Trapped in Atlanta’s Heroin Triangle
Jewish mothers share the lessons of losing children to addiction

In March I sat in a Sandy Springs home with three of five Jewish mothers who have children buried within feet of each other in the Menorah Garden at Arlington Memorial Park. All ages 20 to 31, those children died within two years of one another from causes related to opioid addiction — in all but one case, heroin.

As kids they attended public, Jewish and secular private elementary, middle and high schools. They had b’nai mitzvah celebrations. They went to Jewish summer camps.

They also lived within Atlanta’s Heroin Triangle, an area starting in northern Atlanta, running northwest past Marietta, then east through Alpharetta to Johns Creek and Duluth and back southwest, encompassing Dunwoody and Sandy Springs. The area includes parts of Cobb, Fulton, Gwinnett and DeKalb counties.

In “The Triangle,” an 11Alive investigative series in February and March, reporter Jeremy Campbell uncovered a 4,000 percent rise in heroin-related deaths from 2010 to 2016 in those affluent northern Atlanta suburbs.

The exposé shed light on a problem plaguing U.S. cities large and small and inspired the National Prescription Drug Abuse and Heroin Summit in Atlanta on March 29, which President Barack Obama attended.

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One mom called to tell me Jewish Atlanta has a heroin triangle as well. Four years after losing her child, she wanted to speak out. She said there is a story here, a Jewish story, and it needed to be told.

Although, after much emotion and uncertainty, all preferred to remain anonymous, three of the five mothers spoke with me that day in late March. All of them are permanently changed, their hearts broken by incomprehensible loss.

I asked them what they wanted to say and what they needed the Jewish community to know. Their answers:

- Atlanta has a Jewish heroin triangle. They all said heroin is just as big a problem in the Jewish community as in the general community, and it must be fully acknowledged. They want to dispel the myth that heroin addiction, untimely death and inexplicable loss don’t happen to Jewish people.

- We want the Jewish community to be aware that there is a drug problem among the Jewish community,” one mom said. “Young Jewish adults used over time, opened the gateway to the more dangerous, ultimately deadly substances. She emphasized the common statistic that 45 percent of people who become addicted to heroin start out with prescription opioid pain pills.

- Low self-esteem is a factor. One young man’s deadly spiral began with a DUI conviction. Even on supervised probation, he could not stay clean, and he ended up in a rural Georgia jail for more than six months. He then was sentenced to two months at a Tennessee halfway house, requiring this Jewish young man to attend church three times a week. Two weeks later, under family supervision at home, he overdosed in his bedroom. “Each time, he couldn’t stay clean,” his mother said. “He used to cry to me that all he wanted was his life back — life before drugs.” She added, “All of these kids wanted to stop, but you just can’t stop.”

- Addicts lie. One mother spoke of how smart her child was. But, she added, “addicts lie... They’re functioning, and you don’t even know they’re on it.”

The mothers feel that they could have done more. They are aware that others must think they are terrible parents because drug deaths don’t happen to Jews, but they would have done anything for their children.

In addition to losing their children, they feel as if they lost their friends and community as well. One said, “We want people to know that we’re not bad parents, and our children weren’t bad children.” Another added, “And we don’t want this to happen to them.”

The first said, “Heroin is not like any other drug. You can’t get off.” She said most kids trying heroin for the first time don’t know “how potent it is, and once the drug takes a hold of you, you can’t get out of the vicious cycle. Heroin and opiates are poison. Drug dealers are murderers. They prey on the weak.”

- You can lose your child even when you are seeking help.

Shana was enrolled at a California treatment facility when she died of a prescription overdose in mid-2011. Her mother was due to fly to see her the next day when the coroner called to say she had overdosed on a combination of two drugs and was gone.

The treatment center had let Shana leave. Afterward, no one from the facility even called the mother.

A victorious judgment in a wrongful-death lawsuit, which paid enough only to cover attorneys’ fees, was little consolation. It did not bring Shana back.

Shana’s mom said other drugs, and high schools. They had b’nai mitzvah celebrations. They went to Jewish summer camps. They also lived within Atlanta’s Heroin Triangle, an area starting in northern Atlanta, running northwest past Marietta, then east through Alpharetta to Johns Creek and Duluth and back southwest, encompassing Dunwoody and Sandy Springs. The area includes parts of Cobb, Fulton, Gwinnett and DeKalb counties.

