

Heroin's Sting

As 'H' reaches into the 'burbs, Teri Appleton agonizes - her daughter left detox center and her fate's unknown

By Wendy Ruderman
Daily News Staff Writer
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LOOKING BACK, Teri Appleton sees lots of red flags.

Like the times Appleton discovered money missing from her purse or couldn't find a piece of jewelry. She had trouble rousing her teenage daughter from sleep. While driving, Appleton recalled looking in her rearview mirror and seeing the girl nodding off in the back seat.

When Appleton opened a roll of coins, she found them stuffed with tinfoil and hardware bolts.

But the moment she knew - really knew - came on an average ho-hum morning inside Appleton's comfortable split-level home in Pennsauken.

Appleton went to wake her daughter, who worked an early shift at Hair Cuttery. She walked into her bedroom, steaming coffee in hand. When the girl wouldn't wake up, Appleton pulled back the bed covers to sit her up and shove the coffee mug in her hand.

That's when Appleton saw four bags of heroin. The baggies were stamped with skull and crossbones and street names that "sounded like death," Appleton said.

In nicely decorated homes all across the Delaware Valley, parents like Appleton are quietly fighting to save their children from a vicious and deadly drug. They are the new face of heroin addiction - white suburban youths from loving families. They defy the stereotypes of heroin addicts.

Appleton's 22-year-old daughter, Jessica Paolini, has been missing more than six months. With each passing day, Appleton becomes less hopeful - and more desperate. Appleton has spent hours each night after work driving the streets of Camden in search of Jessica. She'd scan the faces of prostitutes and slow her Ford Taurus at drug corners. In January, Appleton took her search to North Jersey, where someone reported seeing Jessica at a KFC in Elizabeth.

Last week she convinced the Camden County Prosecutor's Office to put out a missing-persons press release. "I've done everything," Appleton said. "I can't think of anything else anymore."

Though she knows it sounds awful, Appleton says she wishes her daughter was stricken with cancer instead of heroin addiction. Then it would be easier to get help.

"It just seems like there is more of a support system when an illness is diagnosed," Appleton said.

"And there is no shame . . . Instead [heroin addicts] have leprosy."

Appleton, who has two other children, sat inside her home last week and wondered where she went wrong. She would do anything, she said, to find Jessica and try to make it right.

"I think people think you don't love your children as much when they are on drugs, but that is not the case," said Appleton, 51, a clerk-typist who works for the Borough of Haddonfield.

While national statistics suggest that heroin abuse has remained steady or trended downward in recent years, experts say an increasing number of young people from affluent and middle-class communities are getting ensnared by heroin.

"We are seeing a different population nowadays," said **William J. Lorman**, clinical director of residential services at the **Livengrin Foundation** in Bensalem.

"People have this picture of a heroin addict, the track marks on the arms, the filthy, dirty, malnourished person living on the streets," Lorman said. "It's not like that at all."

Lorman said he is seeing a lot of young people, ages 18 to 25, at Livengrin. Many are struggling to stay in college or to keep good jobs. They come from supportive families.

A lot like Andy Reid's boys.

The two eldest sons of the Eagles' head coach seemed clean-cut and "yes-sir, no-sir" polite. When they got caught with drugs, neighbors in the cul-de-sac where Main Line homes go for \$6 million expressed disbelief.

Last month, Garrett Reid, 23, entered an out-of-state drug-treatment facility after admitting he was high on heroin when he ran a red light and injured another driver. His father took a leave from work to escort his son to rehab.

Britt Reid, 21, got caught with small quantities of cocaine, marijuana and oxycodone, a prescription painkiller, in the SUV he had been driving during an alleged Jan. 30 road-rage incident in which he allegedly flashed a silver pistol at another driver.

"A well-off white kid from the suburbs, with a stable family background and a successful father, who is doing heroin - that's not shocking at all," said Bill Shralow, spokesman for the Camden County Prosecutor's Office. In a sting operation targeting heroin sales in North Camden last year, undercover police arrested 51 people - 76 percent came from towns outside of Camden, tony places like Cherry Hill and Medford. Twenty-one of those arrested were under age 30.

George Wilhelm's kids went to Harriton High School with Garrett and Britt. Wilhelm's son Joey was friendly with Britt, who would sleep over occasionally at their Upper Merion home. The teens stayed up all night and slept all day. Wilhelm suspected drugs and confronted them.

"[Britt] said, 'What are you, crazy? I'm not on drugs. I don't do drugs,' " Wilhelm said in a recent interview.

