

Long Highland

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They had all the proof they needed that they were fighting a real war.

Recently, two detectives from the Nassau County narcotics/vice squad went for a quick bite at a county line area bagel store. Both are seasoned veterans, having fought the darker side of suburban life for some years. Among other duties, of late, their time had been spent dealing with an increasing heroin problem in Nassau County, one they know is very real and very frightening.

Across the store, they noticed a young man sitting at a table falling asleep, or nodding off, into his lunch. Moments later, another young man exited the men's room with blood trickling down his arm. The detectives moved in to investigate. The young man snoozing in his bagel was arrested after the cops found heroin in his pocket. In the confusion, the bleeder got away.

This was in the middle of the day, in a typically white, middle-class American suburb. And it is becoming a familiar story.

A Typical Teenager

Jessica* seems like the nicest girl in the world. She's soft-spoken, bright-eyed and as sweet as can be, the kind of girl you'd want your kids to hang out with.

For years, she'd find the kind of kids she wanted to hang out with on the streets of Levittown. That's where the former Island Trees High School student would wander to buy her heroin-from fellow students. That is, until the night her stepmother found her in bed unconscious, blue-faced, with saliva dribbling down the side of her mouth, ODeD.

"I almost died," remembers Jessica.

In the hospital, she was shot with adrenaline through a needle in her heart, an instant detox. She remained in the hospital with a collapsed lung for a week, going cold turkey.

"I was convulsing and thrashing, trying to get out of my body," she recalls. "I weighed 100 pounds and eight people had to hold me down. I look back at it now and cringe. I had no concept of how I was playing with death."

She started using heroin at 15 and stayed on it for four years. Now, five years clean and 24 years old, she says, "I desire it all the time. I liked the rush and release. It was an exciting, thrilling and new experience that you just cannot feel unless you're high."

That's what authorities are up against.

In The Trenches

Going to the offices of the Nassau County Police Department Narcotics/Vice Squad (NCNVS) makes you feel like you are up to no good. There, they don't look like cops, and there's a degree of mistrust in their eyes that cannot be shaken. It is the product of dealing with liars for a living.

Detective Lt. Andrew Fal's face does not carry the lines one might expect from a cop who has been on the job almost 40 years. As the commanding officer of the NCNVS, Fal has a lot on his plate. His day consists of dealing with some of the darkest aspects of the human condition, including human trafficking, prostitution and drug dealing. He has seen the drinking age change more than once, several police commissioners and county executives come and go, and crime stats go up and down in Nassau. Nothing should surprise him, really. But recently he has been shocked by something he never thought he would see again: heroin, once again taking root as a popular drug, on LI's manicured streets.

When heroin began to show up in arrests around Nassau, especially with young people, Fal was stunned.

"I said, 'No, this can't be,'" says Fal, who remembers when heroin began to claim lives in Nassau 30 years ago. "I mean, how stupid are these kids?"

There is no denying that the drug is a big problem among kids in their late teens and early 20s, says Fal. Across Nassau and Suffolk, more and more arrests, overdoses and, most disturbingly, casual use, are related to the drug that is perhaps the most hardcore of all illicit substances.

According to Detective Lt. Peter Donohue, deputy commanding officer of the NCNVS, the numbers don't lie. In 2003 in Nassau, he says, there were 102 heroin-related arrests. Last year, there were 151—a frightening increase of almost 50 percent. But those numbers can be misleading. Many people who are arrested for petty crimes, rather than drugs, are committing them for one reason—to get more heroin.

Although Suffolk police were unable to make heroin arrest statistics available as of presstime, The New York Times reported 95 fatal heroin-related overdoses in 2005 in Suffolk, compared to the 47 in 2004. Rehab clinic admissions for opiate abuse from a criminal justice referral source rose in both counties, by 32 percent in Nassau and twice as much—66 percent—in Suffolk between 2000 and 2007, according to the New York State Office of Alcohol and Substance Abuse Services.

"Heroin is emerging as a threat," says Suffolk County District Attorney Tom Spota through his spokesman. "Over the past few years, a significant rise in the drug's purity coupled with a greater

supply on the streets has resulted in an increase in the frequency of heroin overdoses," the spokesman added. As a result, in 2005, Suffolk County police responded by creating a special unit in the county police narcotics bureau, to track and investigate heroin overdose cases.

Detective Lt. William Burke, commanding officer of the Suffolk Police Narcotics Section, points out that there has been a shift in the heroin-abusing demographic since his rookie days three decades ago.

