

## Heroin steals young lives



**BARB GUY**

For most of us, a too-young face and an unfamiliar name in the obituaries tell a story that we otherwise wouldn't hear. Some boy or girl, some young person, has been lost to drugs.

Last week, the face in the newspaper belonged to John, a boy who, along with his family, has been part of a large circle of good people whom my husband and I count as friends. From within this circle, we watched with happiness as the boy was welcomed into his family as an infant and over the years we watched him, his little sister, and their big peer group grow up.

Now, barely 19, he is gone, and everyone in his world has to learn how to live without him. Former children, now young adults whom we dearly love, have to go through wrenching pain. The adults in the group are

devastated. His parents - I can't imagine.

Sometimes, kids who are beautiful, intelligent, loved and engaged in the world lose sight of the amazing lives they have. Being a teenager is a special kind of hell - a nightmare for many. But what we know now, safe in the blessing of being 30 or 60 years old, what most of us know, anyway, is that we had it pretty great all along, that life is fragile and precious and we are lucky to be part of it.

I am one of a subset of my generation who often admit to one another that it's a miracle we lived through our teenage years. But somehow, most of us do make it through, bad judgment and all. And at some point, we shed the bad choices, or they become as tame as a second glass of chardonnay or a tendency toward chocolate.

I was 18 when my boyfriend died of an overdose. I knew we were going to be together forever, but I had recently broken up with him, saying that while I loved him, he needed to get his act together before we could continue. While we were apart, he died.

I remember well trying to fix this boy, trying to solve his addiction. I remember his friends' agony as well as my own, and I remember

his mother. I can still see her anguish, her frustration, her utter defeat. And when he died, behind my own mother's carefully constructed countenance of concern, I saw relief.

Over the more than 25 years since then, I have often thought about my actions, my piece in his story. Could I have done something to keep him alive? Or is the pattern of each life inescapable? Are there some people who just cannot be saved, some people who are meant to leave us early?

Like my friend long ago, John was a boy with everything. Everything was in place for a lucky, meaningful life - wonderful parents, good friends, a kind heart. John had a special relationship with nature, a passion for sports and an innate sweetness. But something stole everything from this boy. Something so big and so vicious that all the love and all the parenting and all the friends in the world couldn't overcome it: heroin.

The problem with addiction is that no one can solve it but the person who's addicted; your mom or girlfriend or math teacher can't solve an addiction for you. You have to do it yourself and addiction tricks you

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into thinking that you don't want to.

The only way to be sure you won't get addicted to heroin or meth or another drug: Never use it. Never start. If it's too late for that, get into a drug treatment program and cling to it as if your life depends upon it, because it does.

If you never start using heroin or meth, your parents won't have to stand before everyone they know at your funeral, detailing the thousands of measures they took trying to save your life.

John's memorial service was overflowing with kids, many of them with expressions I couldn't read. The adults were not so inscrutable. Many were ashen, this death swooping way too close to their own children. There's a special tragedy to a funeral home full of young people. The Beatles or Bob Marley playing on the sound system and kids grieving for a friend who was not taken by disease or an accident, but by a mistake that cost all.

In the immense wake that John's passing leaves, his entire village - his parents, his sister, and all the teachers, friends, adults, neighbors, sweethearts and acquaintances in the village that raised him - will today, tomorrow, often and forever ask how they could have prevented this death.

John was a dear, loving boy who would never wish a moment's

heartbreak on anyone, but that's what he has left behind.

Heartbreak, and the memory of a sweet, bright kid, stolen by heroin.

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*Barb Guy writes a regular column for the Sunday Opinion section. © Salt Lake Tribune.*