

Billboards used to increase awareness of prescription medicine abuse

By David Unze • dunze@stcloudtimes.com • March 26, 2010

Dan Pearson's fight against prescription drug abuse continues to spread and is on display around the St. Cloud area.

Pearson, whose 24-year-old son Justin died from an overdose of prescription painkillers, has been a staunch advocate of increasing awareness of the potential dangers of prescription drugs. The foundation established in honor of his son has purchased advertising on 35 billboards within 25 miles of St. Cloud.

The goal: to get the facts out to parents and young people about the prevalence and danger of prescription drug abuse.

"We're hoping to create public awareness and keep the issue in front of people," Pearson said. "If these boards simply get Grandma and Grandpa or Mom and Dad or a friend to lock those prescription medications up and keep them away from kids, it's worth it."

The billboards are an extension of the AWARe public information campaign connected to passage of Justin's Bill. That Minnesota law requires, among other things, an in-person patient evaluation by a physician before medications can be prescribed. Similar laws have been passed in other states.

The billboards offer statistics that highlight the scope of the problem — 4.7 million Americans

abuse prescription drugs; three in five teens abuse their parents' prescription drugs.

Those are statistics that Pearson rattles off when he speaks to groups around the state and nation. He gave the keynote address in December at a two-day prescription drug abuse summit in North Dakota, which last year passed its version of Justin's Bill.

In addition to pushing for legislation and starting a Web site and billboards, Pearson has organized drug take-back events, where people can drop off unused, expired or unwanted prescription pills and other medications. AWARe organized such an event with St. Cloud police in April at Lake George Municipal Complex, and more than 227 people dropped off pills or other medications. More than 159,000 dosages filled seven 55-gallon drums.

Pearson shakes his head when asked to reflect on how his son's death has transformed his own life and created for him a new mission.

"We chose when we lost Justin to talk about it, and we talked about it at his funeral and we just can't stand back and do nothing," he said. "It's a journey we didn't ask for, but it was presented to us."

To see the Web site, visit www.AWARe.org.