

Lake Forest family starts foundation in honor of late son

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Ross and Nancy Friedman launched the GPF Foundation in honor of their son, Gregory Paul Friedman, a Lake Forest High School graduate, Saturday, Oct. 27 with an informational and fundraising event at Northmoor Country Club in Highland Park. Two-hundred and ninety people attended the dinner program, maxing out reservations for the club. The Friedmans are Lake Forest residents, and their friends, family and business associates from throughout the Chicago area and the United States came to support the foundation.

Their 27-year-old son Greg died unexpectedly on Aug. 4, 2017 about a week after taking the recreational drug ecstasy (also known as MDMA and molly) at a San Francisco concert.

The Friedmans started the GPF Foundation in Greg's memory over the 2017 Thanksgiving holiday. This was the organization's first major public event.

The foundation is named for Greg, but also stands for Greg's Path Forward, which references its mission of being "committed to saving lives by supporting education, appropriate treatment and overall awareness of the dangers related to recreational drug use."

"We now wake up every morning and realize how fleeting life is," Nancy said. "Things happen that defy reason. We must utilize Greg's tragedy to make the world safer and better."

She explained since their son's death, she and her husband have done everything they can to understand what happened to him, which led them to start this foundation to help prevent others from losing their lives in a similar way.

Greg was a talented artist and athlete with a deep passion for reading and learning. He was also a natural leader and deep philosophical thinker who loved animals. He played football at Lake Forest High School and attended Tulane University as a presidential academic scholar and running back on the football team. After college, he worked in Chicago, New York, and lastly Los Angeles, where he lived with his girlfriend.

His mother stated that he had no history of drug abuse, but took ecstasy as a social thing at the concert, which is common for teens and young adults to do at parties, clubs and music festivals. According to those with him in San Francisco the weekend of the concert, Greg showed immediate signs of stress following taking the drug. The next morning he felt well enough to fly back home to L.A., but upon his return to work on Monday, he was experiencing dehydration, sleeplessness, anxiety and psychosis. He sought medical treatment from his internist, who prescribed him medication which rather than helped, made the after-effects of the drug even worse. Greg's symptoms led to his fatal fall from a building's rooftop.

The series of events took Greg's parents on a journey of inquiry and discovery, which connected them with two experts in the field of illicit drug use and related mood disorders. Dr. Joseph Palamar is an associate professor at the New York University Department of Population Health,

and Dr. Jennifer Payne is a practicing psychiatrist and associate professor at Johns Hopkins University. The two served as keynote speakers at the foundation's launch event.

Through them and others, Ross said they learned that a significant portion of recreational drugs, like ecstasy, are manufactured by street vendors in Asia and are shipped to the United States. They are often laced with additional drugs, called adulterants, which cause unintended side effects. He said they asked Greg's friend to provide them with a sample of the ecstasy they took at the concert to have it tested, but did not receive it.

Palamar said when he was younger he frequented the New York City club scene and learned that recreational drug usage was rampant there. He explained that ecstasy, or MDMA, which is an acronym for its chemical name, is a "cousin to amphetamine."

"The users are often unaware or in denial of the dangers of ecstasy," Palamar said.

He added that the after-effects can be so severe they refer to "Suicide Tuesday" as the low period for users after weekend use.

"Right now there is a lack of funding for drug research," he said. "This is why [GPF] Foundation's efforts are so critical."

Palamar said research shows 12 percent of young people aged 18-25 in the United States have used ecstasy at least once, but the number could be higher because of those who won't admit to using it or those who don't realize they've been given it. That statistic also does not include younger and older users of the drug.

Payne said, "MDMA-induced psychosis happens overnight, caused by the rapid depletion of serotonin in the brain."

She believes that is what happened to Greg, with or without there being adulterants in the ecstasy he took.

"Psychosis is a cluster of psychiatric symptoms. You can see it in normal people and those with mental illnesses," Payne said.

She said psychosis can be a symptom of both drug abuse and bipolar disorder. She warned that one dose of a recreational drug can lead to prolonged psychosis.

"I think the goal of this organization is admirable," she said.

The GPF Foundation has identified the first few institutions it will work with.

"We felt as though we would like to start locally where we have relationships," Ross said.

He explained they were referred to current administrators at Lake Forest College by a former president with whom they are friends. They all recognize that college students are one group with potential to use recreational drugs and thus are at risk of the dangerous after-effects.

“Another reason we are excited to work with Lake Forest College is they have 14 affiliated colleges throughout the Midwest stretching to Colorado that include Knox College and Lawrence University,” Ross said. They hope to establish educational and awareness programming at Lake Forest College and expand it through their collegiate network.

On the medical side, the foundation has connected with Rosalind Franklin University in North Chicago. Ross said they have talked with the university about the need to build knowledge of recreational drug use and proper treatment into medical education. They hope to create programming for second-year medical students.

Additional people involved with the GPF Foundation and the launch event were the organization’s board members. One member Janna Berk has “steep nonprofit and event planning experience,” said Ross Friedman. “It was absolutely phenomenal what [she] did as event chair [for the launch event].”

Harry Griffith, a retired superintendent of Lake Forest School Districts 115 and 67, is a friend of the Friedman family and served as emcee for the program. He has been very supportive of the Friedmans through this loss.

Twenty-six table captains/ambassadors were also instrumental at the launch event. They were composed of Greg’s friends and his sister’s and brother’s friends and sat at each table to talk with attendees about the Friedman family and the foundation.

Ambassador Katy Hardison, a high school friend of Greg’s sister Molly Friedman’s, explained, “They were an extremely tight knit family. They are very appreciative of having the support of friends and family. It is part of their healing process.”

“In honoring Greg’s life, journey and tragedy, we hope to save lives,” Ross said. “How do you put a value on that?”

For more information on the foundation, visit www.GPFfoundation.org. The organization is currently volunteer run with no administrative costs, with all proceeds going toward the mission.