

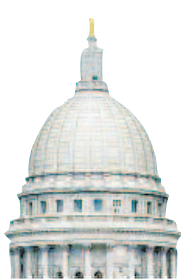
# SUMMER STARTS AT AMERICAN PLAYERS THEATRE SPRING GREEN, WI

Brian Mani, *An Improbable Fiction*, 2021. Photo by Liz Laurent



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# SUNDAY STATE JOURNAL



## Ukrainians try to dig in

Russian armed forces are ramping up their village-to-village offensive in eastern Ukraine.

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## DRAFT CONCLUDES

Green Bay adds six offensive players and five on defense over the three days

SPORTS. C1



## The allure of analog

Local record sellers are seeing demand as listeners seek out that 33-rpm vinyl sound

BUSINESS. A16



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## FATAL COMBINATION | FENTANYL, PANDEMIC DRIVE OVERDOSE DEATHS



JOHN HART PHOTOS, STATE JOURNAL

Margaret Sweet keeps her son Aidan's shoes and coat in her home on Madison's West Side. Aidan Sweet, a 17-year-old West High School student, died in August 2020 from an overdose involving fentanyl, a dangerous opioid. COVID-19 isolation and an increased presence of fentanyl in other drugs have spurred record opioid overdoses in Wisconsin.

# 'Completely overwhelmed'

Agencies in region trying desperately to prevent more deaths

DAVID WAHLBERG  
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As a student at West High School in Madison, Aidan Sweet started buying opioid pills on the street, saying they calmed his anxiety and helped him sleep, his parents said.

When the COVID-19 pandemic began in March 2020, he met with a behavioral health therapist, but the sessions were online.

Amid the isolation from shut-

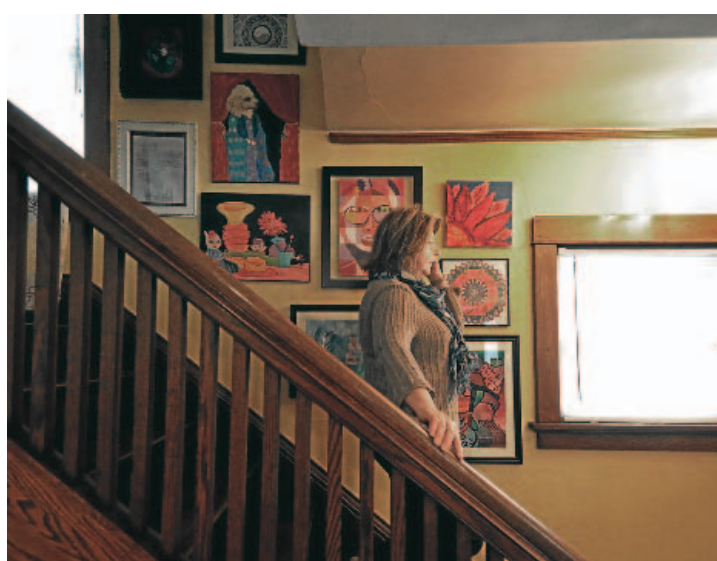


Aidan Sweet

he continued using. "The world turned upside down," his mother, Margaret Sweet, added.

Please see OVERDOSES, Page A8

Lorre Kolb displays her late daughter Lily's paintings in her home. Lily wanted to be a tattoo artist.



## DANE COUNTY JAIL

# Which inmates can be tracked?

Diversion program might be expanded

LUCAS ROBINSON  
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Life with an ankle monitor has its benefits and downsides for Trent Baltes.

The 32-year-old Belleville man works at a Verona sandwich shop from 11 a.m. to 7 p.m., then has a half hour to rush home to blow into a breathalyzer. He also has to pay \$136 a week for his monitor, he said, which has led him to do odd jobs from home on the weekends, such as cleaning out cars.

But despite the stresses, the monitor means Baltes can serve his sentence on the outside as one of nearly 100 inmates on the Dane County Jail's diversion program.

"I feel 100% better than being locked up," said Baltes, who was convicted of an OWI in late March and is due to be released from the program in August. "I'd rather be working than sitting around in jail, and just dealing with being free is a lot better than sitting in there."

It turns out the off-site monitoring isn't only better for offenders. The jail diversion program, available for inmates who pose little or no threat to public safety, has also been shown to be hugely successful: Nine out of 10 of those enrolled last year completed it without violating rules against substance use or committing new crimes, according to data from the Dane County Sheriff's Office.

The success of the program has drawn the attention of county officials looking to reduce the jail population. Under a compromise

Please see MONITORS, Page A12

## MIFFLIN STREET | BLOCK PARTY

# Revelers injured in balcony collapse

Rotten wood escaped detection last month

EMILIE HEIDEMANN and EMILY HAMER  
Wisconsin State Journal

Rotting wood that was covered up with metal panels — and therefore missed by city inspectors in a safety check — caused a second-story balcony to collapse Saturday during the Mifflin Street Block Party, sending two people to the hospital after about a dozen revelers plummeted 15 feet to the

ground, according to a City Council member and police.

