

A Mother Starts NOPE Chapter to Tell Her Stepson's Story

Laurie Serra worked with police and community leaders to begin chapter in Pinellas County near Tampa, Fla. Her group of volunteers plans to speak at dozens of schools.

By Leon Fooksman



After her 28-year-old stepson died of an unintentional drug overdose in 2008, Laurie Serra discovered a shocking truth about her state's lack of attention to a growing drug epidemic.

Florida's lax medical regulations and antiquated prescription system, she learned, gave the state the distinction as the nation's drug dispensing haven.

Perhaps most frustrating, she said, was that an electronic prescription drug monitoring program, credited with cutting off doctor shopping in dozens of other states, had been debated in Florida for more than five years, but never enacted.

"The more I read, the more angry I became," said Serra, a school speech pathologist in Pinellas County, which is near Tampa. "My husband and I decided we needed to educate everyone about what happened to our son."

Now, a year-and-a-half later, Serra is heading up the new Narcotic Overdose Prevention & Education (NOPE) Task Force chapter in Pinellas County. NOPE goes into schools, colleges and community centers and teaches youths and their parents about the dangers of using drugs.

She and her husband, Mark, also are active in a tight network of anti-drug activists which helped pressure Florida legislators to finally create the drug monitoring system in 2009, a database used by medical professionals to prevent abusers from getting prescriptions from multiple doctors.



"I have a strong commitment to change the direction of the way our community and the state are going," Serra said.

Serra got involved in NOPE after meeting the group's executive director, Karen Perry and her husband, Richard, in the state capital during the battle to pass the drug monitoring bill.

She organized a NOPE vigil last October in Largo, Fla. that drew 300 people to remember those who lost their lives to drugs or alcohol.

Since then, Serra worked with Pinellas County Sheriff's Office and other local police departments and community officials to form a team of volunteers for the NOPE chapter. They will educate students and their parents during emotional, hour-long presentations in which police officers show body bags and grieving parents describe the pain of losing their sons and daughters to drugs.

More than 150,000 students and parents have heard the presentations in recent years in Florida, California and Indiana. NOPE has nine chapters.

Pinellas County is one of Florida's leading hot spots for prescribing oxycodone, the powerful painkiller. Florida leads the nation in prescriptions for oxycodone, according to an analysis by St. Petersburg Times. Forty percent more oxycodone is prescribed in Florida than the second-leading state, California, which has twice the population, the newspaper found.

"Like other counties in Florida, we have been overrun with prescription drugs abuse," said Capt. Robert Alfonso of Pinellas County Sheriff's Office. "NOPE will get us access to parents and students."



Serra's work is dedicated to her late stepson, Matthew, who overdosed on several drugs, including OxyContin. He had graduated from Virginia Military Institute with hopes of becoming a lawyer. A star athlete, his troubles with drugs started shortly after he took pills to ease the pain of a back injury.

"Our NOPE effort here is very encouraging," she said.

The new chapter hopes to reach thousands of students in 38 public schools and dozens of private schools. The group also expects to speak at numerous parent association meetings.

"I'm giving it all I got," she said.

If you value NOPE Task Force's commitment to preventing drug overdoses, please consider a voluntary payment to support the organization. Donate at www.nopetaskforce.org/donations.asp

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