Obituaries Shed Euphemisms to Chronicle Toll of Heroin

By KATHARINE Q. SEELYE  JULY 11, 2015

WEST SPRINGFIELD, Mass. — When George P. Gauthier died of an opiate overdose in May at 44, his sister, Cindy Gauthier-Rivera, wrote an obituary that was more like a cry from the heart.

His destructive addictions to heroin, painkillers and alcohol had cost him his marriage, his children, his job and eventually his life, she wrote from her home here in western Massachusetts. An outgoing man who dressed well and loved music and poetry, he had wanted to become a drug counselor, saving others from the abyss. Instead, he plunged further into it; he was found dead at their mother's house, just a few miles from his sister.

“At least he was not alone or in the streets, or killed in a fight or stabbed or shot, but he is still gone,” Ms. Gauthier-Rivera wrote. “This is so painful and I want to scream and I want him back but not the addiction.”

When celebrities like the actor Philip Seymour Hoffman die of heroin overdoses, the cause of death is a prominent part of the obituary. The less famous tend to die “unexpectedly” or “at home.”

But as the heroin epidemic surges across the country and claims more lives every day, a growing number of families are dropping the euphemisms and writing the gut-wrenching truth, producing obituaries that speak unflinchingly, with surprising candor and urgency, about the realities of addiction.
Many of these obituaries read more like personal eulogies than death notices, even as they appear for all to read in newspapers, on Facebook, and on websites like Legacy.com and ObitsforLife.com, where Ms. Gauthier-Rivera originally posted about her brother. Some have even gone viral, prompting an outpouring of messages in which strangers share their own heartache — a sign of how widespread addiction is, even as it has stayed for so long under wraps.

Experts say the emerging openness about fatal overdoses is a sign of a broader shift.

Now, addicts, law enforcement officers and policy makers are all pushing to treat drug abuse as a disease and a public health crisis, not a crime or moral failing, and families are confronting addiction publicly in new ways, through rallies, online and in unvarnished obituaries.

“This is part of a trend toward a greater degree of acceptance and destigmatization about issues pertaining to mental illness, including addiction,” said Dr. Jeffrey A. Lieberman, chairman of psychiatry at the Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons.

Heroin abuse is soaring, thanks chiefly to its cheap price and widespread availability. Between 2002 and 2013, use of heroin rose across a wide spectrum of demographic groups — young and old, male and female, poor to affluent — according to a report released on Tuesday by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Among the more striking findings, heroin use doubled among women in that decade and rose by 60 percent among Americans with a household income of $50,000 or more, Over the same period, heroin-related overdose deaths nearly quadrupled, with more than 8,200 reported in 2013.

The candid obituaries of heroin users are filled with pain and sometimes outrage at the loss; the dead are often so young that their survivors include not just parents but also grandparents.

“Jack Pond was also called Son, Daddy, Brother and Friend and Jack was an addict,” began Jack Pond Ringler’s obituary in The Gazette in Colorado Springs in November. He was 26.
After Wade B. Pickett Sr., 34, was found dead of a heroin overdose in early May in the bathroom of the metal shop where he was a welder, his wife, Tiffany, wrote of his addiction in The Express-Times in Easton, Pa. “I am sorry if this obituary offends, hurts or shames some people,” she wrote. “I hope that it might help save some people from the incredible heartache we are experiencing.”

In the obituary for Daniel Joseph Wolanski, 24, of Avon Lake, Ohio, who fell victim to heroin in April, his family wrote, “Someone you know is battling addiction; if your ‘gut instinct’ says something is wrong, it most likely is.”

The family went on to advise: “Don’t believe the logical sounding reasons of where their money is going or why they act so different. Don’t believe them when they say they’re clean.”

These new addiction obituaries do not appear to be the result of any organized effort. But treatment specialists say they reflect a nascent movement by some in recovery and their allies to speak up and press for better treatment options and changes in the criminal justice system.

Their efforts include a documentary film, “The Anonymous People,” which urges those with addiction issues to come out of the shadows. It is being screened by drug and alcohol recovery groups across the country.

And a group called UNITE to Face Addiction, a coalition of advocacy groups, is planning a rally in Washington on Oct. 4, called “the day the silence ends.” The goal is to raise awareness about addiction’s being “treatable and preventable” for the estimated 22 million Americans in its grip.

