

Heroin takes toll on local family - Daily Jefferson County Union: News

Heroin takes toll on local family

By Lydia Statz | Posted: Friday, January 3, 2014 8:31 am

“My husband and I still sit back and look at each other and say, ‘How did this happen to our family?’” Lisa said. “I would never have thought that a child of mine would go to prison. That was beyond anything that I ever thought could happen to me.”

“Lisa,” not her real name, came forward to share her story as the mother of a son currently incarcerated for crimes he committed to fund his heroin addiction. She requested anonymity to protect her family’s privacy.

Since 2010, more Jefferson County residents than ever before have turned to heroin as their drug of choice, driven by the decreased availability of prescription opiates. The nation as a whole has become more aware of the toll of prescription drug abuse in recent years, leading to a reformulation of the popular OxyContin, the creation of prescription drug-monitoring programs, and a new reluctance among doctors to write prescriptions for unnecessary opiates.

With new obstacles in place, many who had become dependent on opiate painkillers found themselves turning to the cheaper, more readily available heroin as a substitute.

“Alex,” who today is 30 years old, was no exception.

“Our son, growing up, always was kind of a risk-taker. He was brilliant, helpful and kind in school. Then he hit the middle school years and that’s when they say you’re either going to do great or the kid’s going to fall off,” Lisa said. “After that, he was always dressing in black and didn’t ever want to be home.”

Alex got his first real taste of opiates at age 15 when he burned his hand badly and was prescribed a course of Percocet for the pain — the kind of legitimate use with which many abusers begin their downward spiral.

“He was on Percocet for a few days and he told both my husband and I, ‘I like this and I want more.’ And we thought, ‘Well, it’s not going to happen,’ not realizing the significance of your 15-year-old son saying, ‘I tasted this and I like it,’” Lisa said.

Throughout his teenage years, Alex had plenty of behavioral problems, which Lisa and her husband were quick to recognize and deal with. They had him evaluated multiple times for any underlying problems, and recognized that he probably was experimenting with marijuana.

“The first thing people say is, ‘Where were the parents?’ We weren’t negligent in any of that. We were right on top of it and thought that he probably was experimenting with drugs. He’d smell like pot once in a while, and, you know, we’d give the lecture or what-have-you,” Lisa said. “So in that respect, maybe we blame ourselves because we were thinking, ‘It’s great we have a kid who doesn’t touch alcohol.’”

After dropping out of high school, however, Alex found a way to continue his opiate use through illegally obtained Vicodin pills, which continued for many years. But it wasn’t until 2010 that his use took a turn that really caught his parents’ attention.

When Alex couldn’t find a job during the worst part of the recession, Lisa offered him a chance to manage the family’s income property, thinking it would give him something to do, and a chance to move to a different city to look for work.

It wasn’t long before she got a call telling her Alex had robbed the apartment’s tenant in order to fund his addiction to heroin, and that he wasn’t getting out of bed.

“So I called the police, the police in Milwaukee arrested him and the police said, ‘Ma’am, we’re really sorry, are you sure he’s doing heroin?’ They said, ‘Of all the drugs he could choose, that’s the one that will kill him,’” Lisa recalled. “I said, ‘Well, he still needs to be arrested, and hopefully he’ll get some treatment.’”

At this point, Alex was selling everything he owned just to buy heroin. Pieces of his car, his winter jacket ... basic necessities gone in order to purchase the next fix.

“His teeth were falling out. He was really thin. Everything focused on this drug,” said Lisa.

Instead of going to prison, Alex entered a treatment program, but he quickly learned to cheat the system. He was using synthetic urine to pass the required urine tests, and continuing to use heroin the entire time. Shortly before he was scheduled to “graduate” from the program, Alex was busted buying heroin in Racine.

“I’m not blaming that system. It’s just that people who are on heroin or any drugs are just so savvy to what they can do,” Lisa said. “They lie to themselves and they’re so good at being able to hide what they’re doing that you could offer all kinds of money and all kinds of services, but unless they’re ready for those things, we’re throwing money away.”

At this point, her son was living in “deplorable, filthy” conditions, and telling lies that got more elaborate as the weeks passed.

“So we just kind of backed out. And that was when I just started shutting down on him, when I was seeing him destroying himself. I said to him, ‘Don’t come to me for anything anymore. The last thing I will give you is money,’” Lisa said.

Previously, she and her husband had been helping Alex pay some bills, such as car insurance, so he could continue to look for work. Usually, however, he would cancel the payment and pocket the money instead.