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HAMSA Helps Jewish Community Battle Addiction

By Leah R. Harrison
harrison@atljewishtimes.com

There is no cure for heroin addiction. There is no one-stop-shop, easy solution or predetermined path. As with any addiction, there is recovery. The long road back is as individualized as the person embarking on it.

HAMSA (Helping Atlantans Manage Substance Abuse), initially funded and sustained by grants from the Marcus Foundation, is a service of Jewish Family & Career Services. It is an entry point and resource to combat addiction, as well as an ongoing source for education, outreach and information dissemination to fight the spread of a devastating problem that afflicts the Jewish community just as it strikes the greater community.

Eric Miller sits at the helm of HAMSA. A call to Miller and the HAMSA team is a first response for addicts and their parents, other loved ones and friends so they can map out a customized, realistic and sound road toward recovery from heroin and other substance addictions.

Miller is knowledgeable, empathetic and skilled at guiding people through best steps and available treatment options, but he did not come easily to his position as HAMSA coordinator at JF&CS, nor to his place as a resource for Jewish Atlanta recovery. His is a route no one would willingly take.

He is particularly qualified to deal with addicts and their surrounding circles because it is a journey he has taken.

Referring to his position and place in our community, Miller said: “Everything depends on my sobriety. My job, my relationship, my family — everything.”

Contrary to the sacrosanct anonymity that is a cornerstone of the recovery community, Miller allowed us to shine a light on his battle with substance abuse, his life choices and his steps to the position he occupies today.

As any addict of any substance knows, sobriety is a tenuous place with no guarantees, accomplished with hard work and vigilance every day. No one in recovery takes tomorrow for granted.

But there is another tenet: One addict helps another addict. Those who let themselves be identified, people in our community like Miller and international personalities like Michael Phelps, greatly benefit others by their example, although it puts greater pressure on their sobriety.

“You can’t reduce shame and stigma if you’re not willing to talk about it,” Miller said.

He said nobody plans to become an addict. Often, “the thing that set them apart positively is also what took them down. They were the star football player. They tore their shoulder. They got into painkillers. The painkillers stopped being prescribed for them, so they started looking for them on the side. Or they just noticed how it felt.”

Coping with addiction eventually brings an understanding that it crosses all religious and socioeconomic boundaries. The more an addict holds himself out as being different, the further he is from recovery and from the benefit of help from others experiencing similar struggles.

So even if young Jews and their families feel that they need religion-based resources to become comfortable with a program, they should emerge with a deeper understanding of the commonality we all share.

Contrary to popular belief, “there is nothing un-Jewish about the 12 steps,” Miller said about the recovery system used by programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous.

In part of an Oct. 21, 2005, Atlanta Jewish Times cover story, “Skating on Thin Ice,” about a Cobb County young man who battled heroin addiction with the help of an Israeli program, Rabbi Ilan Feldman of Congregation Beth Jacob took on the issue of attaching religion to a 12-step program.

After spending time with 10 addicts, the rabbi said the 12 steps “ultimately address the issue of personal responsibility.”

People need to get rid of denial, take responsibility and connect to other people in recovery,” Rabbi Feldman said.

Miller told of the shocking reality that when you get sober, all those “un-sober friends that were previously around are no longer available to you.” They simply evaporate. “All of my ‘dear’ friends, literally, the day after I got sober, disappeared,” he said. “So you have to now create a new life in recovery, which is why the 12-step program was so effective for me.”

As an addict, you might be able to return to your community, but that connection has to be on different terms. A frequent saying in recovery is “The only thing you have to change is everything.”

You have to alter the things you do, the places you go and the people with whom you associate, thereby eliminating potential threats to sobriety.

Asked if it felt like a solitary journey, Miller pointed out that recovering addicts don’t do it alone. You find and lean on a new community of people struggling with similar, even if slightly different, issues.

The upshot is that the Jewish community needs to take a seat at the table. We could benefit from regular NA meetings and family and grief therapy groups held in Jewish settings as an entry point to participation, although they should be open to all, just as the countless meetings held in churches and community centers around the metro area have open doors (www.grscna.com/areas). Rabbinical support as a touchstone in treatment and recovery, like the spiritual guidance present for other faiths, would also make an impact.

