

Heroin victim's mother shares tragic story

By Lydia Statz, Union staff writer | Posted: Monday, May 5, 2014 9:14 am

Melanie Crandall's greatest worry should be about helping her 18-year-old daughter find a job or apply to colleges to help her through the bumpy transition from adolescence to adulthood.

Her daughter, however, won't be doing any of those things. Alexis Schoeffling passed away in September 2012 at 17, before she even had the chance to get her driver's licence.

She was one of the first victims of a deadly heroin overdose in Jefferson County's current heroin epidemic. Thursday, May 1, marked the first time Crandall shared her family's story publicly, speaking at the Jefferson County Heroin Summit at Jansen's Banquet Hall in Fort Atkinson. The event brought together more than 200 local law enforcement, public health, government and school officials to shed light on the county's growing heroin crisis.

"At 2:29 in the morning on Sept. 23, I got a phone call. It said my daughter was in an ambulance on her way to Fort Hospital and they thought she had overdosed on heroin," Crandall recalled.

She didn't believe the caller at first and hung up, but the second call convinced her what was happening was real.

"I don't think I remember much of the next probably hour or so," she said.

Schoeffling eventually was transferred to American Family Children's Hospital in Madison, but, Crandall said, she knew from the moment she saw her that there was no hope.

"The EMTs worked very hard to at least get a heartbeat back on her, but there was no brain activity," she said. "She had been unconscious for so long that there was nothing."

Crandall said she spent a lot of time arguing with God, bargaining with him to take her instead, and screaming at Alexis to wake up. In the end, though, it didn't do any good and she faced a choice.

"I came to the decision to donate her organs, and then they asked me how long I wanted to wait. But as I sat there and looked at her, she kind of started retaining some water and puffing up. As you saw in the picture, she was very beautiful, and I thought she would be more angry at me for letting her not look so good, so I gave them a time limit," Crandall recalled. "At about 4 p.m. on Monday afternoon, they walked into her room and they said, 'This is your chance to say goodbye to your daughter.'"

At the heroin dealer's trial that resulted from Alexis' death, Crandall shared some of the notes she had written in the hospital, some of them to God, and some to her daughter.

"Please, God, tell her she can come back to us," one read. "I'm sure you have plenty of angels; you don't need to take mine too. I promise you I will do anything you ask of me; please just give her back to us."

Another note she wrote while waiting for the organ donation team to arrive.

"Here I sit waiting for them to take you away. How on earth did we get to this point? It all feels like a dream. Please wake up; this is your last chance to live. I don't know how to do this, I can't say goodbye."

An investigation afterward revealed some of the details of the night that led up to her death.

According to the criminal complaint in the case, Alexis was with her 18-year-old boyfriend when she met up with Cynthia Rogalski, a then-22-year-old Watertown woman, at Riverside Park in Watertown on Sept. 22, 2012.

Schoeffling reportedly paid approximately \$100 for four or five little pieces of heroin wrapped in tin foil.

Jefferson Police were dispatched at 2:29 a.m. on Sept. 23 to a Jefferson address to find Schoeffling unresponsive. She would die on Sept. 24.

The Dane County Medical Examiner's Office ruled her death was the result of an acute intoxication due to the combined effects of alprazolam (Xanax) and heroin.

The drugs' combined effects caused respiratory depression and coma, leading to a total depletion of oxygen to Schoeffling's brain, which eventually led to her death.

Rogalski originally was charged with first-degree reckless homicide by delivery of heroin and intentionally contributing to the delinquency of a child, but eventually pleaded no contest to delivery of heroin with an enhancement due to it being her second drug-related offense.

Rogalski currently is serving 10 years in prison.

At the trial, Jefferson County Circuit Court Judge Randy Koschnick called Rogalski a "peddler of death," and chided her for contributing to Schoeffling's death.

"Heroin is a scourge on society," the judge said. "Was it Alexis' choice to buy the drug and take it? Yes. But you gave her the means by which she consumed the drugs."

Rogalski used her opportunity to speak in the courtroom, apologizing to Schoeffling's family and saying that she thought about what had happened every day.

"It's not like I just went on living my life like nothing happened, because obviously it's affected me a lot," Rogalski said. "I know nothing I say is going to change that or make them forgive me. I am sorry. I never wanted any of this to happen. Never in a million years would I think me using

drugs would lead to something like this. I just never thought of the consequences before I started using drugs.”

Melanie Crandall had never thought about the consequences of heroin use before that day either. Like many in Jefferson County, she said, her perception of the drug was still one of urban alleyways and junkies with trackmarks up and down their arms, not rural communities.

“I was a bartender. I thought, if there was a drug or something going on, I would have heard about it,” Crandall said. “I never heard about it. I had no idea what to look for. I didn’t know what kind of signs.”

Even if she had, she might not have seen anything worrisome.

“Four hours before that, she had been in my house, gave me a hug, kissed me, told me that she loved me,” Crandall said. “She was two different people. She was one person when she was with me, and as soon as I walked out the door to go to work, or she walked out the door with her boyfriend, I guess she was a totally different person.”

Now, Crandall hopes that speaking about her family’s tragedy will help prevent others from going down the same path, and encourage them to educate themselves about the drug and its powerful effects.

“Nobody wants to talk about it. I’m not very proud of the fact that my daughter died of a heroin overdose at 17, but if I’m not up here talking about it, maybe your neighbor’s going to die from it, or maybe your daughter,” she said.

“You just have to have knowledge, and I believe knowledge is power. I believe it takes a village to raise a child, and everybody needs to start sticking together. Too many people are dying and they’re dying too young.”