City Teens Following Path to Heroin, Death
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For those who think heroin is the drug only of society’s biggest losers — aimless, jobless, nasty, skinny people in long-sleeve shirts who would even break into the homes of relatives to get money to feed this expensive habit — don’t feel so smug.

Its users may include the well-groomed, nice-looking teen you see cruising home from school in your upper-middle-class neighborhood. In The Sunday Journal, reporters Jeff Proctor and Hailey Heinz told the startling story of the growing abuse of heroin among Albuquerque teens. It’s an all-over-town problem.

Marijuana is often said to be a gateway drug that leads to heroin, and it may be in many cases. But in descriptions of the paths that led to the sad deaths of two local youths, it was a different source: prescription drugs.

“They get hooked on the pills, which are opioids like heroin, and those are very expensive,” said Edward Knoth of the local Drug Enforcement Administration office. “So a lot of kids go on to heroin, which is a lot cheaper and very much available.”

True, a teen’s addiction starts with that youngster’s decision to get high. True, sometimes a parent doesn’t learn the true nature of their kid’s friends until it’s too late. True, there are warning signs a kid is abusing drugs. But it’s not the parents’ or anyone else’s fault when a child makes an irreversible mistake.

That doesn’t make the loss less painful.

Parents take notice. How well do you keep track of your prescriptions? Are they easily accessible? How’s your kid really doing?

HEROIN STALKS CITY TEENS
Increase in Overdoses Spotted at Affluent Schools

Sunday, April 18, 2010 / Story by Jeff Proctor Of the Journal

Steve Paternoster watched his 16-year-old daughter, Haley, fight for her last few breaths in a hospital emergency room. In the end, the heroin won.
Craig Weatherfield got a knock on his door and stood quietly as a police chaplain and three other officers told him what he had known the moment he saw their faces and uniforms: that his 20-year-old son, Nathan, had lost his battle with heroin.

Nathan and Haley had struggled with drugs on and off. Both had tried to get clean. Haley died April 9, around 3 a.m. Nathan died Monday morning.

“This is just a terrible, terrible thing,” said Steve Paternoster, a well-known restaurateur who owns Scalo Northern Italian Grill and Brasserie La Provence in Nob Hill. “Nothing’s going to bring her back.” The two join a growing list of young people who have fallen into the clutches of black tar heroin, which has plagued New Mexico for generations, and paid with their lives. Many of the most recent casualties came from well-off families, had plenty of love and support at home and had every other advantage.

A local substance abuse counselor calls it an “epidemic.”

Heroin overdose deaths among New Mexicans between 17 and 24 has climbed steadily the past few years, from two in 2006 to six in 2007 to 15 in 2008, the most recent year statistics are available through the state Department of Health.

Experts say some teens start using expensive pharmaceuticals and transition to the cheaper heroin, which they inject, smoke or snort.

“Most of the ones I see overdosing are between 19 and 22,” said Bob Barnes, who runs a local counseling agency called Recovery Unlimited. “I’ve seen the percentage going up, increasing rapidly due to the availability of these chemicals, particularly heroin and Oxycontin. Even as someone who worked in the field 24 years, I’ve never seen anything like it.”

Law enforcement confirms the growing trend.

In fact, federal agents are working cases that involve the heroin and pharmaceutical trade among young people at affluent high schools, said Edward Knoth, assistant special agent in charge of the local Drug Enforcement Administration office.

“We have made some arrests on people supplying pharmaceuticals,” he said, referring to a probe that was launched last year into drug trafficking at Eldorado High School. “It’s totally separate people who are supplying the heroin in that area. So we’re tracking it from two separate angles and trying to keep up a citywide attack, especially as it concerns high school-aged kids.” Knoth provided more details of an emerging pattern the administration is tracking locally and nationally of the progression of addiction and the easy access young people have to street drugs.

“DEA has seen an increase in heroin usage, and a lot of that is people starting in high school with pharmaceuticals,” he said. “They get hooked on the pills, which are opioids like heroin, and those are very expensive. So a lot of kids go on to heroin, which is a lot cheaper and very much available. We’re hearing about a lot of young kids overdosing on heroin — 17-, 18-year-old kids.”

