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Local programs combat addiction in Terrebonne and Lafourche

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Colin Pellegrin, 23, of Houma, has been doing drugs since he was 10.

He started out with marijuana before moving onto alcohol and other drugs at age 14, and then onto methamphetamine when he turned 18.

Three years later, Pellegrin overdosed in a detox center after taking muscle relaxers and benzodiazepines to try to wean himself off of the methamphetamine he had just injected into his veins. He was 21.

"I was so messed up when I got there that they told me I had to be in detox," Pellegrin said. "I brought my own klonopin and Somas to detox myself."

Justin, 32, of Metairie, overdosed on heroin earlier this year after he relapsed a second time following brief stints in rehab and in detox. The Courier and Daily Comet is withholding his last name as some of his personal acquaintances do not yet know about his drug overdose.

"All I remember was a warm feeling coming over me," Justin said, who has used drugs since he was 12 years old. He has been addicted to opiates, starting with pain pills and then heroin, for about a decade.

"When I came to, I didn't know where I was at. There was a guy in my face asking me simple questions like what's my name, where do I live, and for the life of me, I could not come up with the right answers," he recalled.

Emergency medical technicians told Justin that he had overdosed while driving.

"I was about to get on the interstate in New Orleans, and I guess I went out before I got on because the ambulance guy told me," he added. "I came to a stop and I hit a square curb. That's where they found me. I was only breathing about three times a minute. I was pretty close to not breathing at all."

Stuart Pratt, 31, of Slidell, was only 19 when he overdosed on 78 anti-seizure pills, rendering him medically dead for over seven minutes and throwing him into a three-month coma.



Chris Heller/Staff

Colin Pellegrin (from left) speaks with Assisi Bridge House licensed addiction counselor Billy Degeyter and Pellegrin's fellow residents John Ernest and Jacob LeBouef at a group meeting Friday at the residential halfway house for recovering addicts in Schriever.

“They told my mom I was never going to wake up, but apparently that day, I woke up,” Pratt said. “That still didn't stop me, because I wasn't dealing with anything I was thinking about or any emotions. The only thing I knew was to use and sell drugs. As soon as I got out, I went back.”

Over the last year and a half, John Ernest, 28, of New Orleans, admitted to overdosing a total of seven times. An opiate addict for the last 10 years, his drugs of choice have included hydrocodone, a combination of oxycodone and acetaminophen, and more recently, heroin.

“It was the best feeling in the world when I first started, but it got miserable chasing it,” Ernest said. “It's a circle.”

His most recent overdose this summer involved heroin.

“I was admitted to the hospital and spent three days in the ICU,” Ernest added. “I had acute kidney failure, nerve damage down my left leg and muscle tissue damage. I had to make a change.”

AN INCREASING PROBLEM

Pellegrin, Justin, Pratt and Ernest are unlikely success stories. Deaths resulting from a drug overdose have increased in Terrebonne and Lafourche Parishes over the past four years. 16 drug overdose fatalities were recorded in Terrebonne in 2011, dipping slightly to 15 in 2012 before rising to 19 in 2013 and then up to 22 in 2014, according to the Terrebonne Sheriff's office. 18 such deaths have been noted as of early October this year.

Terrebonne sheriff's Capt. Dawn Foret said there was no clear way to determine whether these deaths were accidental or intentional.

In Lafourche, the number of drug overdose deaths dropped from 13 in 2011 to 11 in 2012 before rising again to 13 in 2013, according to the Lafourche Parish Coroner's office. In the following year, there was an almost 60 percent increase from 13 to 22 deaths. This year, as of early October, eight drug-induced deaths have been recorded thus far.

All 2011 and 2012 fatalities were borne from accidental drug overdoses, Lafourche Chief Investigator Mark Goldman said. The majority of 2013, 2014 and 2015 deaths were also ruled as such, with only two suicides recorded in 2013, one in 2014 and two in 2015.

The suicides mostly involved benzodiazepines, antidepressants or hydrocodone, Goldman added. Some victims had multiple drugs in their system at the time of death, but morphine and benzodiazepines were listed as the major contributors in Terrebonne and Lafourche, respectively, Foret and Goldman said.

