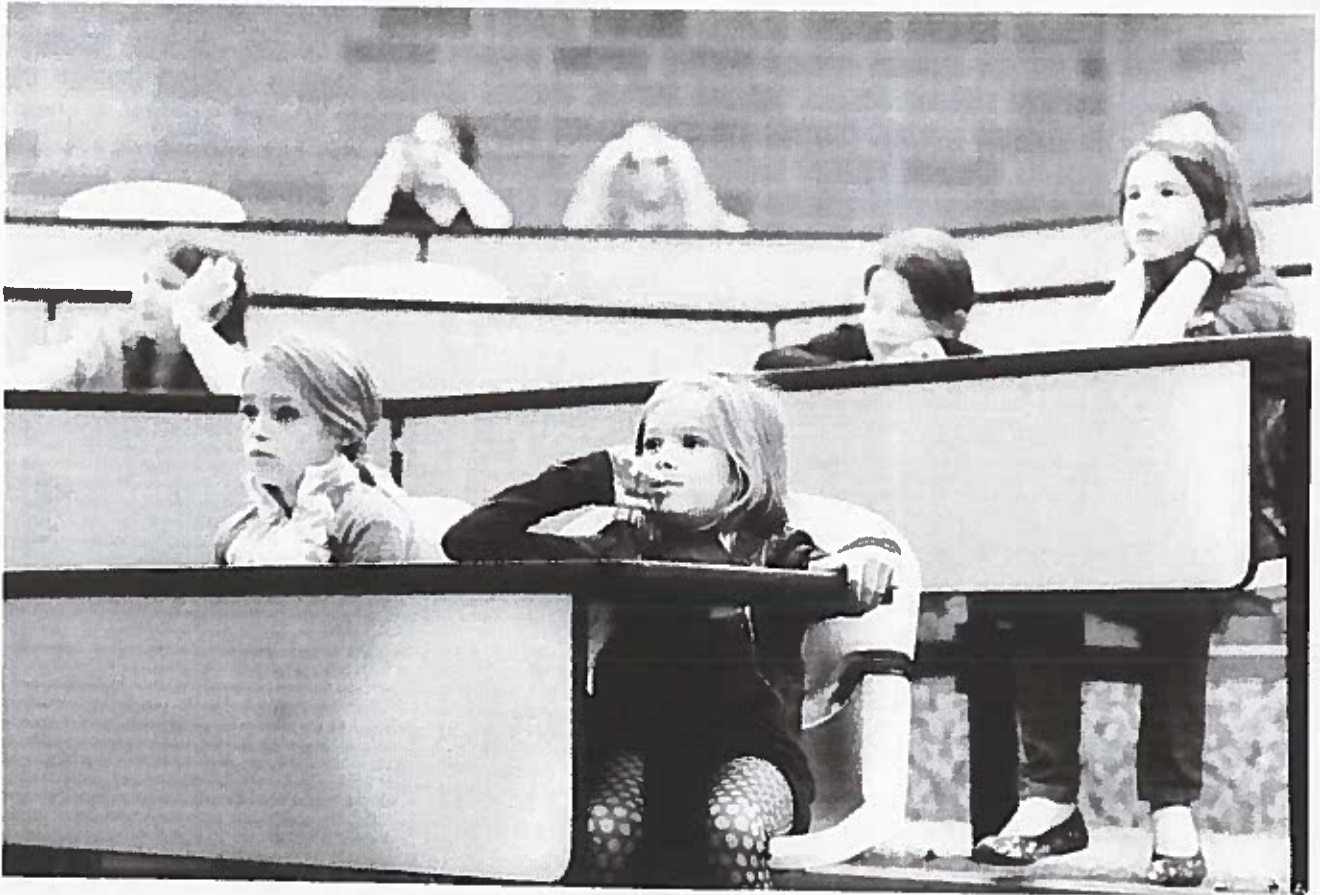

Just say 'Know': Drug education programs changing with the times to help young generation avoid pain of addiction

By David Hurst

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Todd Berkey

Third-grade students at Forest Hills Elementary School listen to Ashley Oswald, a prevention specialist from The Learning Lamp, read Mac Choice on Tuesday, Nov. 22, 2016.

