

Groups praise BC3 nursing club for idea to confront opioid addiction

Students' volunteer effort "helps those of us in the trenches to make a difference between life and death"

July 21, 2017

(Butler, PA) A three-week-old public health initiative by Butler County Community College's nursing club to distribute literature identifying regional treatment options available to those suffering from opioid addiction has already led two people to enter recovery programs, nursing instructor Melissa Griffie said, and is being lauded by community organizations.

In the initiative's first event of an academic year-long effort, 15 BC3 nursing club students – some of whom who have had friends or relatives succumb to an opioid overdose – collectively volunteered more than 65 hours June 30 to July 5 at the Big Butler Fair, dispersing material from Foundations Medical Services, the Grapevine Center Certified Peer Specialist Service, Seeds of Hope, North Main Street Church of God and from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.



Members of the BC3 nursing club began a yearlong effort June 30 to distribute literature identifying regional treatment options available to those suffering from opioid addiction. Various club members dispersed information and answered questions at the Big Butler Fair from June 30 to July 5, and plan to attend other events through May. From left, BC3 nursing students Autumn Gressly, of Saxonburg, and Amy Moosa, of Cranberry Township; Melissa Griffie, a BC3 nursing and allied health instructor; and BC3 summer student Lindsey Duespohl, of Chicora.

"Two individuals who have never sought help before entered a program at one of the Butler facilities whose literature we distributed, and told admissions representatives that they received the information at the fair from the BC3 students," Griffie said.

Allyson Comperatore, of Sarver, is among the four officers in BC3's 100-member nursing club whose idea it was to collect and distribute literature and to inform relatives, friends or addicts where to receive help in a public health crisis that has "touched every family," Butler County Coroner William F. Young III said last week.

"Honestly, if we can help just one person or family in any way, whether it's seeking a support group or getting treatment, then I say we've done our job," Comperatore said. "That would be

one less family worrying about their loved one, and one less overdose to hear about in the news. It could save even one person. It doesn't seem like much, but it really, really is."

"A difference between life and death"

Billie Brink, a team leader with Seeds of Hope, said that the BC3 nursing club "getting involved helps those of us in the trenches to make a difference between life and death in our community."

Added Bette Peoples, executive director of the Grapevine Center: "The distribution of literature by the BC3 nursing club will inform the community not only of the devastating effects of an addiction, but also provide resources that offer hope."

There were 47 fatal overdoses in Butler County in 2015, Young said, and 74 in 2016. There are currently 30 confirmed fatal overdoses and 10 pending toxicology results in 2017, he said, with many suspected of including fentanyl and heroin.

"People from every walk of life in every family," Young said. "Somebody usually has somebody. Almost everyone I talk to brings up the subject. It's their brother. It's their brother's daughter."

It was Autumn Gressly's brother-in-law.

And Amy Moosa's friend.

It was the opioid-addicted newborns Griffie cradled as an obstetrics nurse at UPMC Northwest in Cranberry Township.

"There were many times that I would cry on the way home thinking about it," Griffie said. "I have a son myself. So I could not imagine how that baby feels.

"Babies," she said, "are not supposed to sweat."

"We are out in the community showing that we care"

Gressly, of Saxonburg, and Moosa, of Cranberry Township, were among the first wave of BC3 nursing students to operate the information table at the Big Butler Fair.

"This is about getting awareness out to the community," said Gressly, whose brother-in-law, a military veteran, lost his battle with addiction. "I think it is great that we are out in the community showing that we care, showing that we want to see improvement, and to create awareness with others out there."

Her brother-in-law, Gressly said, was 33.

“For whatever reason, heroin and opioids just have a grip on people that someone who does not have an addiction cannot understand,” she said. “So the best that I can do for people like that is just to love on them and try to help them out the best that I can.”

Moosa said she and others did not realize a neighborhood friend was fighting an opioid addiction.

“And then she lost her battle” last Christmas season, Moosa said. “And to see a young mom lose her battle like that and to leave behind a child is just devastating to that child, the family, all her friends. We realize that in Butler County and in all the counties that it is just growing and growing and growing, and just getting way out of control.”