"When I first came on the police department, I always came across heroin junkies who were 40-year-olds. Now you will see younger kids using heroin," he says, attributing the change to the new, stronger wave of smack. He gives another reason for the resurgence: Today's heroin is cheaper.

"It's a trend that's been going on over the last several years," adds Burke. "We have issues with heroin everywhere."

"OBVIOUS AND OUT IN THE OPEN"

According to the NCNVS, the hotbed of LI's heroin community seems to be the South Shore communities of Massapequa, Bellmore, Merrick, Seaford, Wantagh, Copiague, Lindenhurst and Babylon.

But the epidemic does not stop there. Tony North Shore towns are also facing their own problems, Fal warns. Economics may play a role in why the rest of the Island may not hear of these issues on the Gold Coast.

"On the North Shore, the problem is well hidden behind money," says Fal. "When a kid gets in trouble, [he or she] is sent off to rehab quietly."

And many teenagers and young adults do seem to be in trouble. Students at Syosset High School say that there's a pocket of seniors who have \$400-a-day heroin habits. High school kids in Copiague say that their town is home to dealers who service teens. Massapequa High School students say heroin use is rampant-"obvious and out in the open"-in their school and town. At Ward Melville High School in East Setauket, the commons is called "The Pharmacy." At Sachem North, there's a part of the school openly known as "The Drugstore." Lindenhurst High School students brag that they're the "Heroin Capital of Long Island." And in Bellmore, kids from Calhoun High School say heroin is so prevalent that in some families, it's an intergenerational thing. Several sources from different towns report that some middle- and upper-class kids have junkie parents, and they steal their stash.

Most of the students and heroin users interviewed for this story warn that young heroin users aren't the stereotypical-looking strung-out junkies we know from the movies. These are white middle-class kids who pass for normal, looking sweet and typical-like Jessica-but who often suffer and die silently.

"Parents need to know that their goody-goody child could be doing heroin," says Jill*, 25, a seven-year crack and heroin user from Babylon, "and unless they pay very close attention, there are very few telltale signs until it is too late."

"Weekends and parties are the places where most of these kids use heroin," says one Syosset High School senior, who takes drugs but not heroin.

Across the board, the consensus is that the increasingly common path to heroin starts with what users call "pharm parties," where kids take whatever opiate-based prescription drugs are in their parents' medicine cabinet-Vicodin, Percocet, oxycodone-perhaps going so far as to crush the pills into a powder and sniff them. Teens who abuse prescription drugs are 12 times likelier to use heroin, according to a 2005 Columbia University study that also found that prescription drug abuse by teens tripled between 1992 and 2003.

Smackonomics

There is something very wrong when heroin is more affordable than gasoline. But, say police sources, that is exactly the situation. NCNVS's Donohue says that heroin is cheaper and easier to get than ever before.

Users agree that it does not cost much money at all to get into the game. A small bag could cost as little as \$7. Once the heroin habit really begins, junkies may start to buy in "bundles," which could be as many as 11 or 12 bags, but usually an even 10. That could cost about \$200 or less. The typical user buying in that quantity would get about two bundles, or 20 bags.

Fal says that the drugs are being sold primarily by neighborhood kids who start out by going to Brooklyn, Queens or the Bronx to buy heroin for themselves. As word begins to spread, they start to pick up heroin for friends. Suddenly, they are dealers.

"They find their trade expands exponentially," says Fal. "They never see themselves as dealers when they are arrested. They just think they are picking up for their friends."

"Brooklyn's the cheapest," says a Syosset High senior. This is confirmed by most of the junkies who find they have to go off the Island to buy their heroin after they graduate high school.

"It's so easy to get heroin in school," says Jessica. "When you graduate, you graduate to Brooklyn or the Bronx, and things start to get seriously dangerous."

Most heroin users remain under the radar until their addiction causes them to commit petty crimes to support the habit. At first, they're stealing from parents and friends. Then they get more desperate. When caught, if they don't have heroin on them, they could be off the hook for the drug charge.

Being caught with a small amount of heroin, say, a small bag or two, is treated as a misdemeanor possession charge. The addict could be back doing the drug in just hours-or even less.

But getting caught with multiple bags could result in an intent-to-sell charge, which is big trouble for the suspect. They could wind up in custody at the worst time: when their withdrawal begins. Then it is a completely different nightmare altogether.