It's been 30 years since first lady Nancy Reagan uttered three words that became a national slogan in drug prevention.

But while "Just Say No" was hailed as a marketing masterpiece, the simplistic anti-drug campaign itself often fell far short of its goal, local prevention officials say.

Textbook-driven lectures and fear tactics often didn't resonate with a generation of American youths now in their late 20s through 40s, studies and side effects have shown.

"We saw how that didn't work," said Ingrid Kloss, director of development for The Learning Lamp, which delivers several prevention programs to area youth.

"It's not one-size fits all. You can't just sit in front of them and recite information about the dangers and horrors of drug use," added Megan Bursky, a prevention specialist with the anti-drug nonprofit Remembering Adam.

"You have to be innovative," Bursky said. "If it's a core group of kids you're talking to, you have to tailor it to them ... use personal examples from their lives and get them involved."

Even at the elementary school level, local children know drugs are bad.

"But getting them to understand why they shouldn't do it – and that their actions have consequences – is what we're trying to get through to them now," Bursky said.

In recent years – and as the drug epidemic has become all too real in the region – groups such as Remembering Adam have begun implementing programs that have switched from saying "No" to saying "Know" – taking a broader approach through evidence-based programs to better prepare young people to make smarter and safer decisions.

Teaching life skills

Today, the drug prevention message is being taught earlier than ever.

An estimated 1,900 third- through fifth-grade students at 13 local elementary schools will take a free, nine-week "Too Good For Drugs" course this year, with each weekly session aimed at helping students learn what it means to make good decisions and understand the consequences when they don't, Learning Lamp development director Ingrid Kloss said.

The Learning Lamp and countywide drug and alcohol programs in Cambria and Somerset first implemented the effort in 2012.

Students figure out ways to refuse peer pressure through discussion and role playing. They learn to identify "positive" and "negative" self-talk and how it can either support or undermine their efforts to achieve goals, Kloss said.

"It helps them build the skills they need to say no," she said.

What sets "Too Good For Drugs" apart is that educators bring families into the fold, requiring students to engage with parents on drug education-related homework assignments that encourage both to begin talking about the difficult subject.

Another element is that while certified Learning Lamp teachers conduct the course, each school's classroom teacher observes student behaviors and before and after the class to see if there are attitude shifts in students.

"They look to see if there's changes in how they interact with classmates ... changes in their pro-social norms," Kloss said.

'Grow and develop'

More than a half-dozen prevention-related programs are now offered in the region by partners such as The Learning Lamp, Remembering Adam and the Alternative Community Resource Program.

Often funded by state grants and supported by nonprofits such as the United Way and the 1889 Foundation, many of those programs were developed and tested for specific age groups.

Botvin LifeSkills Training has become the area's most visible example since it was implemented in 2011-12. The Learning Lamp, ACRP and district teachers in some schools deliver Botvin to the sixth through eighth grades, focusing on ways to build self-esteem and self-confidence, how to cope with anxiety and how to better comprehend the wide-reaching consequences of substance abuse, Cambria County Drug and Alcohol Case Manager Fred Oliveros said.

The middle school years can be difficult with or without the lure of drugs, he said.

Botvin LifeSkills builds traits that help students form a positive self-image and make sound decisions, Shanksville-Stonycreek Superintendent Samuel Romesberg said.

"The structure of the program is 'hands-on' and experimental," he said, noting that rather than listening to lectures, students actively participate in role-playing activities and strategy sessions to navigate potentially stressful situations.

"It is a multi-tiered program that addresses many aspects of a student's life as they grow and develop into an adult," he said.

All 11 Somerset County schools participate in the Botvin program for one or more grades, along with Blacklick Valley, Cambria Heights, Central Cambria, Conemaugh Valley, Ferndale Area, Forest Hills, Glendale Area, Greater Johnstown, Holy Name school, Penn Cambria, Portage Area, Richland and Westmont Hilltop in Cambria County.

'Kids on the cusp'

Prevention efforts have been growing from the inside at area schools, too.

An effort that started at Portage Area School District years ago – "Pledge Together" – now reaches 2,000 students in 18 Cambria-Somerset school districts.

