

Opioids haunt recovery: 'It never really leaves you'

By LINDSEY TANNER
AP Medical Writer

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — It's hard to say whether businessman Kyle Graves hit rock bottom when he shot himself in the ankle so emergency room doctors would feed his opioid habit or when he broke into a safe to steal his father's cancer pain medicine.

For straight-talking ex-trucker Jeff McCoy, it was when he grabbed a gun and threatened to blow his brains out if his mother didn't hand over his fentanyl patches.

For newly minted lawyer Bianca Knight, it happened after hitting the street to find pills when her opioid prescription ran out, as she envisioned her career dreams crumbling.

Addiction to powerful painkillers sneaked up on Graves and McCoy and Knight, ordinary Americans who began taking the drugs legitimately for pain, but like millions of others, got caught up in the worst opioid epidemic in U.S. history.

Now they're fighting the same tough, slippery battle for recovery, owing their lives, they say, to an anti-addiction medicine similar to pills that nearly led to their demise. They credit a Nashville doctor too, an addiction specialist who also works as a Vanderbilt University pain medicine physician — sometimes recommending the same drugs to pain patients that brought the others to the brink.

The ironies and tragedies of the crisis are not lost on Dr. Dan Loneragan, who faced his own dark abyss years ago in medical school, when his older brother died suddenly of a possible opioid overdose.

He's heard criticism about doctors "who get 'em hooked on drugs and then turn around and treat 'em for addiction." And he's seen the finger-pointing from those who think faith and willpower are the answer, who say prescribing opioid drugs to treat addiction is trading one vice for another.

"Doctors have contributed to this problem. In the past three decades we have gotten a lot of patients on medications that can be very dangerous," he said. "The pharmaceutical industry has contributed significantly to this problem. This is a problem that we all need to own."

But to stigmatize addiction as a moral failing rather than a brain disease is wrong, Loneragan says. Research has shown that opioid drugs can



Kyle Graves, who is in recovery for opioid addiction, sits in the home he shares with his mother in Franklin, Tenn., June 6. Graves' troubles began more than a decade ago when he sought relief for degenerative arthritis in his hips, shoulders, feet and back. He was prescribed oxycodone, an opioid drug that works best for short-term pain but is risky and potentially addictive when used long-term.

cause brain changes leading to uncontrollable cravings for drug use even when it leads to dangerous and unhealthy behavior. To not offer medicine as a treatment, he says, would be like withholding insulin from a diabetic.

This is a snapshot of Graves, in the trenches of America's addiction crisis. More than 2 million people are hooked on opioids. Overdoses from these drugs have killed more than 300,000 Americans since 2000, and they are killing an average of 120 people every day. Even for survivors, success never quite seems certain.

The family man

Kyle Graves groans slightly as he sits down on the dark leather sofa in his apartment living room, feeling the stabbing pains that a daily handful of pills used to ease. At age 54, he shares the small but comfortable space with his ailing mother, bedridden from a stroke, and two small dogs in Franklin, Tennessee, an affluent Nashville suburb.

Framed thrift shop art posters and secondhand knickknacks decorate the place, fitting decor for a man seeking a second chance at life.

Graves' troubles began more than a decade ago when he sought relief for degenerative arthritis in his hips, shoulders, feet and back. He



A billboard advertising treatment for opioid addiction stands in Dickson, Tenn., June 7.

was prescribed hydrocodone, an opioid drug that works best for short-term pain but is risky and potentially addictive when used long term.

He got several refills for persistent pain. But when he lost his dream job as a car dealership finance manager, Graves found the pills helped get him through that crisis, too.

He was a functioning addict when his sixth child was born — a boy named Joshua Jeremiah who contracted spinal meningitis during childbirth. The infant clung to life for six weeks; his death sent Graves sinking deeper into addiction.

He'd use up a month's supply of pills from pain clinics in days, followed by terrible withdrawals —

vomiting, diarrhea, shaking uncontrollably and intense pain. It's familiar territory for addiction patients.

Graves turned desperate after a doctor refused more refills, suspecting he was selling the drugs because opioids didn't show up in a routine urine test — he'd swallowed them all weeks earlier.

With his wife at work and kids outside playing basketball, Graves grabbed a loaded .22-caliber pistol from his bedroom nightstand.

"I thought, 'I really can't hurt myself by shooting myself in the foot or ankle.' I thought that story sounded legit." He pulled the trigger, then called an ambulance.

At the hospital, two shots of morphine "did the trick."

"I lost my wife, my kids, my home. It just devastated and ruined my life. I never thought anything like that could happen to me."

— Kyle Graves, recovering from opioid addiction

The only pain he recalls was when doctors removed the bullet. Graves thinks only his wife suspected the ruse.

She grew weary and left with the kids — the harshest blow to a man who worships family.

Finally, jobless and living in a lonely Nashville motel room, Graves knew he had to seek help. "I lost my wife, my kids, my home," he said. "It just devastated and ruined my life. I never thought anything like that could happen to me."

His sister helped send him to a California rehab center where hard work and prayer were the main treatments. It worked for a time, but after relapsing Graves sought help from Loneragan, who prescribed recovery medicine containing buprenorphine, an opioid drug that reduces cravings and withdrawal

symptoms.

Graves has been on the pills for about three years. He says weaning himself "would be a struggle that I haven't wanted to try yet."

He has had setbacks, the most recent in 2015, when money was tight, his youngest daughter was distant and he was facing another Christmas without his kids. He knows they won't come around if he falls back into addiction.