"It's not the first time this has happened, and thank God we haven't had serious injuries as a result of this," Ald. Mike Verveer, 4th District, said, noting that a first-floor porch collapsed several years ago. "This could have been substantially more tragic. That's why we take these porch inspections very seriously."

Earlier in April, building inspectors checked every porch and balcony of the aging houses in

the 400 and 500 blocks of Mifflin Street and the surrounding area to ensure they were safe before Saturday's block party, an event that is not sanctioned by the city but typically draws thousands every year regardless, Verveer said.

The balcony that collapsed at 544 W. Mifflin St. was also inspected, but city staff couldn't see the wood rot because of "metal that was wrapped around the wood," Verveer said.

Please see MIFFLIN, Page A6



ANDY MANIS, FOR THE STATE JOURNAL

Madison firefighters respond after a balcony collapsed Saturday at 544 W. Mifflin St., injuring three people.



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# FATAL COMBINATION | FENTANYL, PANDEMIC DRIVE OVERDOSE DEATHS

## Overdoses

From A1

On Aug. 21, 2020, Aidan died of an accidental overdose involving the dangerous opioid fentanyl.

COVID-19's disruption of regular life and an increased presence of fentanyl in other types of illicit drugs, often with users not knowing, have spurred record levels of fatal opioid overdoses around the country, including in Wisconsin, officials say. The state had 1,227 opioid overdose deaths in 2020, 32% more than in any previous year. The preliminary total for 2021, as of Tuesday, was 1,237, a figure that may grow.

Wisconsin's rate of opioid overdose deaths is highest among people ages 18 to 44, more than twice as high among men than women and nearly double the state average among Black people and Native Americans.

Wisconsin's effort to control the problem — from addressing health disparities and reducing the risk of overdoses to expanding addiction treatment and supporting recovery — is being enhanced by the first proceeds this year of the state's \$420 million in opioid settlement funds expected over 18 years.

A new state Department of Health Services plan calls for beefing up substance abuse education in schools, improving overdose activity alerts to warn the public of increased risk and making the overdose-reversal drug naloxone, or Narcan, more widely available, among other steps. The state also plans to boost distribution of newly legalized fentanyl test strips to help users identify the deadly opioid frequently found in other drugs, including heroin, cocaine, methamphetamine, other types of opioid pills and even marijuana.

"Investments are needed across the continuum of care in order for Wisconsin to reduce the dangers of opioids and their impact on our communities," Paul Krupski, opioid initiatives director for the state health department, said in a statement after the agency held a dozen listening sessions early this year.

Addiction experts welcome the renewed push to curb the opioid overdose epidemic, but say the complex crisis has been neglected during the pandemic, making it even more difficult to overcome.

"Our services are completely overwhelmed by the need," said Skye Boughman, clinical supervisor for outpatient treatment at Arc Community Services in Madison, which provides addiction treatment for low-income women. "We know that people are dying on waiting lists."

Fentanyl "is in just about everything, but people think they're taking something else," said Dr. Ritu Bhatnagar, co-medical director of NewStart, UnityPoint Health-Meriter's addiction treatment program in Madison. Even a small amount of fentanyl "will suppress their respiratory drive and be lethal," she said.

Fentanyl and other synthetic opioids, involved in 86% of Wisconsin's opioid overdose deaths in 2020 and 90% in 2021, make addiction treatment more challenging, said Kevin Florek, CEO of Tellurian Behavioral Health in Monona. During detox, people using fentanyl tend to have worse symptoms, such as stomach pain, and comfort medications don't work as well, Florek said.

The presence of fentanyl in so many overdoses is not surprising. It is up to 50 times stronger than heroin and 100 times stronger than morphine.

"It's more addictive, and it's even more difficult to get through the withdrawal process," Florek said.

### Recovery coaches

Among numerous efforts to address opioid overdoses in the Madison area is a recovery coach program at Safe Communities Madison and Dane County. With more than \$500,000 in county funding this year, 18 recovery coaches support people who have survived overdoses or otherwise want help, with focuses on emergency room patients, pregnant women, people in or leaving jail and marginalized groups.

Since October 2020, peer support specialists from the non-profit have been embedded at UW Health clinics in DeForest and Monona, helping patients being treated by doctors for addiction, said Tanya Kraege, recovery coach manager.

