

Fentanyl Fathers Greg Swan, left, and James McCarthy are spreading the word about the dangers of the drug fentanyl as both lost their sons, Drew Swan and Jack McCarthy, to the drug. Swan and McCarthy spoke to juniors and seniors at Seaholm High School in Birmingham during an assembly Wednesday. PHOTOS BY MANDI WRIGHT/DETROIT FREE PRESS

Dads share heartache left in fentanyl's wake



Neal Rubin
Columnist
Detroit Free Press
USA TODAY NETWORK

The object Wednesday morning was to remind an auditorium full of teenagers that they could die, at a point when it's probably never occurred to them.

Prom is Friday for Birmingham Seaholm High. Graduation is next month. Death is some vague thing way off in the future, maybe.

But there was 47-year-old James McCarthy, on stage with a microphone and a mission, telling 300-plus juniors and seniors that

"I'm here to plead with you, and to tell you Jack's story."

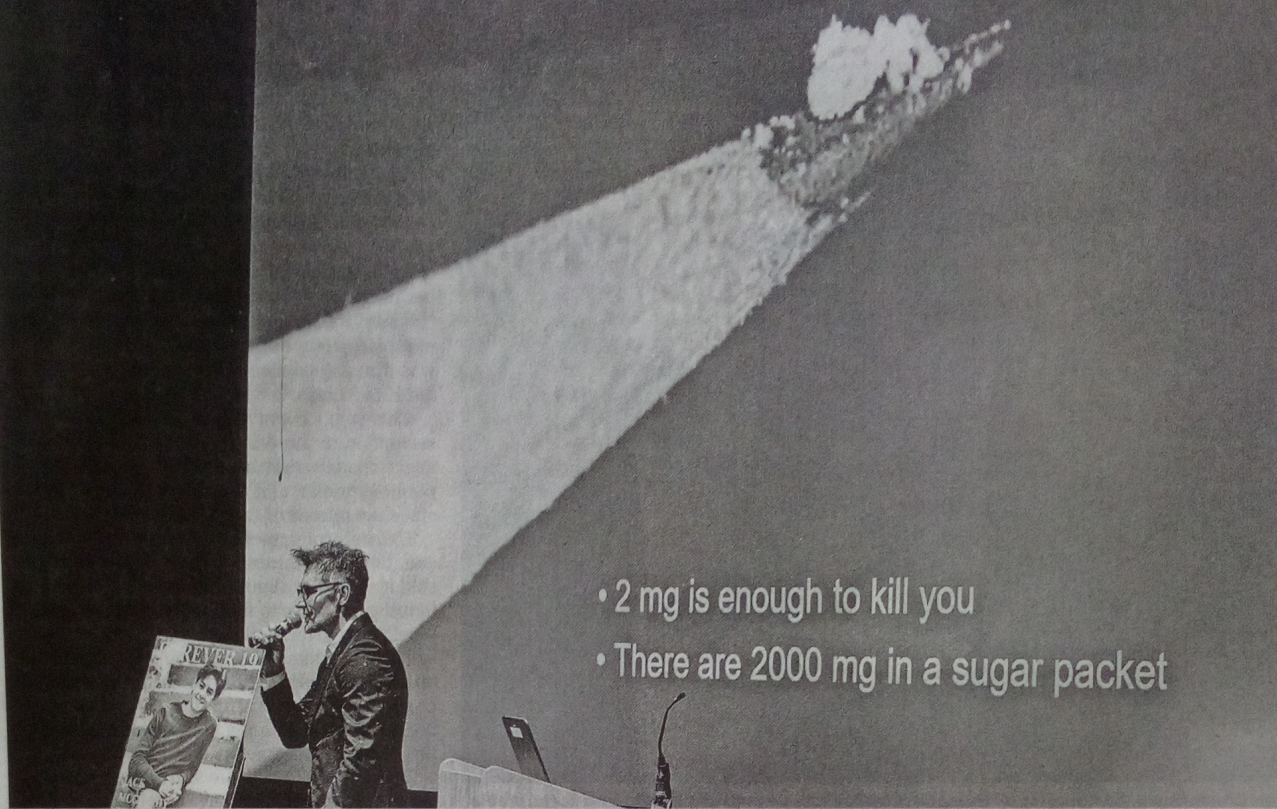
It's a story that ends with McCarthy's 19-year-old son, a Seaholm grad, dead on the kitchen floor, an ending that begins with a scroll through Snapchat in search of drugs. Not party drugs, but prescription drugs, for an Oakland University student with anxiety issues who just wanted to feel normal.

