

Families take lead to fight drug-abuse epidemic in central Ohio

**By** **Alan Johnson** & **Catherine Candisky**

*The Columbus Dispatch*  •  Sunday November 29, 2015 7:01 AM

* The night Jenny Ledman spent with her drugged teenage son,
* her hand over his heart to feel whether it was still beating,
* changed everything.

After that, she and her husband, Dan, took nothing for granted. They talked to their son, Wyatt, his friends, teachers, other parents, city officials, police, health-care professionals, business owners — anyone who would listen — about the community drug problem.

“Not talking about it doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist,” said the Upper Arlington mother and graphic designer. “There’s a tightrope you’re walking. Parents alone can’t resolve it. We’re all in this together.”

With overdoses now taking a staggering 47 lives a week in Ohio, grass-roots organizations are springing up around the state to fight the epidemic.

Many organizations have been started by grieving parents who lost children to overdoses or watched them struggle with addiction. They are frustrated and angry, but mostly fearful about the devastation drugs are causing in their communities.

“It’s horrific. It touches everybody’s family. It’s just out there. It can kill in an instant,” said Franklin County Municipal Judge Scott VanDerKarr who presides over the county’s drug dockets for about 200 users.

Realizing that law enforcement, schools, treatment facilities or families alone cannot solve the problem, groups such as SOLACE in Portsmouth, The Stand Project in Upper Arlington, ACT in Dublin, the Addict’s Parents United in Worthington, and dozens of others are working around Ohio.

The Dublin ACT (Adolescents and Community Together), a coalition of community groups, school leaders, government groups and parents, is one of the oldest groups, formed in 2008 to combat underage drinking.

“There had been several auto accidents involving youth and underage drinking, house parties and some issues with sports teams and kids getting into trouble,” said Dave Rule, a Dublin father of three grown children and the coalition chairman. “Now, we’re more focused on the opiate issue.”

In 2009, the group worked with Dublin City Council to pass a social-host law that makes it easier to prosecute parents and juveniles who allow underage drinking in their homes.

More recently, ACT teamed with police to establish a permanent prescription-drug disposal site, created public-service announcements and education programs aimed at preventing underage drinking and drug use, and helped with a student survey to guide its prevention efforts.

“We’re creating an environment in Dublin where people are talking about this not in a hush-hush way,” Rule said. “We have these problems just like everyone else.”

Brenda Stewart of Worthington has two adult sons who have struggled for years with drug addiction. One has been clean for 3 1/2 years; the other is in jail.

In June, she launched The Addict’s Parents United, a support group for parents and others with loved ones who are battling or were lost to addiction.

“I was becoming crazier than my kids, and I wasn’t even using drugs. I had to take care of me,” Stewart said.

Stewart said her group provides comfort, support and education, and operates a closed Facebook page for parents. It also works to change the perception of drug abuse — vital, she said, to combat the epidemic.

“We used to be those people who were afraid to say anything,” she said. “Now, people are seeing hope and creating camaraderie.”

The team-based approach is also used by Judge VanDerKarr to help addicts who wind up in his court kick their drug habit.

“You draw together what’s out there in the community and use that in the judicial system,” he said.

The court, launched five years ago, relies on intensive supervision, treatment, accountability and — when necessary — discipline, with services catering to drug addicts. Defendants come to court each week, where they talk with VanDerKarr, treatment providers and other agency representatives. Those who fail random drug tests go back to jail.

Many relapse, but about 70 percent graduate from the program.

“Get involved with specialty courts and the outcomes are amazing,” VanDerKarr said. “They save lives.”

Dr. John Leff, a member of Stand and an Upper Arlington resident who is a general and trauma surgeon at OhioHealth Riverside Methodist Hospital, is at ground zero when things go bad because of drugs. Victims of overdoses, automobile accidents, gunshots, beatings and suicide attempts all end up in Leff’s ER.

“This is our Ebola,” Leff said, referring to the highly contagious viral infection. “This is going to destroy more lives than all the other diseases combined.”

Leff said his eye-opening moment came three years ago when he was treating a young college student for an abscess on his arm. It quickly became obvious that the infection came from injecting drugs. The patient was well-dressed and had graduated from a suburban high school with a 3.9 grade-point average.

“As I was talking to this kid, I realize this nice young man was a heroin addict,” Leff said. “ That changed my whole point of view about drugs.

“I realize now there are no boundaries.”

He encourages parents to “be suspicious” of their children no matter how uncomfortable it is. “ Follow where they go. See who they’re hanging out with. Educate yourself, and be prepared.”

“I don’t think this is a problem that will ever stop,” Leff said. “I look at drugs as dream killers.”

Tim Huffman, owner of Huffman’s Market in Upper Arlington for 29 years, said drugs affect his business because he often employs young people and he’s seen problems with theft.

“The more drugs that are sold, the more people that are using them, the more shoplifting we’re going to have. Addicts have to steal from somewhere to feed their habit, if it’s here or the pharmacy or somewhere else.

“It’s best for Upper Arlington for me to be involved. It’s best for us. If we don’t do something now, this will be a big problem later,” said Huffman, adding that everyone needs to help and not lay blame.

The ineffectiveness of the silo approach to combat drug abuse is a theme Attorney General Mike DeWine has been hitting hard as he talks about the drug problem.

“I’ve never seen anything this bad,” said DeWine, which is saying something since he’s been in elective office most of the past four decades. “We cannot arrest our way out of the problem. It’s not going to be solved by your local sheriff or prosecutor.

“The impact goes well beyond those who die. That’s just the beginning of the story,” DeWine said. “For every person that dies, there’s a family that suffers.”

While Upper Arlington is an affluent community, it is not immune to substance-abuse problems, as statistics compiled by Stand show.

Half of all juvenile offenses charged by police in 2014 were for drugs. A school survey found 25 percent of seniors and 9 percent of sophomores said they drink alcohol at least once a week, while 27 percent of seniors and 13 percent of sophomores said they smoked marijuana at least once per month.

The Ledmans decided to take a drastic step to shock their son out of the drinking-and-drugs habit he had fallen into in his junior year. They pulled him out of Upper Arlington High School and sent him to Teen Challenge Ranch, a Christian rehabilitation boarding school in Morrow, Ark. It cost $55,000, but the family was desperate.

Wyatt had been smoking pot, drinking and taking prescription pills one day in 2014. He fell asleep in his parents’ bed. His mother lay beside him all night, sobbing and praying, her hand placed over his heart for fear it would stop beating.

“If we allowed this path to continue, I was afraid he was going to die,” she said.

Wyatt did not die; he thrived at the camp. In a YouTube video, Wyatt thanked his parents for making “tough choices.”

The experience “transformed my whole family,” he said.

*For information about joining or forming a community anti-drug group, contact the Drug-Free Action Alliance at* [*www.drugfreeactionalliance.org/ohiocenter*](http://www.drugfreeactionalliance.org/ohiocenter) *or the Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services’ toll-free help line, 877-275-6364.*

ajohnson@dispatch.com

[@ohioaj](http://twitter.com/ohioaj)

ccandisky@dispatch.com

[@ccandisky](http://twitter.com/CCandisky)