Not Just Horsing Around

Heroin is a hell of a drug. Few substances have its immediate addictive qualities. Heroin is derived from the poppy plant, native to Southeastern Europe and Western Asia, but now is cultivated in many other parts of the world. Cops say the majority of the heroin that makes it to LI comes from countries such as Colombia, via Mexico. A member of the opiate family, which are the most addictive drugs, heroin goes right to the brain. It's that first hit that a heroin addict will chase after, forever. It is a futile chase, as most addicts will tell you.

It's been said by junkies that heroin is better than sex. While most would probably disagree, it makes scientific sense. In the early 1970s, scientists found that the human brain has receptors that seem to welcome opiates with open arms. Morphine, heroin, opium and other similar substances affect the part of the brain that releases endorphins, those sweet, natural brain chemicals that provide a "rush."

Some have said the initial rush of heroin is like an orgasm, complete with flushed skin and heavy limbs. But as the drug begins to settle down and travel through the body, it acts like morphine, numbing and calming the nerves. The feeling is so pleasant that users want to do it again. And again-well, that is, if they don't mind vomiting every once in a while. Welcome to the Terror Dome.

"Users develop a tolerance, so you need more and more heroin to feel the euphoria that is associated with the first heroin high," says Dr. Joseph Rio, the chief toxicologist for the Nassau County Medical Examiner's office.

Consequently, the brain urges the addict to do whatever is necessary to get that high. Of course, along the way the body begins to develop a dependence, too. Rio says that, not unlike substances like tobacco, the physical hook of heroin becomes a painful, nagging feeling.

But that tolerance is phony, because it is only the brain that is getting used to the opiate effect of the drug. The body continues to take a pounding, and there is no real tolerance level to achieve. Organs like the liver and kidneys will be damaged. And once a sniffer graduates to the needle, a host of other issues present themselves, including hepatitis B and C, HIV/AIDS, abscesses from repeated punctures not being cleaned, and other infections. Once someone begins doing heroin, there really is no upside.

Fal says, though, that this dependence works to the advantage of the cops.

"Addicts don't want to get sick," says Fal. "They get what we call diarrhea of the mouth."

That is when the cops can start to break down the walls of silence built up by drug addicts.

"When we arrest addicts, they know they only have a certain amount of time before they start to sneeze, get chills, and eventually be lying on the floor in the fetal position in withdrawal," says Donohue. And don't forget the insatiable itching, parodied by non-users but feared by junkies.

And a junkie will do anything to get a fix. That desperation has led to recent arrests in both counties. Sources confirm a recent bevy of arrests in the Massapequa area, which they believe will continue to lead to more information.

Recently, a married couple was arrested for a string of robberies in Massapequa. The man and wife were robbing school-aged kids, tearing chains from the kids' necks or grabbing whatever they could to fund their heroin addiction. Beyond south Nassau, on June 25 in north Suffolk, 21-year-old Victor Chunga of Smithtown was sentenced to 35 years to life for stabbing to death 70-year-old Martha Watson in her Nesconset home last December. Chunga stabbed Watson while trying to steal heroin from her grandson, Matthew Watson, who had stopped supplying Chunga with heroin. Matthew Watson was also stabbed repeatedly, but lived.

Fighting The Fire

The problem is so alarming that Nassau Police Commissioner Lawrence Mulvey and County Executive Tom Suozzi hosted a May 8 conference organized by the Nassau County Police Department for Nassau's school administrators.

A multimedia presentation opened the eyes of school officials, for many had no idea that heroin was making such a comeback locally.

The police department announced that it was holding the meeting with school personnel from districts "located in the south corridor of Nassau County, where an increase in the use of heroin amongst teens has made a significant resurgence." And yet, many insist that the drug is not a problem within their schools.

When asked about heroin use at Massapequa High School, Massapequa Public Schools administrators responded to the Press with fervor.

"The Board of Education and administration have never been informed of any use of heroin within the high school by our supervisory staff," said Acting Superintendent of Schools Charles Sulc in a letter faxed and mailed to the Press. "Furthermore, the Nassau County Police Department has never been in contact with the Board of Education, nor any level of the high school or district's administration, regarding heroin use by Massapequa High School students."

Sulc did not return calls from the Press, relying only on the letter.

Robert Schilling, executive director, assessment, student data & technology services for Massapequa Public Schools, flatly denied any heroin incidents with Massapequa High School. He did, however, attend the police department's conference. So what did he do with the information gleaned from such a dramatic presentation?