It is time for the Atlanta Jewish community to join in and have a presence in the fight against heroin addiction.

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www.atlantajewishtimes.com
Addiction Resources in the Jewish Community

By Leah R. Harrison
lharrison@atljewishtimes.com

Although we do not have a Jewish presence in residential recovery facilities, Atlanta has many passionate professionals and wonderful programs and treatment networks. Provided is a list of resources for battling addiction that are available in the metro area, as well as a vision for what could be, including models for out-of-state programs to which local professionals refer people in need.

HAMSA coordinator Eric Miller described three pillars under which HAMSA (Helping Atlantans Manage Substance Abuse) helps combat heroin addiction and other substance abuse in the Jewish community.

Prevention and Education

Miller and the HAMSA clinical team are putting in place a curriculum of prevention and education for fifth through 12th grades that will be available to public and private schools, as well as synagogue education programs.

The curriculum is evidence-based and age-appropriate and will be infused with local content, people and stories to make it applicable to, and resonant with, Atlanta middle and high school students as it tracks them through pivotal developmental years.

Treatment and Intervention

This critical function could also be called “Helping the addict and the family.” By the time the mom, dad, aunts, uncles and cousins call HAMSA for assistance, the addict has typically gone into treatment, fallen out and gone back in again. Huge amounts of resources have often been expended, and the family calls in desperation, saying, “What are we going to do now?”

The HAMSA team asks a series of questions to help determine the course of action and offers information and options for each step, including support and guidance for the family of the addict.

The path for combating heroin abuse varies with each case but can involve the following:

- Needs assessment and evaluation.
- Individual and/or family counseling.
- Clinical referrals.
- Detox, typically seven to 10 days. Numerous state-licensed detox facilities are available with options for a wide variety of preferences and budgets.
- Treatment, typically 30 days to six months. Many state-licensed drug and alcohol treatment facilities offer inpatient or intensive outpatient programs. The focus can vary from teens and young adults to wilderness experience.

Out-of-state inpatient treatment centers, some affiliated with local centers, provide Jewish rabbinical support and, in some cases, kosher facilities. Inform the HAMSA team if those services are priorities for your family.

“After detox you need to go into treatment,” Miller said. If the addict has health coverage, “insurance typically covers about 30 days of that. You really need six months. Especially if we’re talking about heroin, you really want to be in treatment for a year.”

Note that the terminology matters. While insurance may cover some services at “inpatient treatment facilities,” it usually does not pay for “residential programs.” Many local centers fall into the latter category and can be very expensive.

“There are less expensive options. You just have to find them,” Miller said.

- Intensive outpatient. This treatment can vary greatly — including group or individual talk therapy, education, and even yoga — for half a day, roughly four days per week. Many locations and options are available in Atlanta.
- Residential, which is long-term intervention. There are many residential options, including halfway houses, sober living, and staying with the family while participating in a 12-step program.

Fellowship, Family and Community Support

- Sober friends to replace those who threaten sobriety. Create a sober community around you.
- Supportive family. Supportive friends and family can also help the addict strategize. For example, have grape juice available at a family simcha, or make sure the addict has access to a car in case a situation becomes uncomfortable.
- Recovery groups throughout the city. The addict selects a group that is comfortable and that enables the addict to center his recovery — either a 12-step “home group,” offering the structure of a sponsor, sponsees and friends, or a more clinically based program.