His hopes of rebuilding a life with those five kids, now grown, help keep him clean.

"I'd like to have a house, a place they can come over and have a cookout on the weekend," he said.

"They know I love 'em with all my heart," he said. "They still have issues. I've offered to get them together and talk to them. I guess they're not ready yet."

Graves' triggers are tragedy and misfortune; he tries not to dwell on what the future might bring.

"I don't worry about it a lot right now. Anything could happen, though, that could change that," he said. "You never know."

Pain wakes Graves up at night and greets him in the morning. He takes nothing stronger than over-the-counter pain relievers. He has stopped asking Loneragan for opioid pain pills. The answer was always no.

"I've come to tears in his office," Graves said. "I'm going to get older and it's just going to get worse...what is a guy like me supposed to do?"

He passed an important test a few months ago when another doctor prescribed opioids after shoulder surgery. Graves took the pills as directed, then quit.

He's on disability now; looking after his mom keeps him busy. Sometimes he writes country songs — some sound good enough to be played in clubs 20 miles up Highway 65 in Nashville, and it doesn't take much prodding to get him to share one.

"A man's gotta do what a man's gotta do, when he's loving a woman, a woman like you," Graves sings. "He'll sacrifice and give all he's got, to keep the fire burning, to keep the fires hot."

At times, in the middle of the night, when back pain flares, he still fights flickers of temptation.

"It really never leaves you," Graves said. "The voices always still call you back to the darkness. You just have to ignore 'em and go on."

Big Tobacco's anti-smoking ads begin after decade of delay

WASHINGTON (AP) — Decades after they were banned from the airwaves, Big Tobacco companies return to prime-time television this weekend — but not by choice.

Under court order, the tobacco industry for the first time will be forced to advertise the deadly, addictive effects of smoking, more than 11 years after a judge ruled that the companies had misled the public about the dangers of cigarettes.

But years of legal pushback by the industry over every detail means the ads will be less hard-hitting than what was proposed. Tobacco control experts say the campaign — built around network TV and newspapers — will not reach people when they are young and most likely to start smoking.

"Their legal strategy is always obstruct, delay, create confusion and buy more time," said Ruth Malone, of the University of California, San Francisco, who has studied the industry for 20 years. "So by the time this was finally settled, newspapers have a much smaller readership, and nowadays, who watches network TV?"

The new spots, which begin Sunday, lay out the toll of smoking in blunt text and voiceover statements: "More people die every year from smoking than from murder, AIDS, suicide, drugs, car crashes



Discarded cigarette butts in an ashtray outside a New York office building. Decades after they were banned from the airwaves, Big Tobacco companies are returning to prime-time television.

and alcohol, combined."

Smoking remains the nation's leading preventable cause of death and illness, causing more than 480,000 deaths each year, even though smoking rates have been declining for decades. Last year, the adult smoking rate hit a new low of 15 percent, according to government figures. That's down from the 42 percent of adults who smoked in the mid-1960s.

Experts attribute the decline to smoking bans, cigarette taxes and anti-smoking campaigns by both nonprofit groups like the American

Cancer Society and the federal government.

The new ads are the result of a 1999 lawsuit filed by the Justice Department under President Bill Clinton which sought to recover some of the billions the federal government spent caring for people with smoking-related illnesses.

A federal judge ultimately sided with the government in 2006, ruling that Big Tobacco had "lied, misrepresented and deceived the American public" about the effects of smoking for more than 50 years. The decision came nearly a decade

after U.S. states reached legal settlements with the industry worth \$246 billion.

But under the racketeering laws used to prosecute the federal case, the judge said she could not make the companies pay, instead ordering them to publish "corrective statements" in advertisements, as well as on their websites, cigarette packs and store displays.

The campaign will be paid for by Altria Group, owner of Philip Morris USA, and R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Co., a division of British American Tobacco.

Altria, maker of Marlboros, referred inquiries to a statement it issued last month: "We remain committed to aligning our business practices with society's expectations of a responsible company. This includes communicating openly about the health effects of our products."

Reynolds, which sells Camel cigarettes, did not respond to a request for comment.

Originally the U.S. government wanted companies to state that they had lied about smoking risks. But the companies successfully challenged that proposal, arguing that it was "designed solely to shame and humiliate." An appeals court ruled the ads could only be factual and forward-looking.

Even the phrase "here's the truth," was disputed and blocked.

"Here's the truth: Smoking is very addictive. And it's not easy to quit," read one proposed message.

"This was a classic case of a very wealthy set of defendants willing to appeal every conceivable issue time and time again," said Matthew Myers of the Campaign for Tobacco Free Kids, one of several anti-tobacco groups who intervened in the court case.

More than half a century ago, American media was saturated with tobacco advertising. Cigarettes were the most advertised product on TV and tobacco companies sponsored hundreds of shows, including "I Love Lucy," "The Flintstones" and "Perry Mason." People smoked almost everywhere, in restaurants, airplanes and doctor's offices.

Congress banned cigarette advertising from radio and TV in 1970 and subsequent restrictions have barred the industry from billboards and public transportation. Yet companies still spend more than \$8 billion annually on marketing, including print advertising, mailed coupons and store displays.

Anti-tobacco advocates estimate the upcoming TV advertisements will cost companies a tiny fraction of that, about \$30 million. The broadcast ads will air five times per week for one year and the newspaper ads will run five times over several months in about 50 national daily papers.

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