

Greenwich twins bring message of addiction to their WMS peers

By Emilie Munson Updated 10:19 am, Wednesday, August 23, 2017

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Twins Max and Katie Konigsberg, incoming freshmen at Greenwich High School, pose outside their home in Greenwich on Tuesday. The pair produced a video about the opioid epidemic for their Western Middle School ... [more](#)

GREENWICH — When the topic of opioid abuse arose, everyone’s ears perked up.

It was nearing the end of winter 2016 and Jeff Konigsberg, Joan Lunden and their four children sat around the dinner table at their home in backcountry Greenwich. Konisgberg was responding to one of those ordinary “Tell me about your day” prompts and he began to tell his family what he learned that day talking to a Greenwich orthopedic surgeon.

The surgeon described how doctors’ habits of overprescribing opioids are putting the drugs into the hands of adults and teens who may inadvertently abuse them. The description sparked a long family conversation.

“I honestly had no idea,” said Max Konigsberg, 14. “When you think of drugs, you like to think of all the main drugs like cocaine and the drugs you hear about at school. But it is really astonishing to think that you can get these drugs from your doctors.”

Max and his twin sister, Kate, decided to research opioid abuse in Connecticut and the nation for their Western Middle School capstone project. Their work culminated in a five-minute video they produced and presented to an auditorium of classmates and parents in the spring.

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"It really hits hard," Kate said. "One third of many prescription pills will go unused and potentially diverted when prescribed, and when those pills are left in the houses of people all over the world, that leaves so much room for error and danger. So many people are not aware of that."

As part of their outreach, they have planned a prescription medicine drive to be held Sept. 17 at the "Race to Stop the Opioid Epidemic." The 5K is being organized by the ONS Foundation for Clinical Research and Education, which is conducting research on alternatives to opioid prescription.

Jeff Konigsberg is an ONS board member.

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Speaking from personal experience, Lunden, a co-host of Good Morning America from 1980 to 1997, urged parents to clean out their medicine cabinets.

"If you have these drugs in your home, be aware of it and put it under lock and key or get rid of it," she said.

'I couldn't have saved myself'

Before Max and Kate were born, Lunden's oldest daughter, Jamie Hess, now 37, developed an opioid addiction after several injuries from competitive horseback riding.

When Hess was in college, she fell from her horse and broke bones in her face and jaw. She was prescribed opiate painkillers and continued to use them after she healed.

Over a period of about a year and a half, Lunden and her younger daughter, Lindsay Weinberg, noticed Hess's behavior begin to change.

"We all knew something was going on, but we didn't know what," Weinberg said. "She was late to everything unexplainably..."

"... And talked a thousand miles an hour," Lunden finished.

Lunden asked Hess, who was living in New York City at the time, several times if she was buying drugs, and Hess would tell her mother no.

Finally, late one snowy night during Hess's junior year in college, Lunden drove to her daughter's apartment with a drug interventionist and checked her daughter into a rehabilitation facility.

"The first thing she said is, 'Thank you, I couldn't have done this myself. I couldn't have saved myself and I only wished we could have done this sooner,' " Lunden said.

Lunden was shocked to learn the source of her daughter's addiction.

"She wasn't buying something on the street from some dealer," she said. "She was taking pills from a bottle that had her name on it."

Hess spent six months in rehab kicking her addiction and has since remained clean. Now a mother herself, she works in public relations for The Narrative Group in New York City.

An epidemic

According to the American Society of Addiction Medicine, two million Americans, ages 12 and older, had a substance use disorder involving prescription pain relievers in 2015.

Opioids were involved in 33,091 deaths in 2015, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and opioid overdoses have quadrupled since 1999.

In Connecticut, drug overdose death rates increased 26 percent from 2014 to 2015, the CDC reported. Connecticut residents are more likely to die from an unintentional drug overdose than a motor vehicle accident, the state Department of Health said.

Greenwich had close to 20 overdoses last year, including fatalities, according to Greenwich Police.

Weinberg, 34, said prescription drug misuse was common at Greenwich High School when she attended.

"Going through Greenwich High School, drugs and alcohol were very prevalent," she said. "I saw it all over the place at parties and in school. You saw the traditional high school drug usage, but there were also a lot pills being taken."

Most adolescents who misuse painkillers are given them by a friend or relative, the American Society of Addiction Medicine reports.

Kate and Max, who will be freshman at GHS when school starts next week, said they've heard about drug use at the high school, but not at Western Middle School. Still, they think middle-schoolers should be aware of the issue.

"When you're at parties and you're mixing these drugs with alcohol, it can also be fatal in a lot of situations," Kate said. "So I think that was really important to educate (teens about), especially all going into the high school."

Prescribing new habits

For their research project, Kate and Max interviewed several local experts, including Paul Sethi, a Greenwich sports medicine orthopedic surgeon. With the ONS Foundation, he is working to change doctors' prescribing habits to decrease the amount of opioid medications that fall into the wrong hands.

Doctors, and in particular surgeons, must walk the fine line of prescribing enough pain medication to make their patients comfortable, but not too much so that pills are left over, he said.

"We as doctors have to wake up," Sethi said. "While this is just one surgery, we need to assume responsibility that this is an inadvertent gateway to addiction."

While national task forces consider how to regulate the prescription of opioids, surgeons at ONS in Greenwich are trying new drugs during surgery that can reduce to need for opioids after.

The ONS Foundation, which partners with Greenwich Hospital and has medical offices in Greenwich, Stamford and Harrison, N.Y., also has two ongoing studies looking at ways to reduce narcotic consumption after shoulder surgeries, Sethi said. He presented some of their preliminary results at the American Orthopaedic Society for Sports Medicine conference in July in Toronto, and at the American College of Surgery in New York City.

"Pain is so subjective and the treatment of pain is equally subjective," Sethi said. "We believe that that should no longer be the case."

Konigsberg said he is glad his family can partner with ONS and Sethi to help raise awareness at the Foundation's September 5K. The Greenwich Police will provide a drop-off box to collect unused or expired medications at the race.

"We really feel there is going to be a lot of people coming on the 17th and bringing what they have in their medicine cabinets," he said. "And if it works, we'll try to spread the word to other parts of the community and the country."

Kate, Max and Lunden will discuss their opioid awareness efforts on WGCH radio at 2 p.m. Monday .

People can drop off unused pills at the lobby of the Public Safety Complex any time. Greenwich Police will dispose of them safely.

