



For Pete's sake: Marci Davies hopes to spare others the pain of her brother's heroin death

By CAROL HARPER – **Sandusky Register**, May 23, 2003

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NORWALK

Hundreds may be listening, but Marci Davies might as well be speaking to one student at a time.

It's like that when you're trying to understand senseless tragedy.

Davies lost her brother to a heroin overdose in 1999. And ever since, she has grappled with unanswered questions and agonizing sorrow.

Pete Rinner, 24, had first tried heroin three months before he died.

His family didn't know.

"I didn't even know what heroin was," Marci says.

Davies, 31, opens herself up to the pain of Pete's death every time she speaks to junior and high school students, in order to reach some who may think they can handle heroin.

"This is real," Davies says. "If you think taking drugs is just about you, you're dead wrong."

Marci and Pete were the youngest of four children in Steve and Marcia Rinner's family. Because their neighborhood on League Street in Norwalk was full of boys -- Marci was the only girl their age -- she and Pete grew up playing pickup games of football, baseball, soccer and basketball

together.

Before junior high, the two regularly fought, she said. The relationship deepened, however, when Marci walked into Norwalk High School as a freshman. Stress and peer pressure drove them to confide in each other.

They grew accustomed to long talks.

"The holidays are really tough," she said. "Every memory in my childhood, he's right there. It's hard with my kids, because he would have been an awesome uncle. We would have had a great time. I think about his getting married and being a father."

Pete was there as Marci married Jason Davies and the young couple bought a house on Harkness Street in Norwalk. Marci and Jason set up a room so Pete could stay when he came home from The Ohio State University. He often brought friends with him.

When Marci was expecting her first child, Malori, now 5, she shared her excitement with her brother.

"I called my mom every time I went to the doctor," Davies said. "Then I called Pete."

Pete's behavior began to change subtly right about them, she said.

"One of my last best memories of him was Christmas morning (1998)," she said. "I bought my husband a guitar for Christmas. I was in the kitchen making pancakes. Pete was in the living room playing my husband's guitar.

"I remember thinking, 'How wonderful life is,'" Marci said.

Her brother seemed different, but he told his sister he wasn't feeling well, that he was dealing with financial problems and too much stress.

About two months later, Marci's dad called her office with the news.

"They found Pete dead on the floor and they couldn't revive him," she said.

When Pete's life should have been full and ongoing, it was gone.

"At the funeral home, I can't tell you how many times I got up from my chair and walked over to the casket," Davies said. "I tried all day to say good-bye. He wasn't a bum. He wasn't a junkie on the street. He was a beautiful, 24-year-old kid who was going to have a career and a future.

"But now, when my kids have birthday parties, he's not there. When there's a holiday, there's an empty chair."

No explanation for Pete's experimenting with drugs that makes sense.

"I understand his personality," Davies said. "He felt he could control everything in his life, and pretty much he did. He probably thought he could control this and quit whenever he wanted. The more I look into heroin addiction, the more I find that isn't the case.

"I think the hardest thing to understand about this is, it's so senseless. There was a girl near Pete who overdosed and was in a coma, and she is alive. (Survival) has nothing to do with physical attributes. I try to make (students) understand it's just not worth going there. It's just not worth it."

She tells students to ask themselves three questions when someone places something in their hands:

Who made it?

What is it, really?

Is it enough to kill me?

"You just don't know what's in there, or how it's going to affect you. If you do heroin, you might not wake up the next day. Or you might wake up and say, 'I don't care about my life. I want to do heroin again.'

"And I wonder, sometimes, why this had to happen," she said. "I watch on TV and see people who lie and steal and are addicted for 20 years, and he only had a few months."

For more than five years, Marci and her family have struggled to understand the last months of Pete's life and cope with the consequences.

"We had no idea he was using heroin," Marci said. "My dad thought the phone call from police was a wrong number."

Sifting through the fragments of Pete's life, one of his family's cherished mementos was a notebook of song lyrics he wrote while at Ohio State. Other discoveries trouble them.

One of Pete's friends told Marci that Pete had smoked half of a joint of marijuana the night he first tried heroin.

"Marci, I couldn't believe what I saw," he told her. "Pete was the one who helped us. He was the responsible one."

"People tell me marijuana can't kill you," Marci said. "But if Pete were straight that night, would he have snorted heroin up his nose? I don't think so."

Sometimes, uncovering information about Pete's death has been as frustrating as the family's

struggle for acceptance.

"Nobody would tell us the truth (in Columbus). They didn't want to get into trouble. People can get arrested for giving heroin to someone if there is a death ... And we don't know what happened to his belongings. We don't know if he sold his \$1,400 stereo, or if someone stole it."

Today, Marci tries to educate young people about the dangers, seen and unseen.

She asks them to remember a time when they were extremely hungry -- when they were not able to sit at a desk and focus on studying.

All they can think about is the gnawing hunger.

"When you're addicted to something, it's a million times worse," she said.

So are the tangled, burning emotions for those left behind when a loved one overdoses.

"I don't know how my parents made it through those first few days," Marci said.

"He could light up my mom's life," she said. "Mom loves sunflowers. On Mom and Dad's 25th wedding anniversary, Pete was late. When he and his girlfriend walked in, Pete was holding a big bouquet of sunflowers. It didn't matter if there were 200 people standing there, my mom just lit up when she saw him.

"He always knew just what would light up someone's life. Pete made people feel comfortable when they talked to him."

Leaving the past behind -- but keeping memories of Pete alive -- is a struggle for Marci.

"(Pete's) girlfriend moved out west and her life has moved on," she said. "I want that for her. I don't want her to stay there and suffer. She will have things to deal with like I do."

Pete's death shattered Marci's stereotype of a drug user: Someone lying in a gutter with a needle in his arm.

"Pete was an awesome person who happened to screw around with heroin and it killed him.

"If one kid walks out of here and makes a decision in light of Pete's tragedy, then it's worth it. I know I'm not going to save the world. But I don't want anybody to feel the way I feel."