



"Parents Night Out" educates parents about prescription drug abuse (April 15, 2009)

By Juan Juan Moses (*Reprinted with permission from the Lake Spokane Outpost*)

Trouble started for the Tilla family in 2005 when Jim and Sherry noticed changes in their daughter. Their 16-year-old had always been passionate about sports, but she quit volleyball and softball. It was perplexing to the parents until their youngest daughter suggested that the 16-year-old "was using something." Only then did the Tillas realize the gravity their child's changes implicated. The 16-year-old had been introduced to oxycodone and was about to embark on a long and hellish journey. Although the story has a happy ending, the emotional roller-coaster the family was thrust into was, in Jim Tilla's own word, "brutal." It is a ride that is every parent's nightmare and a ride every parent fears from the moment of their child's conception.

On Tuesday, April 21, Lakeside Middle School presents the community with an adult only "Parents' Night Out" free talk on the subject of prescription drug abuse. The evening is the extension of "Shift into Reality" campaign, a year-long campaign to raise awareness of teen drug and alcohol use. "Shift into Reality" is the brainchild of school student assistance specialist Kathryn Busch. Since scoring the home run of the State Farm grant on this subject, Busch has taken the message beyond the school and into the community at large in an effort not just to educate students, but parents as well. Tuesday's "Parents' Night Out" will feature Dr. William Hurley, Medical Director of the Washington State Poison Control Center and ER physician at Harborview Regional Trauma Center in Seattle. Dr. Hurley will focus on the signs and symptoms of prescription drug use, abuse, physiological explanation of addiction, overdose response, prevention etc. He will be presenting his talk from the medical point of view.

Also speaking on Tuesday evening is Jim Tilla. Mr. Tilla will be sharing his family's own harrowing experiences of his daughter's prescription drug use. It is an intimate story of how innocence is lost and how unwavering love and support of heart-broken parents and a concerned community are transformed into strength; not just for the Tilla Family, but for the small community of Chewelah where the Tillas live. And now, through Jim Tilla and his group's efforts, the lessons are being heard beyond local communities.

"At first, we sent her to counseling." Jim Tilla spoke to the Outpost, measuring his words very carefully. But the child skipped the sessions. One of the other daughters suggested the entire family go to counseling together to show support. Without hesitation, the Tillas all went to counseling. This dragged on for a year and a half and by then the 17-year-old had finished her junior year at high school. Jim Tilla remembers gratefully one particular meeting with the daughter's baseball coach from Chewelah high school. The coach had paid a home visit to the Tillas to voice his concern about the deteriorating performance of what used to be the material of a star athlete. The daughter's use of the opiate, Oxycontin, had picked up speed. During her senior year, she was in and out of her parents' house, living there sporadically, taking cash and items from the house on her visits. She took things from her friends as well to raise money for the drug. By the time she was arrested for shoplifting, she weighed less than 100 pounds and looked gaunt. During her brief stay at home, at one point, Jim Tilla found her in a drug induced haze, in and out of consciousness. Convinced he had lost his daughter, he frantically revived her.

“The first thing she did when she woke up was to look to make sure she still had the drug in her hand.” Tilla recalled that frightening episode.

Jim Tilla by now was getting very well educated on the workings and dangers of opioid abuse. But still the family did not know how to help their daughter. If she refused all help, what could they do?

When Tilla bailed his daughter out of jail for shoplifting the second time, the tormented father asked his child, “Sweetheart, what could we possibly have done that we didn’t do?” It was more of a statement for himself than a question, seeking an answer from the child. It was a search in frustration, guilt, fear, helplessness, bewilderment, self doubt, and despair – all the emotions a loving parent goes through watching his child slipping out of their life. What the daughter responded changed Tilla. The young woman looked at her father and said, clear as day, “Dad, I thought it was safe because it was from the pharmacy.”

It was a moment of clarity for both father and daughter. “I can understand that sweetheart.” the father replied. He drove home in silence afterwards – the weight and implication of his daughter’s reply sinking in. From that moment on, Jim Tilla took matters into his own hands.

