

Education initiative aims to shed the stigma of addiction, save lives

By Marion Callahan STAFF WRITER



Straw family

Anna Straw (left), a 2011 graduate of Pennridge High School, shown with her mom, Jane, died from a heroin overdose in November. The Straw family lost Anna to addiction, but they refused to give in to the stigma that shames so many families into silence. The family published the reason behind her death in her obituary.

Anna Straw Initiative

When: Every Monday night, starting Feb. 2.

About: It will be offered in four two-hour sessions and will be ongoing. The focus will be on addiction as a disease, family impact and rehabilitation, developing a support network and how and when to use Nalaxone (to reverse the life-threatening effects of opiate overdose).

Where: The Presbyterian Church of Deep Run at 16 Irish Meetinghouse Road, Bedminster Township. The council's family education program is also offered in other Bucks locations and in neighboring counties.

To register for the program in Bucks or surrounding counties, call: 1-800-221-6333.

One Perkasio family is determined to save lives.

Jane and Stephen Straw lost their 19-year-old daughter, Anna, to a heroin overdose Nov. 9, 2012, but refused to give in to the stigma that shames so many families into silence when a loved one loses the battle with drugs.

In crafting their daughter's obituary, they were candid about her death.

Now they are allowing their church, The Presbyterian Church of Deep Run, to use their daughter's name for a free community education program aimed at shedding the stigma of drug addiction and battling heroin use, a crisis that keeps growing in Bucks and Montgomery counties.

The Anna Straw Initiative, led by parishioner Jim Kosa, is working with The Council of Southeastern Pennsylvania to address the growing problem of addiction to drugs and alcohol in Upper Bucks County. The initiative, which begins Feb. 2, is an extension of the council's Family Education Program, which is offered in other Bucks locations and surrounding counties, too.

"We want to tap into resources that are already in the community and make them more available to people," said Kosa.

Kosa said the Anna Straw Initiative will be an ongoing education program aimed at making people who are experiencing addiction feel less alone about stepping forward and reaching for help, family support and information that could save lives. The four two-hour sessions will include an orientation to addiction and how to deal with it.

The Doylestown-based Council of Southeastern Pennsylvania is offering its expertise and support for the sessions, which will be held at the Bedminster church. The council's education program has been offered across the region for the past 15 years. The training at the church will incorporate the most updated information about the drug crisis, its impact on families, rehabilitation and life-saving drugs, such as Naloxone, which is available in the state and counters the effects of opioids.

Heroin was the primary drug of use for half of all addicts seeking government help in 2014, according to figures released earlier this month by county agencies.

"Opioid (which includes heroin and prescription pain medication) addiction is still the number one reason people are seeking drug treatment in Bucks County, surpassing alcohol for the fourth consecutive year," said David Fialko, a prevention specialist who oversees Bucks County's Overdose, Prevention and Education Advisory Board.

The number of heroin cases was up 15 percent from the year prior, according to a Bucks county report. In Montgomery County, heroin admissions were up 8 percent to an "all-time high," said Kay McGowan, deputy administrator for the department of drug and alcohol services. Half of all Montgomery County's clients were addicted to heroin, McGowan estimated.

Beverly Haberle, executive director of the council, applauded the church's initiative.

"The whole faith community needs to deal with this illness and respond to this illness like they respond to people with other illnesses," she said. "People struggling with addiction don't get that kind of response. You feel very alone. A loving congregation has the opportunity to let people know they are not dealing with this alone."

Stephen Straw said he doesn't want to be perceived as "brave" for making the cause of his daughter's death public.

"We want people to see it as a disease like any other and it should not come with other baggage," he said.

Stephen and Jane shared their story about their daughter's addiction just a few months after she died.

Anna, like so many young users, had her first taste of opiate addiction from the medicine cabinet. Curiosity is what the Straws believe drove Anna to try drugs.

Anna, a 2011 graduate of Pennridge High School, wasn't sure what she wanted to do when she finished high school, but she didn't want to travel far from home. She loved fashion and the arts and talked about going to cosmetology school.

Drugs derailed her career plans, Jane said.

Shortly after graduation, Anna tried Percocet, a prescription painkiller that friends had given her. The drug quickly changed her life. The yearning to find a cheaper drug with as good a high led her down an eerily familiar path for users — the road to heroin. In a matter of weeks, she made the jump from pills to heroin.

Jane recalls sitting on the front porch with Anna, listening as her daughter described her addiction and her lack of control.

"She didn't want this to be her life, and she wanted to fix it," she said. "Once she began, she didn't know how."

One Friday in November 2012, after a stretch of sobriety, Anna was dressed nicely and ready to go job hunting. That night, she didn't return home. The next day, she didn't return phone calls or texts from family or friends.

Then, minutes before Jane was ready to head out to Bristol Township, one of the known places Anna went to use drugs, the family heard a knock on the door. It was a police officer with news that Anna had been found dead in a parked car. She had overdosed on heroin.

To keep her affliction a secret was never an option. Telling the truth was necessary, Jane said.

"My love was not lessened in any way by what she went through, and I was proud of her for being honest about it and for trying hard to manage it," she said. "She was no less lovable or deserving of respect because of her challenges, regardless of how those challenges may have come about."

So often, Jane said, people think this is a illness that affects "others."

"But we are not others; we're your next door neighbor, the same hard-working, conscientious parents," she said.

Jane agreed to put her daughter's name on the upcoming educational initiative to remind people that the disease "has a face."

"People need to feel safe from the stigma," she said. "We stepped up and said, 'Yes this happened to us.' It's time we stop treating it like something left in the dark."