

Smithtown grapples with rise in teenage heroin use

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Michele DiBartolo drove up to Walgreen's on Smithtown's Main Street, just a block or two from the white pillars of the century-old Town Hall. Slipping out of the driver's seat of her 1994 [Infiniti](#), the 17-year-old left two friends waiting in the parking lot. Once inside Walgreen's, she ambled to the ladies room, where she injected a hit of heroin.

She walked back outside into the night to find her car surrounded by six police cars, her friends being handcuffed beside it. She ended up in the Fourth Precinct, charged with heroin possession and handcuffed to a table for seven hours, she said. It was her first and only arrest.

By that day last December, DiBartolo, now 18, had been using heroin for about two years, but managed to keep up her grades, and play lacrosse and softball.

"I was still going tanning, still doing my nails. I was still worried about how I looked," she said. "I still maintained good enough grades that my parents wouldn't notice."

Teens like DiBartolo have been snorting or shooting heroin in alarming numbers across Long Island in the last few years, its use hidden behind the suburban veil of afternoon ball games and bike riding.

While there's no indication that young people are using heroin in higher numbers in Smithtown than elsewhere, officials there in recent years have begun to see - and respond to - disturbing evidence of its impact: The town's substance abuse counseling center is seeing more, and younger, heroin and other opiate addicts. Residents and business owners have found hypodermic needles in parks and parking lots. Since January 2006, 30 people have died of heroin or other opiate overdoses there, according to the county medical examiner.

Starting about two years ago, an alliance of police, treatment counselors, town leaders, and school officials wasted no time taking aggressive steps to combat the problem. In April 2008, the town assigned a public safety officer full time to patrol its parks and beaches solely for heroin use. To raise awareness, the Smithtown school district hosted a series of forums beginning last March that has drawn more than 2,000 people, many of them worried parents hungry for information.

In places like suburban Smithtown, drug abuse can sometimes be easily hidden. "You have a car, or your parents own a car, and you can get transportation wherever you want to go," said one former Smithtown East High School cheerleader and recovering heroin addict who spoke on the condition that her name not be used. Parents routinely supply money for movies or food, "and you have a safe home to go back to," she said.

Prescription pills such as oxycodone are too easy to get, she said. After raiding parents' medicine cabinets, teens found other ways, often sending a male friend to the doctor claiming a fake back injury. Men would usually get a stronger dose, she said.

DiBartolo started in ninth grade with prescription pills as well. "We heard from a lot of people that you could get high off them, and that's when we realized it was right in the house," she said. "We could be getting high for free right now, and so we tried it. And from then on, we were stealing a lot of their pills."

DiBartolo said most high school weekends involved "driving around, picking up drugs, hanging out with boys and stuff. Some weekends, we'd stay at [a friend's house], go upstairs, watch TV, and listen to music and do drugs all night . . . it became a lifestyle."

By 10th grade, she had turned to heroin, experimenting with it after buying it from a dealer she met on Main Street who had no cocaine available.

"I remember I got really sick. I was throwing up and stuff, but I still thought it was really good, and I felt really good." She had found her new high.

DiBartolo wasn't alone. By the time she was a senior at Smithtown West High School, she said she knew about 15 classmates who were also using heroin.

While heroin use numbers may be small, they are large enough to have seized many people's attention.

"If you have 1,000 kids and 98 percent of them are doing the right thing, the other 2 percent is still a significant number of children that you have to be concerned about," said Edward Ehmann, superintendent of Smithtown schools, which sponsored what is believed to be Long Island's biggest heroin forum last March to share information with the 1,000 parents and others who attended. Many districts in [Nassau](#) and [Suffolk](#) have followed.

Cop with a bird's-eye view

Perhaps no one has more of a bird's-eye view of the problem than Det. Sgt. Edward Compagnone of the [Suffolk](#) police Fourth Precinct, which covers predominantly Smithtown. After working more than a decade in the Fourth, he left in 2003 to join the anti-gang unit in the Seventh Precinct in [Brookhaven](#). Three years later, after he was promoted to detective sergeant, Compagnone returned to the Fourth to find that opiates - particularly prescription narcotics such as oxycodone - were the party drug of choice for the 16- to 24-year-old crowd.

"We were doing a lot of work with pills for the first year or so," said Compagnone, who heads the Neighborhood Enforcement Special Operation Team that deals with drug issues and other street level crimes. "Since then, I guess about year and a half, two years now, there has been an onslaught of heroin in the area . . . These were kids that were going to school, taking these pills, and now have graduated to full-blown heroin addicts. That's the hook that gets these people on it."

Statistics confirm that more people are seeking treatment for heroin and other opiate use in the town. Since January 2008, 44 Smithtown residents have been referred for treatment through Pederson Krag, a [Suffolk](#)-based rehab center, according to the state Office of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Services. In [Suffolk](#), that is second only to Huntington, which has a much larger population.