Twelve-step Narcotics Anonymous groups are all around Atlanta (www.grsna.com/Areas). Sally Anderson leads a weekly clinical recovery group through HAMSA at the JF&CS offices at 8549 Chamblee-Dunwoody Road in Dunwoody on Mondays from 11 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.
- Additional HAMSA programs in partnership with the Jewish community include Sober Shabbat, a roaming Shabbat dinner held monthly for Jews in recovery; Acoustic Shabbat Cafe, which alternates monthly between Crema Espresso Gourmet in Dunwoody and San Francisco Coffee in Virginia-Highland (see the schedule at www.atlantajcc.org); and Families Anonymous, a group meeting for those whose lives have been affected by a loved one’s addiction, held Monday nights at 7:35 p.m. at Temple Beth Tikvah in Roswell (contact Jeanne and Jeff Schultz at 770-552-8750 or asburypark@comcast.net).
- Also available are Alcoholics Anonymous, a group meeting for addicts held Tuesday nights at 8 at Temple Kehillat Chaim (contact Mike Gordon at 770-597-4599 or mcgordon@mindspring.com), and two Al-Anon sessions, a group meeting held Wednesdays at 6 p.m. at Congregation B’Nai Torah in Sandy Springs (contact kathyschottk@yahoo.com) and a Seven-Hour Serenity group meeting held Wednesdays at 7 p.m. at Temple Kol Emeth in East Cobb (770-973-3533).
- Sober Birthright Israel trip (www.israelfreespirit.com/trip/jacj).
**SPECIAL REPORT**

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journey of alcoholics’ families.

“Other people have their G-d or Jesus,” one mom said. “I don’t know what Judaism has. We have nothing. It’s a hushed society.”

Another said: “I don’t believe in G-d; in Judaism, now. There is no one helping spiritually. It’s not like alcoholism. There’s no shame to that. We need Jewish resources for fighting illegal drug use.”

- They want you to talk about it, and they want to hear from you.

Have conversations with friends, acknowledge the problem, “throw away stigma, embarrassment and anything else that gets in the way of finding help,” and help them make an affordable facility and Jewish resources available here for addicts and their families.

In the spirit of the March heroin summit, regard opioid addiction as a

**A Jewish Place to Go**

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- Regular but separate AA and NA meetings at synagogues or other Jewish facilities.

- A Jewish-friendly narcotics halfway house after rehab with psychological counseling and access to rabbinic support and Jewish services and observances.

- Jewish-based family and grief support groups.

**Getting. Giving Help**

If you or someone you know has lost a child and would like information on a support group, or if you want to help create a stronger Jewish support network in Atlanta to battle heroin addiction, contact Eric Miller, the program coordinator for Helping Atlantans Manage Substance Abuse, at 770-677-9318 or emiller@jfcs-atlanta.org.

If you have personal stories, ideas or more information, email lharrison@atljewishtimes.com or call 404-456-6208.

Next week the AJT looks at how health care is dealing with opioid addiction.

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**Vision for Jewish Future**

By Leah R. Harrison
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Now that the education curriculum is in place, HAMSA coordinator Eric Miller is ready to “focus on a treatment plan for the Jewish community. I don’t think we’re ready to have a Jewish recovery center, but I know we’re ready for a Jewish voice in recovery.”

He said he knows of at least three people from the Jewish community who are in treatment facilities without a Jewish component because one does not exist, and at those centers the patients go to church on Sundays.

“I tell you what: If the rabbis looked and saw that 100 percent of the Jews with this problem go to non-Jews to help them solve it, you know they’d be up in arms about it, and they’d be looking for everything they could to relieve this problem,” Miller said.

He added that faith of some sort is an important aspect of recovery.

Under HAMSA’s plan, first the Jewish community must expand the network of addiction resources. The brick and mortar can follow later.

The HAMSA road map for battling Jewish substance abuse includes:

- Increasing Jewish recovery group options, targeting narcotics and other destructive addictions.

- Using the new counseling wing at the Dunwoody campus of Jewish Family & Career Services for enhanced and additional HAMSA programs.

- Expanding community partnerships to provide, for example, coffeehouse Shabbats with the Marcus Jewish Community Center, Moishe House educational and social programming; a spiritual cleansing ritual with the Metro Atlanta Community Mikvah; SOJOURN prevention programming; and interfaith programming.

- Adding a Jewish spiritual voice to inpatient recovery options by having a rabbi as a resource, as well as Jewish services and observances among the spiritual elements now typical at many recovery centers. A kosher kitchen at a partner facility is a long-range goal.

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**Ad**

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disease, not a crime, so we can focus on intervening and saving our children.

The three women agreed that they know more families need help.

If you realize you know these women, please understand how difficult it was for them to lay themselves bare to increase awareness, inform us about Jewish Atlanta’s needs, and, they hope, spare others from the pain they have experienced. Don’t just talk to others about them; reach out to their families, thank them for their courage and offer to help in any way possible.

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