Lynn Pedraza, director of Health and Wellness at APS, said Eldorado has a full-time substance abuse counselor, partly because the principal asked for one.

“The principal talked to me last year and said there had been problems,” Pedraza said. So the position was kept full-time instead of cut to part-time as planned.
Of Albuquerque’s 13 high schools, nine have full-time drug counselors. La Cueva is one of the four that doesn’t, which Pedraza said is a matter of resources.

Substance abuse in general, in our community, is not funded at the level we need funded,” she said.

‘The apple of my eye’

Steve Paternoster was in Roswell on April 8 for a meeting of the New Mexico Military Institute Board of Regents. He noticed on his BlackBerry that the daily credit card report for La Provence hadn’t been finished, so he called home. Haley, who had spent the previous night snuggling with her dad and watching a movie, answered the phone. She assured Steve that she would let his wife, Jane, who is Haley’s stepmother, know about the credit card issue and call right back. She did exactly that, then went downstairs to play with her two younger brothers: Jameson, 2, and 5-year-old Jackson. A short time later, as Jane was leaving the house with the boys, she told Jameson to knock on Haley’s door and “tell Sissy goodbye,” Haley didn’t answer. So Jane knocked. Still no answer. Jane entered the bedroom and discovered that the bathroom door was closed and locked. Jane ran downstairs, grabbed a butter knife and came back up to jimmy the door.

“Haley was on the floor,” Steve said. “No pulse. No breathing. The paramedics were here immediately. It looked like she took the drug — it was heroin — in both wrists. They also found some Vicodin. The paramedics were able to get her heart started, but she never regained consciousness.”

Haley was rushed to University of New Mexico Hospital. Steve left his meeting and did the same. She hung on for 17 hours, all the while her breathing becoming more labored, her heart rate dropping, her fever climbing, her lungs filling with fluid. Haley received “complete and compassionate care” from the hospital staff, Steve said. Several times, they would restart her heart, plead with her to stay alive. As the evening wore on, it started to become clear that Haley wasn’t going to make it.

“I said that if they couldn’t make it where Haley would still be Haley, that I couldn’t do it,” Steve said. “The priest had come and administered last rites, so I issued a (do not resuscitate) order. Then, she went into arrhythmia, and this is something no one should ever have to witness. She sat straight upright in the bed, and her eyes flashed open. Then, she fell back. It was horrifying, and it will haunt me for the rest of my life. I told her it was OK to go, and she did.”

The tragedy of it all aside, Steve wants everyone to know that he isn’t ashamed of his daughter — and that she didn’t commit suicide. “She was still doing OK in school, she loved being pretty, she loved her friends, she loved doing things for other people, and we had plans to go skiing this weekend,” he said. “Everybody was crazy about her. She had good family support. And she was a kid who was getting high like her friends were getting high, and that’s what she chose to do. But I’m certainly not ashamed of her. I’m crazy about her. She was the apple of my eye.”

Haley had struggled with substance abuse the past few years. Between 13 and 14, she went through a Youth Court program and had gotten things turned around. She had been enrolled at La Cueva High School, but Steve said it wasn’t suitable for her recovery. “She didn’t feel comfortable there, with the whole drug culture there. It’s out
of control,” he said. “We’re seeing an explosion in drug use here, and these kids in public school don’t have a chance. These kids are getting high, and they’re not just drinking and smoking pot. In fact, they turn their noses up at drinking. Their drug of choice is heroin. They’re doing heroin.” La Cueva High School principal Jo Ann Coffee could not be reached for comment late Friday.

Pedraza of APS said her department has used grant money to set up awareness training and programs to help students with drug addiction. She added, though, that drugs are available throughout the city. “I do believe that drug abuse is across the district and across all socioeconomic status,” she said.

It was Haley’s 16th birthday, Christmas Day 2009, when Steve started to become aware his daughter was using hard drugs. He had bought her a car and in fairly short order started to notice all the detritus of addiction: dented wheels from driving loaded into curbs, smashed-in windows, cigarette butts floating in cups in the center console and, on one occasion, a missing stereo that Haley said had been stolen. “I’m pretty sure she sold it,” Steve said. So, one day, as he was driving her to school, he asked her: “You have a problem, don’t you?” “She nodded her head, ‘yes,’ in a very small way,” Steve said. “And I asked her if it was the problem I thought it was. She nodded her head again, and then we went to work on getting her better.”