The town's substance abuse program, Horizons, is facing an increase in the number of clients addicted to prescription opiates who then move on to heroin, and they are getting younger, according to its director.

"When the prescription drugs became less available and heroin came on the scene, the shift was immediate," said Elaine Economopolous, director of the program.

Added attention may have contributed to a spike in heroin arrests. Charges against those arrested in Smithtown rose from 15 charges in 2004 to 117 last year, the largest percent increase in any of the western [Suffolk](#) towns, according to the [Suffolk](#) police.

One of [Suffolk's](#) largest heroin busts ever, according to District Attorney Thomas Spota, happened in the Fourth Precinct. In November of last year, Suffolk police said they netted 10,000 packets of heroin and 100 oxycodone pills among other drugs at a home on Brooksite Drive in the Smithtown community.

"It's our priority," said Compagnone. "The word is out there. We are making strides, going after the big dealers."

To combat the problem, the Smithtown Town Board purchased an unmarked car for town officers to catch those using heroin on town property. Still, Supervisor Patrick Vecchio said, the burden of stemming heroin use and sales shouldn't fall on any town.

"It's a stain on our community and you need more enforcement to eradicate that stain," said Vecchio, a former New York City police officer. He called for more police presence, including redeployment of resources to put more cops on the streets in areas seeing a rise in heroin use.

Suffolk Police Commissioner Richard Dormer said his department in 2004 put more detectives in its narcotics division, though he wouldn't specify how many. Also, he said the department has recently added police officers in the Fourth Precinct. "I always preach that we must have the flexibility to assign our people where we need them . . . and we are doing it with this problem."

Death brings issue home

At virtually every meeting on the problem this year, the name of Martha Watson comes up. In December 2007, the 70-year-old grandmother was stabbed to death in her Nesconset home by 22-year-old Victor Chunga, a self-described heroin addict who told police he broke into the home she shared with her grandson, Matthew, looking for heroin.

Chunga's attorney, Jason Bassett of Central Islip, said he was suffering heroin withdrawal at the time. He is serving 35 years to life upstate.

"I've sat across the table from a lot of people charged with a lot of things, and I never met anyone who seems less capable of any physical aggression," Bassett said in a recent interview.

In a letter to Newsday Sept. 21, Chunga wrote, "I left Long Island hoping my tragedy would open people's eyes. Smithtown is where my heart is . . . "

Ten months after Watson's murder, a routine community cleanup of the shuttered Bavarian Inn on Lake Ronkonkoma unearthed a disturbing find - dozens of discarded hypodermic needles and glassine bags from heroin.

"They're using the area as a shooting gallery," Fred Gorman, president of the Nesconset-Sachem Civic association, said at a hastily called meeting afterward. "If we work intelligently, we can take it back." The town has since has boarded up the site several times, and police patrol the property.

The meeting, held on a rainy October night last year at the Nesconset Nursing Center, brought out more than 200 people. Some told stories of drug sales they had seen in parking lots of local delis and fast-food places; some identified homes in their own neighborhoods where they believed heroin was sold.

The room fell silent as a woman in the crowd got up and said, "My son is one of the bums you look at . . . He's been infected . . . It's been four years, and I fight on a daily basis to save my son."

One of the recurring themes since then, in Smithtown and elsewhere, has been that prevention and treatment are as important - and can be even more difficult - than enforcing the law.

Suffolk Legis. John Kennedy (R-Nesconset), who along with Gorman has been on the front lines, said the town needs treatment centers along with more police on the street. To learn more about it, Kennedy and his wife, a nurse, have taken classes at Suffolk Community College in chemical dependency.

On March 8, more than 1,000 people showed up at the forum on heroin abuse held at Nesaquake Middle School in Smithtown. There, residents told of finding needles in streets, and kids shooting up in their cars before school.

East Hills Park, a short walk from Smithtown High School East, was considered a particular problem for drug debris left behind.

"We all know, this type of activity by itself is catastrophic for our youth, but it also leads to other crimes. . . . You have moms and dads and children in a recreational facility where these spontaneous things are of great concern," said Smithtown Public Safety Director John Valentine.

Safety was the first concern of Gorman, too, who said of the heroin paraphernalia found alongside Lake Ronkonkoma: "Hopefully, the people feeding the ducks and those using heroin are not there at the same time."

Recovery and new reality

After a few attempts to get clean, DiBartolo is in a residential rehab center, Outreach House II in Brentwood. She has earned a Smithtown West high school diploma while taking classes there at the house. Her GPA is 3.2, she said. Her life is full of rules - shoes lined up neatly, beds made with military corners. But after 10 months there, she's determined to make it work this time. And she said she's glad Smithtown has taken steps to recognize the problem.

"They believe it's a good area and nothing's going to happen, and it leaves loopholes for everyone. . . . They don't view a 16, 17-year-old - that does sports, that does good in school, has a good home life, and respects their parents and comes home on time - as someone who'll be shooting up heroin. The stereotypes . . . get in the way of the reality of it. And the truth."