The school district had no comment on that question. Neither did officials from both the Copiague and Lindenhurst school districts, according to an e-mail from their publicist, Kathy Beatty.

"We had no specific [incidents] at Massapequa High School," says Fal. "But, in general, there is a problem. And, it's a conclusion you can make, that it is in the schools.

"We are not about mincing words," Fal continues. "We made that presentation so all the school administrators knew that [heroin] could be coming. It's an emerging problem. We have to create an awareness. You can't just wait until you have a problem."

On a recent walk through downtown Park Avenue in Massapequa Park, Massapequa High School students were observed spending their newfound summer freedom hanging out on benches lining the street. When asked, one 16-year-old boy admitted to heroin use. "It's a good drug," he said, while trying to persuade passersby to purchase cigarettes for him and his friends.

At nearby Brady Park, a small, informal 18th birthday remembrance for a boy from Massapequa who died unexpectedly this past March was taking place. His friends were open about the boy's heroin use.

"Plain and simple, [Massapequa High School] has problems with dope," said the dead boy's 20-year-old friend from Levittown. The friend admitted that he himself is a former heroin user, right after the group at the table finished smoking some marijuana. "I don't think [the school district] wants to admit they have a problem," said the Levittown friend. He would know—he did heroin with the Massapequa teens.

Ask any junkie in high school, and they will probably laugh at the idea of the administration not knowing that heroin is being used by students in the school. Often, these kids do not hide the fact that they use.

Edward, now 24, took heroin while at Lindenhurst High School. He says, bluntly, "They knew who we were. It's this generation's drug of choice." This sentiment is echoed by many young heroin users.

Jessica, who once trolled the streets of Levittown for drugs as a high school student, agrees. She says, "Teachers are well aware of the heroin use. I had one girl in my English class announce to the whole class, in front of the teacher, 'I was up all night doing heroin.' I thought the teacher was going to flip out."

But Alice Andersen, a licensed social worker who serves as the drug and alcohol counselor for Levittown Division High School, says she has never seen a student with a heroin problem at the school.

"Alcohol and pot have always been the drugs of choice," she says. "We have not had one child [on heroin], or one report of heroin abuse in the school."

Ask someone who has used, though, and you get a very different answer.

"I knew I could always get heroin from a student from Levittown," says Jessica.

But it's not just administrators who disagree that heroin is becoming more prevalent. Some students do as well.

"I don't think it's really that bad-it's just certain kids," says Andrew Carroll, 17, who graduated Massapequa High School in June. The former hockey team captain, taking a quick break from his job at a local deli, described the news coverage focusing on the school as "exaggerated." Others see any trace of heroin use as something to be concerned about.

Abusing heroin leads to obvious addiction, but too often that habit will end in death. Dr. Rio explains that heroin affects the brain as it is communicating with the body. So, the brain might tell the heart to stop pumping blood, or the lungs to stop breathing. Too often, when someone who is high on heroin goes to sleep, they never wake up.

By all accounts, the heroin that is being used today is immeasurably more potent than in the past. The potency allows users to sniff heroin as opposed to shooting it at first. That is a mind trick that Fal believes gets the ball rolling in the wrong direction.

"Kids think it's no big deal if they sniff it," says Fal. "It takes the stigma away from the drug. The image of someone using a needle is not reality to them."

But no matter how it's taken, heroin use is a harsh reality. A hit of heroin that is sniffed or snorted can take up to 15 minutes to affect the brain. A subcutaneous injection-one that goes just under the skin-will make its way to the shooter's system in about 10 minutes. But an intravenous shot, one straight into the vein, is almost instant.

"We've been in a little bit of an upswing," says Kevin Leonard, clinic manager with the Suffolk County Department of Health's Division of Community Mental Hygiene. He is careful not to term the increase a trend, describing opiate abuse as "cyclical in nature," and noting that in his three decades in the rehab field, he's seen lots of ups and downs in terms of heroin use.

Meanwhile, though, Fal, Burke and the rest of the cops across the Island remain steadfast in stamping out the flare-ups before they become an inferno. Fal remains astounded that heroin use is even an issue.

"With all the technology and information at their fingertips, how could these kids do heroin?" he wonders. "I mean, heroin is not just recreational. It is highly addictive. It causes problems. It increases crime."

Fal pauses.

"And, it causes death," he says. "They just don't understand the consequences."

-With additional reporting

by Heather Burian

For help with heroin addiction, call Suffolk Helpline, 631-853-7374 or Nassau Helpline, 516-481-4000.

*Not their real names.