“You’re violated on so many different levels because they can con anybody,” Lisa said of heroin abusers. “And they can con their parents probably the easiest because you believe in them. They’re your kids. You want them to get better. They’re telling you story on top of story and you get hooked right in.”

Finally, however, Lisa’s relationship with her son hit an unthinkable wall when she called to have him arrested for burglarizing her own home.

“When I went into a closet and saw that something was amiss, I called the police and they came, and they were conducting a very professional investigation and I said, “My son did this. You don’t have to investigate anybody else. Just go to talk to my son.””

About \$10,000 worth of goods were stolen, but because local law enforcement had been so bogged down with similar crimes, she took it upon herself to get her valuables back. Lisa was able to follow Alex’s paper trail and find some, but not all, of the goods her son sold for drug money, and prove to detectives that he had committed the crime.

“We were able to find that stuff, call the detective and say, ‘Here, we found it. Now arrest him.’” Lisa said. “At that point, we just wanted him off the street because he was going to die. He was not going to stop using ... and I could not watch that anymore.

“I was so fragile and there’s a point in life where you say, ‘he’s going to ruin my life and his too,’ or ‘I can’t let him ruin my life and I’m moving forward no matter what happens.’”

Today, Alex is in prison for the crimes that he committed to fund his heroin habit, and the fact that he is locked away behind bars brings Lisa some bittersweet relief.

“Now that he’s finally in prison and I know that he’s in a safe place, I know that he’s not going to be out using and hurting anybody else, he’s not going to be hurting us, I can start rebuilding a relationship with him,” she said. “It doesn’t mean I’m going to turn around and say, ‘Welcome home’ when he gets out. I might never be able to have him live in my home. I can’t trust him.”

At one point, Lisa distanced herself emotionally so far from Alex that she mourned him as if he had died. She has reopened the door to a relationship with him a little bit, but said that even during those times, she pushed him away to preserve her own life. Even so, Lisa said, everything she has done has been out of love for him, and a belief that she was doing the right thing.

“Other parents might look at it and say, ‘Oh my God, how could she distance herself that much from her kid?’ But I think I did it in a loving way; I don’t think I did it in a punishing way. I don’t think along the way I said, ‘You’re a no-good criminal,’ Lisa said. “It was always, ‘What’s happening here is too painful. I can’t watch it.’”

Even her decision to have Alex arrested twice was motivated by a belief that if she didn’t put him in jail, he was on the fast-track to death.

“Had he not gotten incarcerated, he would be dead. There’s no question in my mind,” Lisa said. “And that was the last thing he said to me. ‘If I use again, I will die, because I’m not going back and doing all of these things that I’ve already done, and I won’t be going back to prison.’ He’s already OD’d twice, and twice somebody was there to call an ambulance.”

Lisa said she believes her decision to distance herself from Alex when his problem reached its peak was crucial to preserving her own mental health and personal life. Her advice to other families dealing with similar problems is to not let heroin drag the rest of the family down with it.

“If you don’t take care of yourself, you’re not going to survive it either,” she said.

With heroin use and the crimes it fuels at unprecedented levels in Jefferson County, Lisa certainly is not alone as the parent of an abuser, but sometimes, she said, it feels that way.

“There should be a support group for parents; I don’t know that there is one. Where I found support was online through websites. But it’s easy to do it anonymously than to get people in your community to talk about it,” she said. “I know people whose children are in kind of the same boat, and if anything, they don’t want to talk about it, because it’s too close.”

Staying off of heroin is a monumental task, and one at which not many people succeed. Lisa said she believes Alex wants to live a better life, but she really doesn’t know what the future holds for him.

“He can talk the talk, but once he gets out, the temptation is still there,” she said. “You can get heroin anywhere across the whole state. Where is he going to move that it’s not going to be a temptation? And he likes it. He liked getting high when he was 15 on Percocet.”

And still that pull always will be there. Alex once described his addiction as feeling like being held underwater in a lake and gasping for a final breath of air. For him, heroin is that final breath of air.

“Think about how that feels and how you want that last breath of air and what you would do to get it. That’s what I would do to get heroin. That’s how powerful heroin is,” she recalled Alex saying.

And yet, until Alex fully realizes what the lifestyle has brought him, there will be no help.

“He told me, “In here in prison, you’re just a number. I don’t want to be a number,”” Lisa said.

“And I was like, ‘Well, if you kill yourself on heroin, you’re a statistic.’”