‘The kid was so smart’

Craig Weatherfield had watched his son, Nathan, who was 20 when he died on Monday, walk the dark hallways of addiction for a few years. So when the police chaplain, accompanied by three other officers, arrived on Craig’s doorstep, he already knew what he was about to hear. “As soon as I saw them, I just knew it had to be terrible news,” he said.

Nathan had not been living with his parents. “We went through the fights, the holes in the walls, and he and I were just having a terrible time getting along,” Craig said. “One morning, there was a fight, and it turned into a domestic violence situation, and Nathan went to jail. A judge issued a no-contact order, and he moved out.”

Nathan had struggled with marijuana and alcohol abuse since his teens, when he was a student at Eldorado High School. And he had tried to get clean.

“We were trying to deal with it,” Craig said. “And there were definitely times when he seemed to be receiving counseling and other stuff well.”

Nathan dropped out of Eldorado before his senior year. A self-starter, Nathan got his GED and, later, an associate’s degree in computer science from Central New Mexico Community College.

“When he put his mind to something, you just couldn’t stop him,” Craig said. “The kid was so smart. He taught himself how to build computers, and he was always fixing everyone’s computers. And he taught himself to play piano. He was really interested in music production.

“I’ll tell you something: He used to go on 50-mile hikes with the Boy Scouts, and he wasn’t even a Scout. He just loved to be outside.”

Nathan’s parents had known their son was using heroin for about a year. They’d seen it before.
His older brother started smoking heroin a few years ago, and within two weeks, he couldn’t stop. He went to his parents with his problem and was able to turn his life around.

“That just shows you how insidious this thing is,” Craig said. “Boy, we could’ve lost two of them just like that.”

Nathan had been in counseling in recent months. His parents saw glimmers of hope. “But then the drugs took over again, and we just couldn’t control him,” Craig said.

Craig is alarmed at how easy it is for young people to get heroin and other street drugs. “These kids can send a text or make a call and have something at their front door in 15 minutes,” he said. “And that’s ... all over town.

“I’m going to reach out to other parents. I’ve got to do something. If I can spread the word or help out — I just want to try to help in any way I can. No parent should ever have to live through this.”

Journal Staff Writer Hailey Heinz contributed to this story

**Signs of heroin or prescription drug abuse**

Nodding off during the day and sleeping a lot. Declining grades. Changes in friends or attitude. Frequently asking to see a doctor. Wearing long sleeves in the summer. Scratching frequently. Missing money or other valuable items. Burnt foil, bent spoons or other drug paraphernalia. — Source: Bob Barnes, Recovery Unlimited

**Resources for recovery**

- Turquoise Lodge, inpatient rehab, 841-8978
- Metropolitan Assessment and Treatment Services (MATS), short-term detox, 468-1555
- Recovery Unlimited, outpatient counseling, 292-4849
- Lifestyle Recovery, outpatient counseling, 345-6801
- A New Awakening, outpatient counseling, www.anewawakening.com, 224-9124

**Former Addicts Feel Lucky For Escaping the Trap**

Sunday, April 18, 2010 / By Hailey Heinz Journal Staff Writer

In the span of a year, Patrick lost seven friends to heroin. A graduate of Eldorado High School and the son of a doctor and teacher, Patrick is now 22, clean, and recovering from heroin addiction. Heroin in affluent schools, he said, is a serious problem.
“Heroin just runs away from you,” he said. “One day it hits you: ‘I’m not controlling this, it’s way beyond me — but at that point, it’s out of your control.’ ”

Catherine, a 21-year-old La Cueva graduate, decided to get clean after waking up from a weeklong blackout.

“I called my parents and said, ‘I think I have a problem,’ ” she said.

As families reel from the deaths of Haley Paternoster, Nathan Weatherfield and dozens more in recent years, Patrick and Catherine are more hopeful faces of the heroin problem: young adults who were addicted in their teens but have kicked their habit and done their best to move on.