In areas that have embraced it, "Pledge Together" is creating a new social norm – clusters of students openly and actively pledging to a live drug-free lifestyles. By voluntarily submitting themselves to random drug tests, students who might otherwise be at risk to give in to peer pressure have one more excuse to decline an offer to do drugs, Bursky said.

The program gives students a group of peers, voices in their school communities and a sense of purpose, she said.

"It's not about finding a student who uses drugs. It's about encouraging them to stay drug-free," she said. "It really focuses on the positive side of it ... and creates another opportunity for these kids to talk to their parents about drugs."

Parents must give consent for the sixth- through 12th-grade students to be tested for drugs, Bursky said.

She's witnessed how the movement has caught on in some schools.

This fall, 85 percent of the Portage school's sixth- through 12th-grade population enrolled in "Pledge Together."

In a community that has seen its share of drug issues, that shared mission is vital in local neighborhoods, Oliveros said.

'Somewhere safe'

After-school outreach programs through The Learning Lamp have been launched in high-poverty areas, including Oakhurst, Moxham, Prospect and Coopersdale in recent years to give kindergarten through eighth-grade students a safe haven between the hours of 4 p.m. and 6 p.m. – a time period when kids are increasingly on their own and, studies have shown, they are most likely to experiment.

A free hot meal gets many of them in the door, Kloss said.

But the after-school program “gives them somewhere safe to occupy their time in a healthy environment, instead of the streets,” she said.

Other programs are geared toward kids who have already veered down the wrong path, according to Community Action Partnership Director Jeffrey Vaughn.

The partnership's Youth Awareness Program serves as a message that it's never too late to get back onto the right path, he said.

For more than 20 years, drug and alcohol specialist Mike Messina has been conducting small-group, counseling-style sessions with young adults who have gotten into trouble in school or ended up before a district magistrate.

“They're referrals. They're kids on the cusp,” Vaughn said.

“And the idea is to catch them early to make an impact before they end up worse off.”

Messina teaches accountability, helping the young adults make better choices over a six-week program that ends with a certificate.

“The intent is to get them into a group dynamic so they can interact together – see how they are all dealing with similar problems and that they can overcome them,” Vaughn said.

'We give a crap'

Oliveros said the state requires that at least 25 percent of local programs be evidence-based. But as of May, approximately 75 percent in the Cambria-Somerset region fit that criteria.

Oliveros' county agency, the Cambria County Drug and Alcohol Program, administers a list of state and federal drug-abuse treatment and prevention program funds to providers such as The Learning Lamp.

The county agency is also tasked with creating the countywide prevention plan that lays out a framework for programs through six federal strategies – information dissemination, education, alternate activities, problem identification, community-based processes and environmental influences.

Each is aimed at convincing youth to think twice before falling into the trappings of addiction – or fostering alternatives.

"It's a comprehensive program," Oliveros said. "It's not just one type for one person."

These days, it's not as simple as getting children to understand the dangers of drugs, project partners said.

Many of them turn to drugs because of a laundry list of other issues:

- Broken homes.
- A lack of positive influences.
- Dealing with the stresses of raising younger siblings because their parent or parents work or are simply gone.

And in communities like Johnstown, the day-to-day reality of the region's growing local drug problem has desensitized them to the risks to the point that powerful narcotics such as heroin seem like no big deal, Bursky said.

"There's a lot of hopelessness. A lack of attachment and a lack of trusting relationships," Bursky said. "For a lot of kids, their friends are their family.

"They look up to older kids."

Those are the people kids listen to and turn to when times get tough, she said.

Because a self-survival mentality has developed, even many young people who aren't doing drugs aren't bothered by the fact a friend might be.

"When we walk in and start talking with them and ask 'How was your day?' and 'What are you doing tomorrow?' they're amazed we give a crap," said ACRP Life Skills Facilitator Roselyn Brandon. "It sounds pie in the sky. But it actually motivates these kids."

Part of the challenge is working to reverse what has become a "culture" of self-doubt and misguided beliefs that they have no control over their fates, she said.

'It's worth the fight'

Sometimes success is measured in small victories, Kloss said – a student proudly showing off a new report card or solid test score to an after-school program teacher.

"Those are signs they are forming those important bonds ... they're showing trust in an adult," Kloss said, calling it a "breakthrough."