What Jack found in September 2021 were convincing replicas of Adderall and Xanax, laced with enough fentanyl to be deadly — which isn't much fentanyl at all, it turns out, and was one of the central points that an embryonic nonprofit called Fentanyl Fathers wanted its Seaholm audience to absorb.

See RUBIN, Page 5A



Samantha McCarthy, 24, third from left, closes her eyes as her father speaks about her late brother, Jack McCarthy, who died of a fentanyl overdose in 2021 at 19.



Fentanyl Father James McCarthy stands next to a chilling photo of a small amount of fentanyl on the tip of a pencil illustrating how little of the drug makes up a fatal dose. MANDI WRIGHT/DETROIT FREE PRESS

Rubin

Continued from Page 4A

Fentanyl Fathers' driving force is Greg Swan, of West Bloomfield, McCarthy, and a few other parents who've lost kids to some variety of a drug that has been debased into what's essentially a widespread poison. The goal, Swan said, is to muster parents to make presentations at 25,000 American high schools.

After three stops in Anchorage a few weeks ago and one last Thursday in Sandusky, Ohio, Seaholm was No. 5, and the kids were listening.

No murmured conversations. No furtive glow from half-covered cellphone screens as McCarthy spoke, introduced a jarring video of other stricken parents, and then spoke some more before Swan came out to help share grim statistics.

Death is an abstract concept when you're still using Clearasil, and fentanyl is supposed to be something that lands other places. But most everybody in the room at least knows someone who knows how to go online and find things they'd need to sneak into the house.

"Every time we take a family photo," said a dad on the big screen who lost one of his four daughters, "I don't see who's there. I see who's missing."

At the end of a row, halfway up from the stage, a girl in a gray T-shirt flinched.

Legends, numbers and impact

McCarthy, as it happens, is the son of Detroit radio legend J.P. McCarthy. Swan is the

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A dad on the big screen
Who lost one of his four daughters

son-in-law of newscaster Bill Bonds.

If it's a fluke that grandsons of two of the city's most famous broadcasters lost their lives to synthetic opioids, it's also a yardstick for the scope of the problem.

Pharmaceutical fentanyl is designed to treat extreme pain, typically in post-surgical or late-stage cancer patients. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says it's 50 times stronger than heroin and 100 times stronger than morphine.

What's known as illicitly manufactured fentanyl is typically mixed in Mexico from chemicals manufactured in China or India, according to the DEA, and then trucked or shipped into the U.S.

The appeal for drug dealers is that it takes only minimal amounts to create a high and it's intensely addictive, ensuring a customer base. The downside is that mixed surreptitiously into pills or heroin, in quantities of powder smaller than the head of a match, it can kill off the clientele.

More than 100,000 people die in the U.S. from fatal overdoses each year. Between November 2021 and November 2022, the federal government estimates 108,712 deaths. Picture slightly fewer people than the average crowd

for a 2022 University of Michigan football game, in the stadium, dead — mostly due to fentanyl.

The parents of the students at Seaholm grew up hearing "Just Say No," the unrealistic slogan of an anti-drug campaign that blithely dismissed the temptations and influences swamping much of the population. The goal was to fight addiction and ruin, in some cases from using substances that are now widely legal.

The message from McCarthy and Fentanyl Fathers is more blunt: Unless your drugs come from Rite Aid, you have no idea what's in them, and they can kill you on the spot.

A concern for every kid

Seaholm health teacher Lisa Donley has known McCarthy since junior high school. She asked him last year whether he'd like to speak to her classes.

Too soon, he said. Too raw. Then she heard about Fentanyl Fathers and asked again, to loud applause from principal Kyle Hall.

Hall carries a dose of Narcan in her purse, just in case she needs to bring someone back from an overdose.

"I'm worried about my seniors going off to college," she said, and about next year's seniors, and about too many other things in precarious times.

It's good to be young and optimistic and maybe a bit oblivious. But painful as it can be, there's a place sometimes for a dose of reality.

Reach Neal Rubin at NRubin@freepress.com, or via Twitter at [@nealrubin_fp](https://twitter.com/nealrubin_fp).



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