Patrick started taking prescription drugs in high school after he began hanging out with an older group of friends, who never talked about the possibility of addiction.

“I was never shown the negative aspects,” he said. “It was made to look cool.”

Patrick’s progression from prescription drugs to heroin followed a trajectory that law enforcement and health officials say is increasingly common: He started out on things like Xanax, Oxycontin and Valium, but those habits soon outpaced his income.

“At the peak, we were spending $400 to $500 a day,” he said.

He and most of his friends had jobs to help pay for the drugs, and they would pool their money on weekends.

As expenses mounted, Patrick and his friends switched to heroin because it was cheaper. An 80-mg Oxycontin costs $40-$60, compared with a $20 bag of heroin, which provides a longer high.

Although he sometimes showed up at school on heroin, he tried to stay under the radar. “I thought, ‘If I do my homework, I’ll be all right,’ ” he said.

And he sort of was — for a while.

Patrick got a partial academic scholarship to Creighton University in Nebraska. He stayed for a little more than one semester, but he was using instead of studying, and he failed his classes.

So Patrick came back to New Mexico. He briefly attended the University of New Mexico and is now at Central New Mexico Community College.

He first got clean last summer, partly because seven of his friends had died, some from overdoses and some from other heroin-related health problems. One died in a car crash when he was driving on heroin.

Patrick got treatment and was clean for about five months until his best friend, who also struggled with addiction, died on Jan. 2. Patrick relapsed.

His new “clean” date, the day he stopped using drugs, is Jan. 19. It’s hard, he said, but thinking about all the friends who have died keeps him from using.
“My mentality has become now, if you do drugs, you’re going to die, it just depends on when,” he said.

Patrick has been accepted at the University of Mississippi. He knows if he were still using heroin, he wouldn’t even have been able to complete the application.

“When I finally got clean, good things started happening,” he said. “I became closer with my family. I started getting good grades in school. I got accepted in a school out of state.”

That doesn’t mean it’s easy, and he still sometimes thinks about using. He said it’s hardest when he has down time or when he is sad. Last week was particularly difficult after he heard about Haley Paternoster’s death, even though he did not know her personally. “That was hard, because it hurts me to hear that other people are going through that,” he said. “Whenever I feel some emotion I don’t really want to feel, what comes to mind is using.”

Lucky to survive

Catherine knows she is one of the lucky ones. She, too, has seen friends die, and she said it’s the roll of the dice that she survived while others, like Paternoster and Weatherfield, did not.

“It’s like Russian roulette, basically. You could OD your first time,” she said.

While Patrick was largely able to keep up his grades and stay under the radar, Catherine said she showed all the signs of addiction. “The school, in general, wasn’t strict on absences,” she said. “I probably missed 100 days and was asleep in most of my classes.” She always wore long sleeves to cover the track marks on her arms.

Catherine said she didn’t seek out drugs but got hooked when she started hanging around with friends who were mostly well-off, high achievers. “I hung out with AP and honors students,” she said. “The majority of those kids are still on drugs.” She said her circle of friends was plagued by depression, which is part of what led to the widespread drug use. “I think a lot of people were trying to escape,” she said.

Catherine used heroin for about eight months before getting treatment. Like Patrick, many of her friends overdosed or ended up in jail. She hasn’t used heroin for almost three years but was arrested last summer on charges of drunken driving and began treatment for alcohol abuse. She is now alcohol-free. Catherine is working full time and hopes to go to college. And although she was lucky enough to survive addiction, she said she wishes she had never touched heroin.

“My relationship with my family has suffered, and a lot of my relationships have suffered,” she said. “There really isn’t a benefit to doing any drug.”

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An Albuquerque emergency room doctor says he has watched the number of young people overdosing on heroin steadily climb during the past several years.

And the state Department of Health has become increasingly aware of what the department’s drug epidemiologist Nina Shah calls a “troubling trend”: young people getting hooked on prescription opiates and moving on to heroin.

Their observations reinforce other officials’ statements that heroin use is a growing problem among young people in Albuquerque and across the state.

“The tendency for heroin overdoses seemed to be traditionally relegated to people in their 30s, 40s, 50s and beyond,” said Isaac Tawil, an assistant professor of emergency medicine and attending physician in the University of New Mexico Hospital emergency room.

