

Silence is Not Golden; It's Deadly

By Ben Jacques

"From 12 on, I hung out with the wrong kids. Cigarettes, alcohol, marijuana, ecstasy. I took pain killers from my grandparents' medicine cabinet. Unlike others, I couldn't pull back. Soon I was dealing. I was often sick. I spent a lot of time in the bathroom. I dropped out of school. I stole. I had five car accidents in six months. I found myself sleeping on couches. I burned all my bridges. One day, looking at myself in the mirror, I saw a skeleton. I said I don't want to go on like this. I entered a four-day detox program. But the spin dry didn't last. I needed a miracle."

"I'm the mother of a 20-year-old heroin addict. Our son started using marijuana at 14. Then alcohol. We found needles in his room. We suspected he was injecting heroin. We put him in therapy. We had him drug tested. Unfortunately, we weren't watching him pee into the cup, and he would use urine samples from his friends. We didn't know what to do. Finally we kicked him out of the house. One day he came back and said he didn't want to live on the street. He wanted to get help."

The stories above, composites of experiences told by recovering addicts and parents are the stories of an increasing number of people in our community, looking for a way out. Looking for cures.

And it is these stories that are driving the newly formed Stoneham Substance Abuse Coalition (SAC), a town commission made up of professionals, parents, teachers, health care providers, police and fire officials, faith organization representations, and those who are, thank God, beating the disease—addicts now in recovery.

Led by School Committee member Shelly MacNeill, the Stoneham SAC is fighting to stem the epidemic of drug use spreading into our town. They are showing up at high school games. They are holding forums and vigils, training parents and responders, using music and spoken word to spread the message about addiction. They know that silence is not golden. It's deadly.

"We like to tell ourselves that it doesn't affect us," MacNeill says, "that in Stoneham we're good. No. we're not good. We have an epidemic."

The trends in Stoneham are alarming. In 2012 Action Ambulance responded to 16 drug overdoses. Last year the number more than doubled. Responses to alcohol emergencies also soared from 49 to 95. The Police Department has also seen an increase in robberies and drug-related crimes.

In 2013 Stoneham High School reported knowledge of 13 students in drug-rehabilitation programs. At least one promising young adult has been lost to heroin use.

Addiction in Stoneham is not limited to the young. Adults, including seniors, and their families are dealing daily with addiction.

The good news is that Stoneham is now doing something about it. Stoneham High School students have formed a Youth Coalition in support of a drug-free environment. And while the Substance Abuse Coalition is applying for major federal grant money to expand its efforts, it has become a resource center for addicts and families seeking treatment and support. You can check out their web page at www.stoneham-ma.gov/home/news/stoneham-substance-abuse-coalition, and at <http://stonehamsac.webs.com/>

Getting over our collective denial that there's a serious drug and alcohol abuse problem in Stoneham is essential—as it is for individuals struggling with addiction.

As a wise, recovering addict has said: “I know now that I'm allergic to narcotics. I break out in handcuffs.”

The Substance Abuse Coalition would like your support as it continues to bring the best resources of Stoneham together to educate about and prevent drug and alcohol abuse, and support individuals and families suffering from this debilitating and devastating disease.

Note: Ben Jacques is a member of the Stoneham Substance Abuse Coalition.