Wilhelm would soon learn that his son was doping on OxyContin, a form of oxycodone.

"That was the drug of choice at that high school," Wilhelm said.

Now, like Garrett Reid, 22-year-old Joey Wilhelm is in rehab for heroin. "Once he started doing heroin, he was taking it over the edge and he was getting out of control," Wilhelm said.

Wilhelm's son's story is a perfect example of why heroin use among well-off teens is on the upswing, according to law enforcement and drug-treatment experts.

These days, the No. 1 drug problem among young people is the abuse of prescription drugs - OxyContin, Vicodin, Valium, Xanax, according to Jeremiah Daley, executive director of the Philadelphia County High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area, a law enforcement clearinghouse.

Kids call it "pharming." It starts off as typical teen experimentation and rebellion. They raid their parents' medicine cabinet and take a few "Oxies" to a party.

Opiates like OxyContin and Percocet are physically addictive - and expensive. One tablet can go for \$80 on the street, said **Lorman** of Livengrin.

So heroin becomes a kind of Plan B for teenagers. Heroin - called "smack" or "H" - is an opiate that mimics the euphoric high of prescription painkillers. On the streets, it's cheap, easy to score, and pure. One packet of heroin sells for as little as \$10, said William Hocker, spokesman for the Philadelphia office of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration.

"It's really low-cost, high-purity South American heroin," Hocker said. "It can be snorted or smoked, and it's really a threat to anyone but specifically to the youth of America because it's so available and low-cost and addictive."

As a kid, Appleton's daughter Jessica liked to play piano. She sang in church and won a coveted spot on the all-state chorus. Aside from her parents' divorce in 1997, Jessica's childhood was not at all rocky. At Pennsauken High School, she marched in the color guard. She ran with a popular, studious crowd.

"She was a normal kid - not the best but not the worst," Appleton said.

After high school, Jessica went to beauty school. There she met a classmate who introduced her to heroin, Appleton said. For two years, Appleton struggled to get her daughter help. When Jessica got pregnant with her boyfriend's baby, Appleton made dozens of calls before finding a detox center that took pregnant women.

Jessica gave birth to Kaia a month prematurely in January 2006. Appleton and her new husband, Tom Appleton, are raising Kaia, now 14 months old.

Just before Jessica disappeared in September, she was to enter a long-term, locked-down drug-rehab center. On Sept. 11, Appleton took Jessica to see her maternal grandparents to say good-bye. As they drove home from the visit, Appleton looked over at her daughter and felt sick at what she saw. She had never seen her daughter look so vacant and zombie-like. It was obvious Jessica was lost in heroin's warm rush.

In a snap decision, Appleton turned the car away from home and drove Jessica to a detox crisis center at Kennedy Memorial Hospital in Cherry Hill. Appleton was angry when she left Jessica there. The last thing she said to her daughter was, "I don't want to see you again until you have a year clean."

Appleton hasn't seen her since. Jessica walked away from the hospital. She was dressed for summer in a wispy green shirt, jean skirt and tan slip-on shoes. When winter came, Appleton grew even more frantic over her daughter's disappearance. She worried her daughter would be cold. She had her daughter's jacket dry-cleaned.

Jessica disappeared at the height of a 2006 epidemic in which as many as 100 people from the Philadelphia region died from heroin laced with a lethal dose of fentanyl, a powerful painkiller.

But Jessica wasn't among the victims. Still, her mom can't help but think she's dead. Last year when four prostitutes were found dead in a ditch in Atlantic City, Appleton called police to see if one was her daughter.

"I just want to find her," Appleton sobbed. "I want to know what happened to her."

Each night when the sun goes down, Appleton lays awake fretting about her daughter's whereabouts. She shudders at images of Jessica passed out, possibly being raped. Or as a prostitute. Appleton feels frozen in a nightmare - one that won't end.

"I'm faced with three different scenarios: She could be found and we would still have to continue to deal with the addiction, which is a nightmare. Or she could be found and she may not be alive anymore, which is a nightmare. Or she may never be found, which is another nightmare," Appleton said.

Last week, more than 100 people combed the area around Camden and Gloucester City, aided by a state police helicopter, searching for Scotty, a missing German shepherd police dog.

"I don't want to offend animal lovers, but isn't my daughter's life worth more than a dog's?" Appleton asked. "Maybe she doesn't mean anything to anybody else but she means a lot to us."

Anyone with information about Jessica's whereabouts should call Pennsauken Police at 856-488-0080 or the New Jersey State Police Missing Persons Unit at 800-709-7090. *