

## Veteran Law Enforcement Deputy: Drug Use and Abuse Is Everyone's Concern

Deputy Leslie Barbalaco has been a NOPE Task Force presenter for some time now in Palm Beach County, Florida. She believes deeply in our mission, and says it's really important not to sugar coat anything about drugs to young people.

Leslie Barbalaco has been a deputy for 19 years. She has worked with teenagers for a long time and knows how wrong decisions can impact young lives for decades to come.

She also has been a NOPE Task Force presenter for some time, bringing our anti-drug message to hundreds of young people.

Based on her experience, she offers this advice for parents of teenagers:

*Have a relationship with your children where they feel they can always come and talk to you. Stress the importance that one time can kill. Be observant, and never think it can't happen to you. If you sense a change in your child, talk to them. Drugs and alcohol do not discriminate. Any child can be a victim and fall to poor decision making.*

We asked Deputy Barbalaco to tell us more. She explains why got involved with NOPE and how best to talk to young people about drugs.

### **Describe how you got involved with NOPE.**

Deputy Barbalaco: Approximately eight years ago, I worked with the Juvenile First Offender program for the Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office. I worked with juveniles who were arrested for misdemeanor offenses. A crucial part of the JFO program is the juvenile taking responsibility for their actions. The juvenile would appear in court, where they would be issued sanctions by a jury of their peers. When the juvenile appeared in court for a drug related offense, they would have to take responsibility in front of their parents. The sanctions received would include drug testing and drug/alcohol classes. The juveniles were involved in the JFO program for several months. The program gave the kids this one opportunity to keep their record clean if they completed all the sanctions that were imposed.

As a coordinator, I observed that most of these juveniles progressed and matured from their experience, and displayed a true appreciate for life and the opportunities that await them. To some, they had already started down the wrong path with drugs and alcohol and I was unsure if they could be brought back. At the time, my captain, Jeffrey Lindscoog, became involved in NOPE and introduced me to the program's coordinators. I was trained on the law enforcement aspect, and now eight years later I am still a very proud speaker for NOPE. I'll always remember my first time speaking and the importance of getting the facts correct. I take being a presenter very serious, and I want the families and students to hear and feel my pride.

### **What role does NOPE play in helping students and their parents understand drug abuse?**

Deputy Barbalaco: On an annual basis, I have seen NOPE grow by the number of presentations we do by leaps and bounds. I have spoken at universities with NOPE to educate college students as well. NOPE not only educates youth, they also have evening presentations for the parents of the children that observed

the presentations the day prior. This gives the parents the opportunity to discuss the presentation with their children and for them to attend an open setting where they can learn and ask questions.

NOPE takes on the stigma associated with drug use. The organization educates the students and parents by presenting them with up to date statistics about drug overdoses. Nothing is sugar coated. NOPE educates that use and abuse is everyone's concern. They stress the importance that telling someone will not get you in trouble with authorities. The presentation reveals specific youth's true stories and gives advice on how alcohol and marijuana usage affects judgment, leading to even worse decision making.

### **What do you hope students will remember after watching a NOPE presentation?**

Deputy Barbalaco: I hope when we complete our presentation that students remember: "Be the hero and tell someone." This statement is stressed. I hope the kids have a different outlook and realize they can get help and not get in trouble. Due to all the missed opportunities, all these lives are lost. Be the hero and stand up for your friends and loved ones. They are presented with many photos of people who have lost their lives due to combining drugs, and that it only takes one time to die. I hope the proof makes an impact on their judgment.

In hearing the heartbreaking stories from the brave parents who stand forth and tell their personal stories, I hope the young people in the crowd realize that they don't want to envision their own loved ones on the stage. Most important, we make sure kids know that we care. This includes the school, NOPE members, presenters and law enforcement. It is not unusual see several students become emotional throughout the presentation and come up to give the family and law enforcement a hug.

### **What advice would you give parents of teenagers as it relates to drug prevention?**

Deputy Barbalaco: I would advise parents to have an honesty policy in their home. Have a relationship with your children where they feel they can always come and talk to you. Stress the importance that one time can kill. Be observant, and never think it can't happen to you. If you sense a change in your child, talk to them. Drugs and alcohol do not discriminate. Any child can be a victim and fall to poor decision making. Advise their kids to be the leader and not to succumb to peer pressure. Encourage them to become involved with activities and sports. Get to know the friends your children are associating with. Ask questions and be observant.

Most importantly, talk to your kids openly and honestly about drugs and alcohol.

*Leslie Barbalaco has been a deputy for 19 years. At the Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office, she has been assigned many duties, including Road Patrol, Community Policing, Juvenile First Offender Program, and currently the Courthouse Services Bureau. Regardless of her job position, she has remained a true heartfelt presenter for the NOPE Task Force. She says she "leaves every presentation hopeful that we've reached every kid in the room. Also, that we lead them to think about present and future decision making. I value the bond and the relationship the NOPE Task force has with Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office."*