 12 months clean. At age 16, Conner enrolled in his first outpatient drug rehabilitation program and began attending Narcotics

Anonymous meetings. To ensure he didn't use, Wildason took several months off work and stayed by his side every day and night. Wildason also pulled him out of high school, homeschooling him instead.

"I reattached the umbilical cord," she says.

The routine worked for Conner – until December 2012. All the old warning signs returned. He was using again.

"I told him I couldn't have him in my house," Wildason says. She says she told him, "I love you. This is my safe place. This is your brothers' safe place, and it's your safe place. But I can't have you in this house if you are using drugs."

So Conner returned to his Narcotics Anonymous meetings to get his rehabilitation back on track. Little did she know Conner had started using heroin.

In February, the family took a vacation together in Colorado.

"Conner seemed to be doing well," Wildason says.

But the night they returned from their trip, Wildason realized the battle was far from over.

"That night, we got a call saying our son was at Harbor Hospital and had overdosed," she says. "When I walked into the ER and saw him, it was the first time I had seen the needle marks."

"I died inside," she says. "I had just spent the better part of a year trying to save him, and he nearly died."

## **Where to turn for help**

Emergency rooms can provide life-saving treatments for teens who overdose on drugs, but they do not fix the long-term problem, Bonincontri says.

Parents of drug abusers need to get their children to qualified therapists, she says. Those therapists can then help families come up with a treatment plan tailored to the individual addict.

"This disease is like every other medical problem that you or your child will ever face,"

Bonincontri says. "It's a disease, and we need to fight it like it's cancer. ... You have to fight it like your life depends on it."

County health departments and local crisis lines offer resources for parents of children who abuse drugs. Rehabilitation centers throughout the state can also provide outpatient and inpatient treatment.

In addition, most counties have secured, permanent medication disposal boxes available to safely dispose of any unused opioid pain medications and lessen the chance of drugs falling into the wrong hands, Scornaienchi says.

To help prevent addiction, parents should talk with their children early about the dangers of all drugs, says Eric Wish, director of the Center for Substance Abuse Research at the University of Maryland College Park.

"Parents should be concerned about alcohol and synthetic designer drugs more than they should about heroin," he says. "Heroin has a horrible reputation in our society, and it's usually the last drug people will turn to after they have used everything else."

And don't be afraid to call the police, Altomare says.

"Parents need to remember they are parents," Altomare says. "That should be their overwhelming mandate and not to be their friend. It might make them mad, but it could save their life."

## **Finding a solution**

Ginger Rosela, Jake's mom, educates others about the dangers of heroin. In February, Gov. Larry Hogan and Lt. Gov. Boyd Rutherford created the Heroin and Opioid Emergency Task Force to address the state's growing heroin and opioid crisis. The group, made up of law enforcement professionals, elected officials and substance abuse experts, meets regularly to gather input and guidance from educators and families suffering from addiction. One of the task force's goals is to prevent kids from using heroin in the first place.

In Anne Arundel County, Schuh says his administration is taking a "three-pronged attack" to address the health care, public safety and education components of the epidemic.

On the health care side, Schuh says he has committed money in the 2015-16 budget to expand addiction and mental health treatment programs. For public safety, the police department, sheriff and state's attorney's offices are all focusing more efforts on narcotics than in years past, Schuh says.

Still, the long-term solution to heroin use is education, he says.

"We have to educate these young people before they try these drugs for the first time so they never try them," he says.

In March, Schuh and the Anne Arundel County Heroin Task Force hosted a town hall meeting on heroin called "Not My Child." Held at Anne Arundel Community College, the auditorium was full and an overflow room was set up to accommodate the crowds.

This year, Schuh plans to work with the county school system to bring more drug awareness into the curriculum.

"I believe in all my heart we're going to turn the tide against this thing and send heroin back to the depths of hell where it belongs," Schuh says.

And according to Rosela, hell is just where heroin belongs.

"It's the devil," she says of the substance that killed her son.

Since Jake's death, Rosela has dedicated her life to educating others about the dangers of heroin. She testified before the Maryland General Assembly in support of the Good Samaritan Law, which provides criminal immunity for people who help anyone experiencing a medical emergency because they ingested drugs or alcohol. She also talks with parents weekly who are just beginning to fight their child's drug abuse.

"Parents just need to know that there's hope and they are not alone," she says. "As long as your child is still alive, there is hope."

Conner, now 20, has been clean two years. He is finally working his dream job as a house lighting designer for a North Carolina music venue. He is even sponsoring teens facing similar addictions to his.

Conner admits he still has weak moments, but that's when he turns to his 12-step substance abuse recovery program and his "clean network," made up of other recovering addicts and his family members.

"It's about perseverance," he says. "I can't give up, and I have to have a network that won't give up on me either. And the biggest part of that network is my mom."

"It's day by day," he continues. "There's no graduating a 12-step program. A recovered addict is the addict who dies clean. Other than that, we are constantly recovering and growing."