

After losing son to drugs, Tarentum native creates nonprofit

By Rex Rutkoski
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By all accounts, Andy Psarras -- bright, loving, giving -- was the kind of guy you would have liked the first time you met him.

He would have turned 21 in a few days.

Psarras, though, son of Tarentum native Dr. Elaine Campbell Psarras, never made it to his 20th birthday. His life, filled with abundant promise, ended in January 2004.

On the day before her son, 19, died of acute drug intoxication, Dr. Psarras told those gathered at his memorial service in Cleveland, where the family lives, that he forgot the advice she and her husband Dr. James Psarras (both are physicians specializing in adult psychiatry) had given him.

"He made a mistake and the consequences of that mistake cost him his life," she said in her eulogy. "Andy did not want to die. Andy did not want his mom eulogizing him today. He had so many more animals to rescue. The truth is Andy (who was considering veterinary medicine, among other careers) was so busy rescuing others that he forgot to rescue himself."

Andy went to a friend's house and experimented with heroin, Psarras says. It was uncharacteristic of him, she adds. "He was a naive user of this drug and most likely shared in the common misconception of heroin, that a small amount could do no harm," she says.

She returned to her native Alle-Kiski Valley this week to visit her sister, Ellen Lunz in Manor Township, and to share the lessons of her son's story, hoping that it may have particular resonance for A-K students during this prom and the coming graduation season.

Andy used to accompany his parents, brother Peter, now 25, and sister Molly, 23, to Tarentum where they spent most Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays at their maternal grandparent's house, William Campbell, now residing in Cleveland, and the late Ella Campbell.

Andy

Online:
www.andysfoundation.com;
email:
info@andysfoundation.com

Mail: Andy's Foundation,
16300 South Park Blvd.,
Shaker Heights, Ohio
44120-1676.

Phone: A phone number is
to be added in June.

Services being developed: Two hot lines to be in place soon. One to provide 24 hour/seven days a week support and advice for anyone experiencing a crisis with drugs; the second to enable anyone to anonymously identify drug dealers.

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Elaine Psarras, who graduated from Tarentum High School in 1967, and Andy had a close relationship. Appropriately, perhaps, he would have become a man this Mother's Day.

She and her family already have given him a posthumous gift, creating the nonprofit Andy's Foundation (www.andysfoundation.com). It is dedicated to his memory and the hope that it will be a resource providing information to help combat the use of illegal drugs and their potential consequence of needless deaths. Last fall, North East Ohio Health Services honored it with its "Outstanding Contribution to Recovery by a Foundation" award.

There needs to be greater awareness and communication to students, parents, and teachers about the serious problem of substance abuse, she says. "It is extremely important that both awareness of this serious problem and communication are heightened in order to discourage experimentation with these potentially fatal substances," she says.

Adding to the tragedy of Andy's death is her belief that his life could have been saved, even after he experimented with a street form of heroin which now can be snorted, instead of injected.

Because her son was a naive user, she explains, his body was more sensitive to the effects of heroin. He died with a level in his bloodstream that was 1/7th of what normally is expected to be a lethal dose.

As Psarras told the governor of Ohio, Robert Taft, in a plea to stiffen laws against drug trafficking, her son's friend found him struggling to breathe and, in his own confusion and fear, called the person from whom they had purchased the heroin. "He recommended he do nothing but to allow him to 'sleep it off,' " she says. Andrew died about two hours after that phone call and, says his mother, could have been saved with appropriate medical intervention.

The Cleveland Plain Dealer plans a series this month on Andy's life and death and drug abuse in the community.

Psarras and her husband have been letting high school principals in Ohio know that the foundation is particularly interested in increasing communication within the most vulnerable populations of preteens, teenagers and young adults with their families, as well as increasing community sensitivity and awareness.

"We've learned from our research that heroin experimentation has reached epidemic proportions in our suburban public and private schools," she told school officials

The couple is preparing educational talks to high schools.

Federal authorities say that heroin also is a significant problem in the Alle-Kiski Valley and throughout Pennsylvania.

Andy's Foundation has created an orange (her son's favorite color) wristband, symbolizing sobriety, with the debossing of Y.E.S. It stands for "Youth Embracing Sobriety." "As wristbands became more popular, we decided that this would also be a wonderful expression of our mission to fight drug abuse,"

Psarras says. The acronym was influenced by a bumper sticker on Andy's car: YEM. It referred to the title of a song from one of her late son's favorite bands, Phish.

An orange enamel lapel ribbon pin also is available.

Psarras suggests that students signing contracts not to use alcohol or illicit drugs prior to, during and after the prom, be rewarded by the schools with the items. It could replace a wrist corsage or compliment one, she says.

(Both items can be purchased for \$4 by clicking on "How To Help" on the foundation Web site: www.andysfoundation.com.)

Several services are being developed, including two hot lines, one a help line, to be in place soon. "Our son's life could have been saved if such a hotline existed," she says.

Her sister, Ellen Lunz, a registered nurse at Allegheny Valley Hospital, Harrison, is helping to promote the foundation in the Alle-Kiski Valley (she can be reached at 724-763-8080). Her other two sisters, Eloise Campbell, and Elyse Campbell Ferber, also live in the Cleveland area.

Lunz admires Elaine's strength. "When she lost Andy, her whole world fell apart. I'm impressed with how she is turning her pain into helping and enlightening others. She's taught me things about drugs that as a nurse I didn't even know. She wants to make a difference so no other mother will have to go through such pain," she says.

Psarras says that her son experimented with alcohol and marijuana during high school and had made efforts to reduce his usage. "He also was of the strong opinion that those substances were not gateway drugs," she says. "As many other parents, we were unaware of any more serious experimentation."

Andy attended a university elsewhere in Ohio for one semester after graduating from high school in 2002. "One of the reasons he chose to leave school was to escape the heavy drug use, including heroin, in his dormitory," Psarras told Gov. Taft. "As very involved parents, we had no idea that such a serious and lethal drug was so rampantly available on a college campus."

Her son returned home and began taking classes in the Cleveland area while working as a veterinarian's assistant.

"He was a warm, kind, compassionate, popular young man who was working very hard to find some clear direction in his life," she says.

The guest book on the foundation Web site bears that out.

This, from someone named Gavin: "Andy has left a mark on me that will last a lifetime. I still catch myself using phrases Andy used to use and even sometimes a hint of his laugh in mine."

From Tom Fuerst, father of Andy's best friend: "His legacy lives on in our

household because of Felony, the pit bull-boxer puppy Andy rescued from a shelter and gave to Ben. When Felony licks Ben's face or mine, I know it is Andy touching our lives again."

It's said that Andy was extremely tolerant of diversity in people and very nonjudgmental.

Psarras says she and her husband had been aware of some past experimentation with marijuana by her son, which they always had strongly discouraged.

"It was our impression that his marijuana usage had greatly diminished in proportion to his growing maturing and increased sense of responsibility," she says.

In her eulogy (also found on the foundation Web site) she told fellow mourners that her son always wanted to find a purpose in his life.

"Perhaps he has found it in his death," she said. "He cannot rescue himself but he can rescue you."

Andy's Foundation is there to try to accomplish that.

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