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Substance of Denial

It does happen here.

They work with you. They go to church with you. They could be living with you. We like to think it happens to other people in other cities. But, the fact is that one in 20 Utahns – or 100,000 people – has a substance abuse problem. One-fifth of them are under the age of 18. The average addict is 31 years old, white, male and LDS.

Kathleen Weiler's timely new documentary, **“Substance of Denial,”** **airs on KUED-Channel 7 Tuesday, April 26 at 8 p.m.** and takes an in-depth look at the growing problem of substance abuse in Utah.

In the program, mothers and fathers share heartbreaking stories of how they lost their children to substance abuse overdoses. An addicted mother tells how she lost everything, including her children, while living in a wrecking yard and sharing needles for a year. A young student on scholarship tells how he was sent home from college because of his addiction. A young LDS man speaks of his addiction to pain medication that was prescribed for a neck injury. The former Miss Teen Utah tells how she overdosed when GHB was slipped into her drink. Weiler also interviews a variety of substance abuse experts, current users, and treatment counselors.

Weiler, who has produced several documentaries for KUED, initially set out to make a documentary on club drugs, but she learned that the usage of ecstasy and other club drugs was actually down in Utah. What she discovered, instead, was a drug problem far more startling and

more encompassing. That's when she decided to expand the focus of her documentary."

"Substance of Denial" airs as part of KUED's Your Health initiative. It will be followed at 9:30 p.m. by **"Beyond Denial,"** a studio special providing resources and tips on how parents can help their families avoid substance-abuse problems. A website with resources will be accessible from kued.org.

Americans, looking for relief from pain or the mundane, spend more money on illegal drugs than on cigarettes. "We're a quick-fix society, ready to medicate our problems, even here in Utah," says Weiler.

The average age a child smokes cigarettes is 12; 13 to drink alcohol and 14 to smoke marijuana. For parents, realizing that a child has a substance-abuse problem is difficult, whether out of a sense of denial, or because teens tend to be moody, anyway.

"It's so hard to know if your kids are using drugs," says Sandi Daoust of Springville. When it was confirmed that her son Robby was a heroin user, she called the parents of his friends to tell them that if her son was an addict, they might want to check into what their own kids were doing. Almost every parent in Springville said "No, not my son. He's in the Priesthood."

Robby's story has a tragic ending. He died at age 18 of a heroin overdose.

Adolescence is a stressful time for kids. It's also a time that peers exert the most influence. Most kids who are hooked on drugs began experimenting early – between the ages of 14 and 16 – as a result of peer pressure, to numb out, or to satisfy their curiosity. Many have siblings who are users.

A former junior high school teacher, Dr. Lynne Durrant, now an associate professor at the University of Utah, says that prevention programs only begin to counter the real education kids get on the streets and through pop culture.

"It's impossible to watch television on any given evening without seeing some reference

to alcohol or drugs,” says Dr. Barbara Hardy, associate director of the Utah Addiction Center.

“Those references, however, could provide parents with an opportunity to talk with their kids.”

Not only are kids susceptible to drug and alcohol pressure, but drugs are also readily available, according to students in the documentary. All you have to do, says one boy, is ask around. The number one drug of choice is marijuana because it is so easy to obtain.

In Utah, the instantly addictive methamphetamine has replaced marijuana as the number one drug of choice for adults, with one meth lab in every 10-block neighborhood, according to the documentary.

One thing is clear from those interviewed in Weiler’s documentary. No one begins using drugs thinking they will become an addict. Chantelle Gillespie began taking prescription pain medications at age 20 and was soon up to 15 percocets and 20 somas a day. From there, she went to street drugs, methamphetamine, shooting up heroin and sharing needles.

A 31-year-old LDS man tells how his prescription drug addiction began innocently when he was prescribed painkillers for a neck injury. Before long, he began going to InstaCare, telling lies to get painkillers. Then, he’d go to a different doctor or dentist’s office everyday. “My work was getting the pills,” he says.

Drugs are intended to change the way people feel, act and behave, but the brain isn’t designed to deal with narcotics and substances of abuse. As Dr. Glen Hanson, Director, Utah Addiction Center, explains, “Drugs hijack brain systems. They are potent chemicals that foul up brain chemistry.”

Having another mental health disorder often predisposes people to become addicted and, unfortunately, the addiction often makes the underlying mental-health disorder worse.

Genetic disposition also is a key component in determining the probability of addiction.

Regardless of how an addiction begins, its consequences for users, their families, friends

and society can be tragic and far-reaching. An important first step, according to many of those in the documentary, is recognizing that there is indeed a problem – even in Utah.

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