

OBSESSED

Land O' Lakes family struggles with prescription drugs

By Kyle LoJacono
Originally published Sept. 28

Ryan Wegener is one of many who is addicted to the latest trend in drug use — prescription pain pills.

Nationally in 2008, 12.2 percent of all crimes committed were related to prescription abuse, an all-time high, and 1,150 people in Pasco, Hillsborough and Pinellas counties died last year from overdosing on the medications, a state record.

Ryan, of Land O' Lakes, became addicted to prescription drugs around age 19 while doing construction work.

"I was really sore the first two weeks and I got with a couple guys who were a little older," Ryan said. "I said, 'Man my back is really killing me,' and they were like you know we got something to take care of that and the drugs are legal too. I said, 'What've you got?'"

Ryan was given several pills of Rociacet, commonly called Roxys, a painkiller that contains acetaminophen and Oxycodone.

"So I took it," Ryan said. He then added, "After a couple weeks of every other day taking them, my back wasn't hurting anymore. I didn't need the pills to go to work, but I still wanted it."

Ryan said after a while, one pill wouldn't satisfy the addiction. He needed two or three to subside his craving for the medication. As his addiction grew he started injecting the pills, a common practice for hardcore users to get a stronger high faster.

Ryan would go on benders where he would use 100-200 pills in three or four days and fall out of contact with his family. Parents Chris and Diane saw changes in his behavior but never suspected he was an addict.

"It was humiliating," Diane said. "What

did I do wrong?"

Chris added, "We weren't in denial in that he dabbled in drugs or tried alcohol, but to find out that he was addicted to drugs — that was devastating. When he said he had an addiction, I think that kind of blew us away."

The addiction drove off Ryan's childhood friends.

"It hurt, and I slowly started moving on to a new crowd of friends," Ryan said. "These were the friends that you could pass out with your mouth open drooling out with your eyes closed scratching yourself, because that's what you did because you have real bad itches. Those were the friends you wanted to be around, because they had no problem with you being high."

His abuse also cost him his girlfriend.

"She was the best," Ryan said. "I could look her in the eyes every day, and she would look me in the eyes and say 'You are high. I can tell you are high.' I'd lie and say 'No I'm not,' but she knew how I was. We'd been together for five years. She tried so hard to get me off of these pills."

"I couldn't go through the withdrawals," Ryan continued. "I did one week with her without taking a pill, and I seriously almost died. Then I got back on it, because I couldn't take it anymore. Sooner or later she caught back on and it came down to either the addiction or her. I wasn't physically strong enough to say I want to be with you. I'm going to get off of this. I ended up throwing away the best thing that I had for an addiction."

A PRICE TO PAY

Ryan was always looking for ways to pay for his drug problem.

"Constantly trying to find somebody to steal from; to con out of money to get some way to get your high," Ryan said. He then added, "Going in your mom's purse taking \$20-\$30; going in your dad's wallet taking \$20-\$30 and then going in your girlfriend's purse, just anyone's purse or wallet that's just laying around and taking when no one is around."

He even stole from drug dealers.

"If you rip off the right drug dealer you can get away with it, but if you rip off the wrong drug dealer you make sure you hide," Ryan said. "You make sure you're not in contact with anyone that knows that person because those people are serious about \$800, \$1,000 that they made off these pills. If you go and take it away like that, they have no problem telling someone they will give them 50 pills to go knock this kid off."

Diane said dealers would come to her door looking for Ryan. Despite the risk of overdosing and from drug dealers looking for him, Ryan said there was little fear of dying.

"When you're doing it, it doesn't really scare you because you're high at the time," Ryan said.

AN AWAKENING

Six deaths finally woke up Ryan.

He had two friends who overdosed and died two days apart from each other, and another friend and his son also died a few months later.

Another of his friends and his older brother died a few months apart, and it was at the second funeral where Ryan saw how the abuse can devastate a family.

"I saw one of my friend's mother and father crying at his funeral," Ryan said. "They couldn't stop crying, and I knew the people pretty well. Just to see how bad his mother was hurt. Those were her only two kids, and they both ODED within three months of each other."

"I just wanted to find some way to get away from that," Ryan continued. "If I didn't cut this (stuff) out, my parents were going to walk into the bathroom and find me ice cold and not breathing with a spoon, a lighter and a needle hanging out of my arm."

Ryan told his parents on Christmas 2010 he was addicted to prescription drugs and wanted to quit. The Wegeners decided to make a documentary, called "Obsessed," to assist other families struggling with prescription abuse and also to help Ryan get well.

The film helped Ryan for a short time, but

2011 REWIND

Ryan Wegener suffered another relapse since this story ran which resulted in him going back to jail. His mother Diane said they are trying to use the relapse to get a court order for counseling to break the cycle. Diane is also still working to get the documentary shown in area schools to help prevent other kids from becoming addicted.

he suffered a relapse three weeks after its filming. He has relapsed three times since.

"It was the last thing that I really wanted to do," Ryan said. "It definitely wasn't the best option. To be honest with you, I don't know why I returned to it. It was really something stupid that happened, but I just thought to myself if no one is going to believe that I'm sober then I might as well not be sober."

"That's what is so scary about this, is there are a thousand different triggers that can make you to the point where this is why I choose to go get high again," Ryan said. "That's exactly what a relapse is. Mine was just not having trust."

SOBER AGAIN

Ryan, now 22, has been sober for six months. He spent three months in a court-ordered rehab program, and has spent the last three pulling his life together.

"It's a long-term disease, and I'm definitely not out of the woods yet with this," Ryan said. "I'm grateful to be as far as I am, but I would definitely say that this is a lifelong disease that I have got caught up in. A lifelong addiction I got caught up in, because I couldn't go around my old friends right now. If I saw them partying and doing some pills I could not tell you definitely I would not do them. ... A relapse could happen any day."

"Obsessed" includes interviews with Jose and Carolyn Aviles, who lost their son to a prescription drug overdose, as well as Ryan's struggles with his addiction. It also offers advice for those looking for help.

The Wegeners' goal is to have the documentary shown in local high and middle schools to help steer students clear of prescription drugs.

"If I can save one life, that's what it's all about," Diane said.

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