

## **A mother's tale: County sees tripling in heroin overdose cases**

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**Author:** AMBER KROSEL

Mary Noll holds a portrait of her son, Justin Hall, in her Cary home. Justin died of a heroin and cocaine overdose in February. (Sandy Bressner – sbressner@nwherald.com)

This is the first part of a two-day series examining the growing problem of heroin abuse across McHenry County.

Mary Noll glanced up admiringly at her Christmas tree, still standing tall three days after the holiday in her Cary home.

Although she jokingly admitted that the branches were mostly bare, among them were memories of the past. Poking out between the green arms, little stuffed bears and crocheted ornaments bore her son Justin Hall's name.

It was "Justin's tree" this year.

Nearby on the living-room wall was an image of her blond-haired, 6-foot-5 son – depicted in an artist's black-and-white rendering of his stint in the U.S. Army – his eyes bright and his smile wide.

Justin rarely grinned in actual photographs, the Cary mother of five said, but the gift from the parents of his childhood girlfriend had become one of her favorite possessions.

On that third day after Christmas, Justin would have turned 25. Instead, Noll looked back fondly on her son's life, his sister and three brothers soon to surround her and offer comfort during a family dinner in honor of his birthday.

"Justin was a great kid," Noll said. "He was the type, you couldn't be mad at him. ... It's just unfortunate he chose a path that was not healthy."

Justin Hall was in his late teens when he began using and dealing drugs.

First it was marijuana. Then he got into cocaine.

Noll had tried to find him help, but in spite of his many positive qualities, Justin was extremely stubborn and often dishonest with his family about his habits.

But at age 24, Justin had confided in his youngest brother that somehow he knew he was going to die from drugs.

Sadly, in February 2008, Justin succumbed to a fatal combination of heroin and cocaine – often referred to in the drug scene as "speedballing."

Heroin-related deaths like Justin's continue to reveal a growing epidemic among today's young adults. Nationwide, drug overdoses overall are the second-leading cause of unintended deaths, behind motor vehicle

fatalities, according to a December study by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

In McHenry County, the number of fatal heroin overdoses has nearly tripled from six to 16 over the past year, making up two-thirds of the 24 local drug-related deaths in 2008. Of those cases, most victims were in their mid-20s to early 30s.

#### The start of an addiction

Justin, who had lived in a Palatine condo that his mother owned during his final days, was more than just a stereotypical overdose statistic to Noll.

As a kid, Justin was "super goofy" and fun-loving, and he constantly clung to his mother's side.

"Even when he grew up and came back home, he was never afraid to hug or kiss me in public," Noll said, smiling.

Since Justin was 6 months old, his mother raised him as a single parent in Elgin. Although Justin's father was in and out of his life, Noll thinks it wasn't his absence that led Justin to drugs. She blames "the wrong crowd."

In high school, Justin wasn't the best student, Noll said. Peer pressure and a heavy workload led him to drop out in the 11th grade. He later earned a GED.

Justin joined the Army in hopes that it would relieve his drug problems. But halfway through boot camp, he fractured his kneecap. While recovering, he soon fell into old habits and was kicked out of the military.

Justin then moved to Arizona, where Noll believed that he was doing well. But she didn't know that a friend there also was a drug addict.

"It was a never-ending battle," Noll said.

When Justin returned to Palatine, he served as an informant, helping area police bust drug dealers. Though Justin was doing the community good, Noll thinks the work – and its paycheck – continued to fuel his addiction.

She once filled his bare refrigerator with groceries, knowing that Justin might spend his money feeding his habit rather than himself.

"He borrowed money from his siblings," she said. "He always had a good excuse."

Justin also had learned to hide drugs well from his mother, even as an adult. And he didn't bear many physical qualities that he'd been using, other than losing a few pounds.

"I think he told you things you wanted to hear," she said. "He was always striving for that next level of acceptance."

#### Ending the pain

The morning of Justin's overdose, Noll said, he'd made several quick phone calls to family, to talk about trivial things, such as buying a car and meeting his mother later that afternoon. But he never showed up.

Justin might have died Feb. 10, but Noll did not find him until a few days later.

"I was on my way to work, and I hadn't heard from him. He hadn't showed up to his job, either," she said. "I let myself into the condo, and as soon as I stepped in the door, I knew."

According to autopsy results, Justin was "speedballing," but Noll didn't understand. He had always said: "Cocaine is bad, but heroin is much worse. I would never do that."

And in the past three years, two of Justin's friends had died from heroin overdoses.

The people who allegedly were with him around the day he died refused to speak to Noll or police, she said.

Before his death, Justin had applied to school for underwater welding. In life, he loved all sorts of challenges – from pilot school to skydiving to paint-balling – anything to put him on edge.

"He was into everything," Noll said. "I think he enjoyed life to the fullest. This just got a hold of him a lot more."

'You never get over it'

After Justin died, Noll got help from counseling and a substance abuse support group in Hoffman Estates, which she attends regularly.

But the overwhelming sense of losing one's child doesn't ever subside.

"There's different stages where I'm fine, but 10 minutes from now, I may not be," Noll said. "There's something that triggers it; I don't know what it is. I could be driving down the road and I start bawling."

In the months after her son's death, Noll also found it difficult to be judged by outsiders.

Why didn't she do anything different? Why didn't she force him, kicking and screaming, to rehab?

"Justin was an adult," Noll said. "I think when someone's involved in drugs, they have to be ready to get help. The drugs take over, and they think they're invincible."

Noll's oldest sons took the news the hardest, while the youngest and closest to Justin has heeded his advice to not abuse drugs. Her daughter won't discuss Justin's death with Noll, but has decided to pursue a career in grief counseling.

For Noll, it's been a long year.

"When I think of Justin, he missed his brother's wedding, he missed his first niece being born," she said. "Of all the people that Justin dealt with previously, ... if one person learned from his mistake – just one – that would be a start."

Heroin and drug-related deaths in McHenry County by year since 2000:

Year - Heroin deaths - Total drug-related deaths

2008 - 16 - 24\*

2007 - 6 - 18

2006 - 6 - 16

2005 - 6 - 20

2004 - 2 - 19

2003 - 10 - 19

2002 - 5 - 17

2001 - 7 - 18

2000 - 2 - 11

\*2008 figures might increase as more numbers become available.

Note: Deaths are considered drug-related when they involve a contributing amount of prescription medication or illegal drug substances in the body's system.

Source: McHenry County Coroner's Office

What to look out for

Possible warning signs of heroin use:

- Unkempt appearance or hygiene issues.
- Missing cash or valuables, stealing or borrowing money.
- Withdrawal from usual interests or unexplained absences from work or family events.
- Lying or deception, hostility toward others.
- Eyes appear to have a "lost" or faraway look.
- "Track" marks, nutritional deficiencies, severe insomnia or periods of oversleeping.

Source: The Heroin Awareness Foundation based in Crystal Lake

**Caption:** Mary Noll holds a portrait of her son, Justin Hall, in her Cary home. Justin died of a heroin and cocaine overdose in February. (Sandy Bressner – sbressner@nwherald.com)

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