“It often involved the homeless population. But there has definitely been an increase in youth coming in with heroin overdoses,” he said. “I’m talking about people as young as 15, 16. Over the years, there has been a trend toward greater high-risk behaviors among young people.”

Shah said that, unfortunately, “it looks like a cost issue in a lot of cases.” A $20 balloon of heroin packs an equal or greater high, officials say, as an 80-mg Oxycontin pill, which can cost about $50. “Compared to heroin decedents during 2003-2007, decedents from heroin overdose in 2008 were significantly younger and more likely to have died from heroin combined with a prescription opioid other than methadone or antidepressant,” Shah wrote in a 2008 report. “It is possible that young users who died of heroin overdose in 2008 had been using heroin for a short time, compared to older, more experienced users.”

Journal stories earlier this month reported two overdose deaths in recent weeks and described what at least one local substance abuse counselor calls an “epidemic.” At least 15 people under age 24 died of heroin overdoses in 2008, the most recent year for which statistics are available. That’s up from two in 2006 and six in 2007. Statewide heroin overdose deaths among all age groups were up about 66 percent from 2004 to 2008 — from 89 to 148.

Starting at home

“It’s a small sample, so statistically speaking, the fluctuations lead to unreliable results,” Shah said. “... It gives you an idea, but not the whole picture.” But, she said, “Nationally, there are a lot of reports on (opiate use going up among young people). And the number of reports is increasing.” And she pointed out that overdose isn’t the only way people die when they use opiates. Users also die in motor vehicle crashes and from
health problems associated with the drugs, so overdose deaths may underreport the
problem, she said.

Young people often have their first introduction to prescription painkillers at home, Shah
said, adding that black markets for pills often develop when young people realize they
can sell their families’ medications for top dollar to their friends. The Health
Department’s 2007 Youth Survey showed that the nonmedical use of prescription
painkillers ranked fourth — behind alcohol, marijuana and nicotine — among the most
common drugs used by high-school-aged people. Shah said nearly 12 percent of ninth-
through twelfth-graders in New Mexico reported using prescription drugs to get high. In
years past, inhalants had ranked No. 4. The Health Department and UNM are working
on strategies to fight the growth of opiate addicts, she said.

ODs on rise

On April 8, UNM Hospital’s emergency room staff worked feverishly to save 16-year-old
Haley Paternoster, who had overdosed on black tar heroin at home that morning.
Haley’s father, local restaurateur Steve Paternoster, said the doctors and nurses gave
his daughter the best care he could have hoped for. But it wasn’t enough. Haley died
about 17 hours after her stepmother found her unconscious on the bathroom floor.
Steve Paternoster had some lengthy conversations with hospital staff members that
day. “As it was reported to me, there had been nine people in Haley’s age range who
had overdosed on heroin and come to UNMH in, like, a week and a half,” he said. “I
was told that several of them didn’t make it.

“The priest who did the last rites for Haley said he had been to that hospital four times in
the past week to do that for other young people.”

Tawil, the UNMH emergency room doctor, said he couldn’t confirm those numbers. “But
it doesn’t surprise me that he heard that,” he said. “One of the more common reasons
we see for respiratory arrest is opiate overdoses — some meth overdoses, too — and a
lot of those are young people.” Haley and Nathan Weatherfield, who was 20 when he
died on April 12, join the growing list of young people who have experimented with
heroin and quickly found themselves addicted. Many of the youths came from well-off
families with plenty of love and support and other advantages. Law enforcement also
has noticed the increase among young people using street drugs such as heroin. In
fact, federal agents are working cases that involve the heroin and pharmaceutical
trade among young people at some of the city’s more affluent high schools.

Tawil said UNMH staff members don’t pay particular attention to the socioeconomic
backgrounds of the people who show up in the emergency room in the throes of a
heroin overdose. “But again, it’s not surprising” to hear that young people from more-
affluent families are using heroin, Tawil said. “Interestingly, those lifestyles we associate
with older folks (who end up overdosing) like homelessness and a street lifestyle —
they’re starting younger now. I guess it’s a chicken or the egg conversation as to
whether it’s the drug use or the lifestyle that comes first.”