In Terrebonne, morphine was listed as the most prevalent drug from 2013 through 2015, records show. It was present in about half of 59 overdose victims during that time period, followed by Xanax, oxycodone, hydrocodone, cocaine and heroin. A drug breakdown was unavailable for 2011 and 2012 in Terrebonne.

In Lafourche, benzodiazepines were the most prevalent drugs from 2011 through 2015, Goldman said. These drugs were present in about 33 percent of the total 67

victims, followed by cocaine, hydrocodone, morphine and oxycodone.

A WAY OUT

Terrebonne and Lafourche authorities conduct three main programs in each parish in an effort to staunch the source of drug use as well as combat the effects of drug addiction.

Each year, Project LEAD educates over 1,500 Terrebonne fifth-graders about the consequences of drug addiction and other delinquent behavior through skits, workshops and classroom discussions as part of the curriculum, said Jason Dagate, program director.

Prosecutors from the Terrebonne and Lafourche District Attorney's Offices are assigned to one of 21 local private and public schools to conduct the sessions as often as once a month. The program culminates in a mock trial, and this year, the spotlight was on marijuana and synthetic marijuana possession.

"We try to get it as real to them as possible," Lafourche prosecutor Frank Rathle said in an Apr. 29 article with the Courier and Daily Comet.

In follow-up to Project LEAD, Terrebonne and Lafourche sheriff's deputies conduct Project DARE, another classroom-based program that teaches basic life skills to help kids avoid harmful situations.

Due to manpower issues, sixth-graders are the main target for Project DARE in Terrebonne, while all junior high school students participate in the Lafourche program.

"The main focus is to get them to realize their choices are what, bottom-line, going to make the difference (and) figure out there are good and bad choices," Terrebonne DARE officer Lt. Dale White said. "Not that everyone's gonna be perfect, since everyone's gonna make mistakes, but (it's important) to learn from the mistakes."

Deputies in each parish build a foundation for the LEAD and DARE programs starting from kindergarten with brief school visitations focusing on safety and other related topics.

For those who end up falling through the cracks, Terrebonne and Lafourche Drug Court is a last-resort option for alcoholics and drug addicts.

Drug Court diverts convicted offenders from jail into a four-phase program that helps treat their addiction, Terrebonne Drug Court coordinator Danny Smith said.

"Each client is offered the utilization of healthy living, healthy thinking, healthy environment and healthy meditation," program director Clarence McGuire said. This includes attending nutritional lectures, individual or group therapy sessions, support group meetings, and completing workbook assignments. Clients are also required to undergo regular urine drug screens, Breathalyzer tests and court appearances to evaluate their progress.

About 13 percent of participants have admitted to having an overdose over the past three years, with the primary drug being heroin, McGuire noted.

“As we realize relapse is a part of recovery, many of our clients experience temporary setbacks,” he said. “Many find their way back with the help of family and staff and their desire to utilize the tools offered.”

FINDING THEIR WAY BACK

Pellegrin, Justin, Pratt and Ernest were admitted into the Assisi Bridge House in Schriever, a halfway house for recovering addicts, at various times over the last six months.

Only 15 men can be admitted at one time, and the treatment is intense and individualized, said licensed in-house counselor Billy Degeyter.

All four men agree that the need for recovery has to come from within before it can take effect.

“I’d always base my life on having other people to try and fix me,” Pratt said. “It would always end up back to the drugs and alcohol because I would never fix what was going on with me.”

“This place shows me that I’ve got to work on myself a lot more,” Pellegrin added. “At other patient centers, they tell you about tools but don’t teach you how to work with any of them.”

They acknowledged that addiction is part of a larger problem that impacts the individual.

“It’s not just addiction,” Ernest noted. “It’s about what you learn here and the tools you put in your toolbox, which is my brain, and how to subdue that monster that’s working its way out and is ready to pounce at any given time.”

Justin admitted that he is working on childhood issues regarding his father and his uncle, whom he considered his primary father figure before his death.

“I’m hoping for a sense of peace. There’s no sense of peace when you’re running and gunning on the street,” Justin said. “I’m hoping to learn how to live without all the drugs and alcohol (and) how to function in society: what they call normal.”

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