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## Searching for solutions

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CHEWELAH – A 12-year-old brings hydrocodone tablets to a middle-school slumber party.

A high-schooler steals methadone pills from her parents' medicine cabinet.

A 21-year-old cuts open a 12-hour Fentanyl patch, squeezes the drug onto tinfoil, and smokes the entire contents through a "tooter," the stripped plastic cartridge from a Bic pen.

He's still holding it in his hand when police break down the bathroom door.

He's dead.

If Mark Selle sounds upset, it's because the superintendent of Chewelah's Valley and Orient school districts has seen every one of these things happen in his community.

And it's taking far too long to do anything about them.

"When we're watching these kids die, when we're seeing these addicts, it's frustrating that we can't do it faster," said Selle.

He's part of a small group of parents and community leaders who have formed to combat prescription drug abuse, which they believe is a grave and growing threat to young people in this Eastern Washington town of 2,300 – and beyond.

"This is a problem at every high school in the country," said Selle, a founding member of the Chewelah-based "Prescriptions for Life."

For four years, the group that includes the police chief, a counselor, a school administrator and two parents whose 20-year-old daughter is an admitted addict have done everything they can think of to warn the world.

They've made presentations and held public forums. They've put out press releases and raised money, though not enough. They've put together a Web site and public telephone line.

Slowly, they say, they're helping raise awareness of a problem that hasn't reached the radar of a society convulsed with anxiety over methamphetamine and other illegal drugs.

"It's becoming generation Rx," said Chewelah Police Chief Troy Anderson.

In this town, organizers can name a half-dozen young people who've died from prescription drug overdoses. That includes Jared C. Scott, a longtime Boy Scout who had a good job, lots of friends, a new fiancé – and who sliced open and smoked a Fentanyl patch within days of his 21st birthday in September 2004.

### For information

Visit the Prescriptions for Life Web site at [www.rx4lifechewelah.org](http://www.rx4lifechewelah.org) or call (509) 935-4529.

The Stevens County coroner listed drug overdose as the cause of death.

Jared's mother, Karen Scott, said her son was not a typical drug user. She'd never heard of Fentanyl when he died, but she knows now that he and his friends may have used the prescription narcotic before.

"Kids are kids. They take chances," she said. "And parents are parents. They want to believe their kids. I don't know how it's going to change, but maybe."

Communities worried about meth, Ecstasy, cocaine and marijuana are ignoring an equally alarming challenge, said Selle, the school superintendent.

"Everywhere we go, when we present people say, 'Well, it's not here,' " he said. "But it is."

National research backs that view. Nearly one in five teenagers – 19 percent or 4.5 million – reported abusing prescription medications to get high, according to the Partnership for a Drug-Free America, a nonprofit advocacy group that seeks to lower youth drug use through advertising.

And nearly a third of those young people surveyed believe "there's nothing wrong" with using prescription medications without a prescription, the research showed. Three out of 10 teens believe that prescription pain relievers are not addictive, according to a 2005 study conducted by the group.

Hayley Tilla certainly shared those views as a high school sophomore in Chewelah, when she first tried OxyContin. It made her sick, she said. Then it made her high. Finally, it made her desperate.

"I stole, I lied, anything you can think of, I did it," she said.

Now 20, the blond, brown-eyed young woman has been battling prescription addiction for more than five years.

Today, she's not sure who's winning.

"I am doing good because I'm not using, but I'm not really doing good, you know?" said Hayley, who suffers from severe anxiety and constant, low-level withdrawal symptoms.

"I'm having such a hard time with this whole pain thing. I'm just always in pain, always in pain. And I know what would fix it would be to go get high."

She won't give in, she said, partly because of her family and partly because she's grieving for her 23-year-old boyfriend, who died in a car accident last summer.

"I kind of feel like I'm doing it for him and for me," she said. "But mostly for me."

Hayley's parents, Jim and Sherry Tilla, fervently hope so. They helped start "Prescriptions for Life" as an outlet for the pain, fear and lack of control that come with having a child addicted to medication.

The couple wants parents and others to know that addiction can strike any kid, any family. They want to push for stricter statewide monitoring of prescriptions and for more and better treatment for Hayley Tilla and other young people with chemical cravings for the potent prescription drugs.

"We talked to her about drugs, about pot and alcohol, and she told us she'd never do that," said Sherry Tilla, a fourth-grade teacher. "She thought because the drug came from a doctor it was safe."

Prescription addiction is easy to sustain – and easy to hide. The drugs are everywhere, and the symptoms are subtle, the parents said.

"I could never tell when she was high," Sherry Tilla said. "I would look into her eyes and look and look and I couldn't tell."

The stealthy drug turned their daughter into a stranger, Sherry Tilla said. Last year on Mother's Day, Jim Tilla gave his wife money to buy flowers. Hayley, in the midst of a relapse, stole the money from Sherry's purse.

Sherry Tilla didn't see Hayley again until midsummer.

"Then she came home and said, 'I need help.' "

Hayley went through a Seattle rehabilitation program last year and is on controlled doses of methadone. She'd prefer to be on buprenorphine, a drug that has been shown to be more effective for some prescription painkiller addicts. She wishes she could find a good addiction counselor.

But few regional doctors, even in Spokane, are certified to provide the drug – and willing to do so. And counseling is almost nonexistent in the area.

"It seems ridiculous that people who want to get help can't," Hayley said.

In the meantime, Patti Hancock, the Stevens County coroner, said there are specific steps that parents and community members can take to keep prescription drugs away from young people.

First, she said, realize that the drugs are there.

"Everybody in the world has hydrocodone," she said. "Grandma and grandpa who have their little drugs in their medicine cupboard would die if they knew their grandkids, the kid who mows the lawn, are in there, looking for it."

Lock the drugs up or dispose of them properly, she said.

"These kids, they have their little 'pharm parties,' " Hancock said. "It's such a waste of life."