The issue is even bubbling up in the presidential campaign, as families tell candidates of their struggles.

Many are sharing their stories online, including on a blog called “Heroin. Stop the Silence. Speak the Truth.” Patricia Byrne, who lives in Colorado, started it recently after she learned that two young people in her hometown, Canton, Mass., had died of overdoses within a week — and she revealed that her son, Kurt, 29, is a recovering heroin addict.
She said she wanted to put an end to her own guilt, silence and embarrassment. “I want families to not feel isolated and alone in this hell that is Addiction,” she wrote. The blog received 100,000 visits in the first week, nearly half a million in three weeks.

Kurt Byrne, who says he has been clean for 17 months, encouraged his mother to go public and said the candid obituaries seemed like a necessary step. “It’s a healthy step toward taking away the stigma,” he said. “And if it’s Johnny from next door, it opens people’s eyes that this isn’t just people on the street corners.”

He added: “You see how it’s affecting homes and families.”

Still, not everyone is ready to go public, least of all in an obituary, which frames a person’s legacy for all time. A disagreement about how candid such a piece should be can cause rifts while a family is trying to heal. Going public can open up a family to painful accusations by people who say they were robbed or threatened by the deceased.

Tracey Marino, whose 23-year-old son, James, recently died from a heroin overdose at home in Stratford, Conn., omitted that detail from his obituary. “People who knew and loved him knew what killed him,” she said in an email. “But to people who I knew were judgmental, I tell them he died of cardiac arrest. Because I did not want his legacy to be he was a drug addict by people who have NO clue about addiction.”

Eventually, though, she came to feel strongly that addiction is a disease, not a life choice, and decided to go public on a Facebook page for “Heroin. Stop the Silence.” In the email, she said her decision had come down to this: “I had to advocate for him because no one else was going to.”

Buddy Phaneuf, president of Phaneuf Funeral Homes & Crematorium in Manchester, N.H., said he had seen a significant shift in attitudes over recent months. “A lot of people say, ‘We don’t want to air our dirty laundry,’” he said. But “we respond to one or two heroin deaths a week, and this is a small state, so writing about it has become much more mainstream. People want to get the word out.”
Helping others is a prime motivation.

Richard Vachon, 69, a retired cook in Manchester, found his son, Cody, 21, on the floor of their home in May, dead of a heroin overdose, which he wrote in his son’s obituary. Once he feels “less shaky,” the heartbroken father said, he wants to “speak my mind and see if I can reach someone through my experience.”

One woman, Elizabeth Sue Sleasman, 37, of Bellingham, Wash., took the extraordinary step of writing her own brutally frank obituary, which her parents published after she died; she realized her death was inevitable and wanted to warn other addicts about what lay ahead.

“I ate out of garbage cans, begged and stole,” she wrote. “You will become a thief and a liar.”

But people have deeper motivations, too. Some of these are rooted in anger, helplessness or an urge to shuck off the shame that may have enabled the addiction or blinded the family to it in the first place.

“If a family chooses to do this, they can have a cathartic experience that facilitates the grieving process,” said Dr. Lieberman, the psychiatrist.

“When the person was alive, they may have been enabling, and they couldn’t acknowledge it,” he said. “But this allows them to begin that process of coming to terms with the fallibility of the family member and their own limitations in not having been able to deal with it while the person was alive.”

Ms. Gauthier-Rivera, 46, said she wrote about her brother’s addiction because it made her feel as though she was doing something. And it immediately prompted others to share their own secrets.

“One person said to me, ‘My sister OD’d, and they found her in a Dumpster,’” she said. Someone else told her mother, “My son got my daughter addicted to heroin, and she overdosed, and my son felt so much guilt at his sister dying, he committed suicide.”
Now, even though Ms. Gauthier-Rivera has a full-time job supervising a home for developmentally disabled people, she and her husband are starting a small ministry, offering coffee and conversation near a methadone clinic here. She said she hoped to coax more people into treatment, conveying to them that they are more than their addictions.

“If I take this and go, ‘Oh, my gosh, I can’t let anybody know what happened to my brother,’” she said, “then I’m just adding to the problem.”

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