

Recovering addicts urged to share victories

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HAVERHILL - Heroin overdoses have claimed thousands of lives — 25 in Haverhill alone last year.

Yet millions of people have succeeded in freeing themselves from addiction to heroin, other drugs and alcohol. Panelists at a Thursday night forum organized by the HOPE (Haverhill Overdose Prevention and Education) Task Force agreed that those who have won the battle against addiction should let others know about their recovery.

Michael Harris, who heads the SOS (Starting Over Sober) program in Haverhill and was one of the panelists, spoke of the "pride of being in recovery." Harris said he used to abuse alcohol, but he's been sober for 25 years and helps other people achieve sobriety.

Those who attended the forum at the Haverhill Public Library watched the documentary film "The Anonymous People," which is about the 23.5 million Americans living in long-term recovery from addiction to alcohol or drugs.

The people featured in the movie, including political leaders, corporate executives and celebrities, told their stories in the hope of saving the lives of others. The subjects included two former members of the U.S. House, Patrick Kennedy, a Democrat from Rhode Island, and James Ramstad, a Republican from Minnesota.

Kennedy, son of the late Sen. Ted Kennedy, was addicted to pain killers and was arrested for impaired driving in Washington. Ramstad woke up in a jail cell after causing a disturbance back in 1981, before he was elected to Congress.

Also featured in the film was Chris Herren, a former NBA player who regularly speaks out about the dangers of drugs. Before going straight, Herren overdosed on heroin and crashed his car into a utility pole. His message: "It's cool to be sober."

"People are ashamed of their addictions," said Christina Mazzone, another panelist, who is in recovery from opiate addiction. "Nobody knew" about her addiction, she said, but she's candid about it now and works to help others overcome the craving to get high.

Philip Lahey, of the Merrimack Valley Prevention and Substance Abuse Program, asked if there was anyone in the room who had not been affected by addiction. Not a single hand was raised.

Lahey, whose daughter struggled with addiction to heroin but has been clean for six and a half years, said more drug treatment centers are needed. He noted, however, that people are "absolutely petrified" when an agency proposes locating such a facility in their neighborhood.

Lahey was asked what one can do if a family member is addicted to drugs. He suggested joining a family support group.

"This is not a new problem," Harris pointed out. Heroin has been around for a long time and the problem is not going to be solved next week, he said.

"I can touch one person," he said, and he told about meeting a former addict he had helped. The person has been "clean" for six years, he said.

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