“We need to be responsible for taking on this initiative”

The nursing club students’ volunteer efforts that began during their summer vacation “show how devoted they are to the community, and how important this is,” said Patricia Annear, BC3’s dean of nursing and allied health.

“It is a shame we need to do this, but it is needed. And we are a community college. And we are a premier healthcare program within the community college. We need to be responsible for taking on this initiative.”

Deaths from drug overdoses in Pennsylvania increased 37 percent in 2016 to 4,642, nearly four times the number of fatal traffic accidents, state Auditor General Eugene DePasquale said Thursday.

“No one is immune to this epidemic, and it has already caused merciless pain and sorrow to many Pennsylvania citizens and families,” DePasquale said.

Brink, of Seeds of Hope, said she is reeling from the possible overdose death this weekend of a woman she calls “Mary.”

“Mary was a daughter, a mother, a friend, and yes, a child of God,” Brinks said. “So the importance of (the BC3 nursing club) getting the word out about services to assist our friends in recovery, and friends and family of addicts is extremely vital as we’re dealing with life and death matters. ... No one is guaranteed tomorrow. But in the opioid addict’s world, it’s like playing Russian roulette. Which batch is tainted with that one mixed with a lethal substance?”

“Their initial choice was never to ruin their life”

Seeds of Hope, Brink said, doesn’t believe that a person such as Mary sets out one day to become an addict.

“Yes, they’ve made poor choices,” Brink said. “But their initial choice was never to ruin their life, nor to tear apart their family, or to die of an overdose.”

Heroin or at least one opioid, such as acetyl fentanyl, fentanyl, hydrocodone, methadone, oxycodone or tramadol, was reported in about 81 percent of fatal overdoses in 2015, according to the DEA Philadelphia Field Division’s 2015 Analysis of Drug-Related Overdose Deaths in Pennsylvania.

Prescribed medications complicate the problem, Griffie said.

“That’s where it becomes a nursing issue because we take care of patients who have pain from a surgery or from an injury,” Griffie said, “and we have to instruct them on how to appropriately take their pain medication so that it is not a gateway leading to an addiction.”

Only West Virginia, New Hampshire, Kentucky, Ohio and Rhode Island had higher drug-overdose rates per 100,000 residents than did Pennsylvania in 2015, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported in February. West Virginia’s rate was 41.5 and Pennsylvania’s, 26.3.

“You do see it on the news all the time and you are just, ‘Oh, it is in the inner city. It’s there,’” Moosa said. “It’s happening everywhere. People are functioning for a while. They are on these drugs and it is not always the stereotype of what people think. It’s a normal functioning person for a while until they lose control. And then it takes over. And it is so quickly addictive to them and it is so easy to die from this addiction. It is so easy for them to overdose. It just takes one time and that is it. Their life is over.”

BC3 students might play role in “divine moment”

Valerie Checkeye is director of community partnerships at North Main Street Church of God, Butler, which offers a 12-step, Christ-centered Celebrate Recovery program and works with other community ministries to build a unified effort to “breathe hope” into those struggling with addiction.

She also praises the volunteer effort by the BC3 nursing club to distribute Celebrate Recovery’s information at public events.

“I believe that at any given time, someone may be broken enough at that very moment, to accept help that may change their lives,” Checkeye said. “If they have that information right in front of them with a resource to call, that may be the moment God uses to restore them. There are no coincidences, but there are many divine moments. We just need to be faithful and obedient to do what we can.”

BC3’s nursing club will next operate an information table at 3 p.m. Aug. 13 at Chicora Park during its community day, Griffie said.

“We want them to see BC3 as an advocate for them to recover or to get help,” Griffie said.
“They might come up to the table and pretend like it is a family member. Or they might not say anything and receive some information. What we want is for the information to get out there.”

Gressly agrees.

“It is a tough war,” she said, “but it is worth the fight.”

For assistance, call Foundations Medical Services, (888) 694-9996; the Grapevine Center Certified Peer Specialist Services, (724) 283-1704; Seeds of Hope, (724) 283-6160; or North Main Street Church of God, (724) 285-4214.