Despite signs across the region that the fallout from drug use – particularly opiates – is worsening, there are indications that inroads are being made at the local school level.

Oliveros pointed to the latest Pennsylvania Youth Survey data that showed a decrease in alcohol, tobacco and drug use from 2011 to 2015.

If that trend continues, it will make a difference in the years to come, he said.

"At the end of the day, the drug problem is still about supply and demand," Oliveros said.

If the region's prevention groups can eliminate that strong demand, "then we'll have a really good shot at making positive change," he said.

And likely, at saving lives, too.

"Sometimes just knowing you've changed one person's path is a victory," Kloss said.

"But with all of us working together, we can make a difference. It's not going to turn around overnight. But it's worth the fight."

Editorial | Seeing hope in programs to educate, prevent addiction

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seeking

a fix

Community education
& finding solutions to
our opioid crisis



We see hope in efforts to address our region's heroin crisis through treatment programs, law enforcement efforts and especially educational programs aimed at preventing future addicts.

As you've read in our month-long series "Seeking A Fix," the Cambria-Somerset region is working on many fronts to reverse the scourge of drugs, especially heroin and other opioids.

Police are adjusting to shifting patterns by dealers, breaking up rings and going after the leaders of those deadly operations.

Addicts are being treated in a variety of ways, from quick-fix overdose antidotes to longer-term medications to full detoxification – sometimes all three – as health professionals gain greater understanding of how opioids impact individuals.

The strongest tool in turning the corner in this supply-and-demand game is to reduce the number of young people who try dangerous drugs and risk becoming addicts.

That is the mission of the United Way-supported Botvin Lifeskills program, The Learning Lamp's "Too Good For Drugs" initiative, the "Pledge Together" effort and others across the region that are taking the message to young people in high schools, middle schools and even elementary schools.

Megan Bursky, a prevention specialist with the anti-drug nonprofit Remembering Adam, said the key is reaching youth through real-life examples and helping them understand that addiction isn't something that can happen to someone else in another place.

Anyone who tries heroin is at high risk of becoming addicted.

And anyone who abuses painkillers is likely to move up to heavier drugs.

"Getting them to understand why they shouldn't do it – and that their actions have consequences – is what we're trying to get through to them now," Bursky told reporter David Hurst.

Data from the latest Pennsylvania Youth Survey show that efforts such as Botvin are having as positive impact.

The middle school education program was launched locally in 2011, when students were surveyed for baseline information. As Hurst reports, a 2015 survey shows improving attitudes and behaviors about drugs and other risk activities such as smoking and binge drinking.

That's as the United Way of the Laurel Highlands and its partners have expanded Botvin from hundreds of students in a few school districts to every school in Somerset County and nearly all in Cambria, with thousands of students going through the class – which offers "LifeSkills" to help youngsters avoid peer pressure and dangerous activities.

The Learning Lamp-supported "Too Good For Drugs" initiative has quickly grown to include 13 elementary schools and 1,900 third- through fifth-graders who receive weekly lessons about the risks of drugs and alcohol.

"It helps them build the skills they need to say no," said the agency's Ingrid Kloss, who noted that the youngsters are required to talk about drugs with their parents as part of the curriculum.

A program that began at Portage Area School District, "Pledge Together," now reaches 2,000 students in 18 area school districts. The program encourages students to pledge to live drug-free lives and even submit to random drug tests.

"It's about encouraging them to stay drug-free," Bursky said.

"It really focuses on the positive side of it."

Community Action Partnership's Youth Awareness Program goes into high-poverty neighborhoods and works with children who may already be experimenting with drugs, or who are largely on their own to make such decisions.

Director Jeffrey Vaughn called his clients "kids on the cusp," and said children see better paths for themselves by interacting with peers facing the same challenges.

Trying to see a positive path ahead through the drug crisis could be overwhelming. The road is long, steep and rocky.

But we're fortunate here that so many people have the strength, courage and compassion to continue pushing forward against heroin and other killers.

We applaud the many dedicated individuals tackling the drug crisis through focused law enforcement and expanded treatment options.

And we are especially encouraged that so many caring individuals are reaching out to educate the community – and especially our kids – in an effort to reduce the demand for drugs and save lives.