Although alcohol and marijuana remain as the most popular drug of choice for teens, nationally, the trend of teen prescription drug abuse is on the rise. The most commonly abused prescription drugs include painkillers such as OxyContin, Vicodin, and Demerol, all commonly prescribed legally for pain relief. Common central nervous system depressants such as Valium, Xanax and stimulants such as Ritalin are also prescription drugs of choice for teens. According to data from the National Institute on Drug Abuse, an estimated 48 million people (age 12 and above) have used prescription drugs for non-medical reasons in their life time. This is about 20 percent of the US population. The NIDA-funded 2007 Monitoring the Future Study showed that 2.7 percent of 8th graders, 7.2 percent of 10th graders, and 9.6 percent of 12th graders had abused Vicodin. 1.8 percent of 8th graders, 3.9 percent of 10th graders, and 5.2 percent of 12th graders had abused Oxycontin at least once in the year prior to the survey. Youths between the ages of 12-17 abuse prescription drugs second only to marijuana. Opioid painkillers now cause more drug overdose deaths than cocaine and heroin combined. According to Dr. Hurley, in 2006, these deaths passed motor vehicle crashes as a cause of trauma death in WA and six other states. About 400 people died last year in WA from accidental overdose of opioids. (methadone, oxycodone, hydrocodone, and heroin)

Determined to save his daughter, Jim Tilla embarked on an altruistic and ambitious project. He took the cue from his daughter's misperception about the prescription drug. He went door to door to talk to his neighbors and community members to ask for help. Among the people that stepped up to his call was the Chewelah police chief, a school principal, and school superintendent. Together, the group formed a non-profit organization called Rx4Life. Rx4Life is dedicated to the education of the danger of prescription drugs. Its website www.Rx4lifechewelah.org offers a wealth of information for parents and all concerned entities. During the time Tilla reached out to the public, he continued to battle for the life of his daughter. It took detoxification, rehab and relapses, and finally, the death of a close friend and that of a couple of others for his daughter to see the handwriting on the wall. Today, the young woman has been drug free for almost three years. She is the poster child for Rx4life.

According to the Spokane Medical Examiner's Office, the total number of deaths attributed to overdose in 2007 was 123 (more than 90% of these deaths were due to prescription drugs). In Stevens County, teen drug use is reflected by surveys conducted by the county. The following Stevens County Healthy Youth Survey 2008 compares the numbers of local teen drug use to the state. The following statistics are provided by Tricia Hughes, Center for Prevention Program, Education Service District 101.

Current Prescription Drug Use

Current use reflects use in the 30 days prior to youth taking the survey.

Ritalin Use (without a doctor's order)

	Stevens County	State
8th grade	2.5%	2.8%
10th grade	0.6%	4.9%
12th grade	1.1%	5.4%

Pain Killer Used to Get High

	Stevens County	State
8th grade	3.7%	4.3%
10th grade	4.6%	9.5%
12th grade	13%	12%

Current Tobacco, Alcohol and Other Drugs

Current use reflects use in the 30 days prior to youth taking the survey.

Cigarette Use

	Stevens County	State
6th grade	4.7%	1.4%
8th grade	12.3%	7.3%
10th grade	14.4%	14.4%
12th grade	21.9%	20%

Alcohol Use

	Stevens County	State
6th grade	7.6%	3.5%
8th grade	22.4%	16.1%
10th grade	32.7%	31.7%
12th grade	47.1%	40.8%

Marijuana use

	Stevens County	State
6th grade	3.3%	1.2%
8th grade	9.8%	8.3%
10th grade	17.9%	19.1%
12th grade	25.1%	23.4%

Inhalant use

	Stevens County	State
8th grade	5.6%	6.4%
10th grade	2.9%	5.6%
12th grade	2.2%	4.5%

Tuesday night's talk promises to be a night of education and resources for all parents as well community members. To learn more about the dangers and prevention and resources out there, come to "Parents' Night Out."

The evening is meant for adults only and no baby sitting is available.

(Special thanks to Jim Tilla of Chewelah, Lynne Guhlke and Sienna Smith of NEW Alliance Counseling Services, and Tricia Hughes of ESD 101)