Safe Communities also helps lead the Ending Deaths from Despair Coalition, announced in May 2021 by Dane County Executive Joe Parisi. The group aims to reduce suicides and overdoses through efforts such as directing

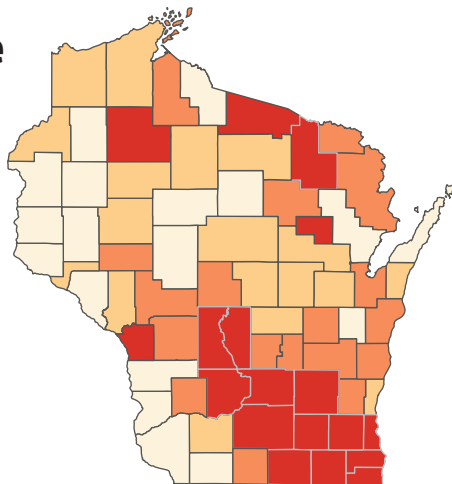
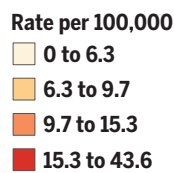


JOHN HART, STATE JOURNAL

Lorre Kolb, beside mementos of her daughter Lily and an urn containing her remains, said she was a "very complex person" who struggled with substance abuse and trying to feel loved.

### Opioid overdose death rates by county

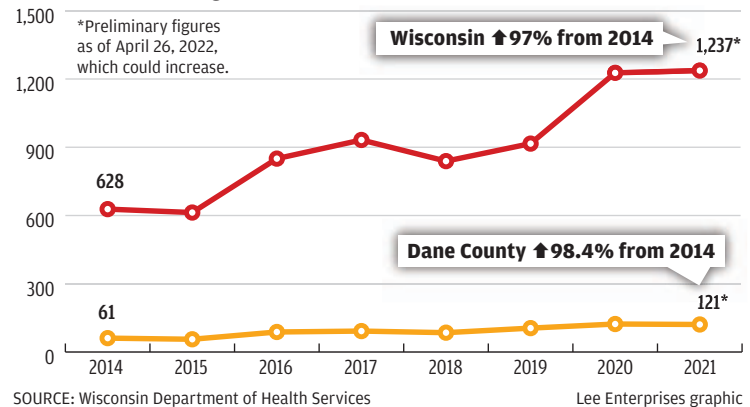
Fatal opioid overdose rates in 2018-2020 were higher near interstate corridors and in some northern counties.



Source: Wisconsin Department of Health Services maps4news.com/©HERE, Lee Enterprises graphic

### Opioid overdose deaths increasing

Wisconsin and Dane County had a record number of fatalities in 2020, with the state hitting another record in 2021.



A scarf made by Lily Kolb is among the artwork kept by her mother, Lorre. Lily died at 20 from an overdose involving fentanyl in April 2021.



JOHN HART PHOTOS, STATE JOURNAL

Left: Margaret Sweet said her son Aidan liked to tell jokes. "He was such a people pleaser," she said. Right: Lily Kolb attended East High School and Horizon High School, for students in recovery from substance abuse disorders.

people to the county's Behavioral Health Resource Center, which opened in November 2020.

Dane County had 1,173 emergency medical services calls for suspected opioid overdoses in 2020 and 1,200 last year, up from 966 in 2019, according to Eric Anderson, a data analyst with Dane County Emergency Management.

In response to the increase in opioid calls, Fitch-Rona EMS ambulances in May 2021 started carrying Narcan kits that include information on seeking treatment. Medics leave the kits with loved ones or roommates of people who overdose on opioids, in a program patterned after one in Baltimore, said Jeff Dostalek, deputy chief of the agency that serves Fitchburg and Verona.

"If we have to go back 15 times to the same house to give 15 boxes of Narcan, I don't care, because that's 16 times somebody might call and get help," Dostalek said.

### Test strips

Public Health Madison and Dane County provides clean syringes and collects used ones at two syringe services sites, formerly known as needle exchanges, to reduce the risk of infectious diseases among injection drug users.

Workers at the sites also hand out Narcan and fentanyl test strips to reduce the risk of overdoses, and encourage clients to seek treatment, said Julia Olsen, a supervisor for the city-county health department. The need is

increasing, she said.

"Things have gotten worse for (people with drug addiction) while we were all-hands-on-deck for the pandemic," Olsen said.

Fentanyl test strips didn't become legal in Wisconsin until March, when a new law clarified they aren't drug paraphernalia. Since 2019, however, Vivent Health has been distributing them at its 10 offices around the state, with approval.

The single-use strips of paper can be dipped into water containing a small sample from a pill, powder or injectable drug. Within minutes, lines on the strips show the presence or absence of fentanyl. The goal is to help drug users make informed decisions.

Vivent, a four-state organi-



JIM SWEET

Jim Sweet, a football coach at West High School, coached his son Aidan.

zation formerly known locally as the AIDS Resource Center of Wisconsin, handed out 46,000 of the strips last year, including nearly 4,000 from its Madison office. Among the 10% of recipients who reported results, nearly 60% said they used drugs with a friend — instead of alone — after drugs tested positive for fentanyl, which can help reduce overdoses. More than half said they used a smaller amount than planned. In Madison, 67% of drugs testing positive for fentanyl were identified as heroin, and 33% were cocaine.

Legalizing the strips is encouraging more people to use them, said Kristen Grimes, Vivent's director of prevention services.

"The people we serve do not want to die," Grimes said. "They want to use safer strategies to reduce their risk of an overdose."

### Treatment clinics

In September 2020, just as the first major peak of COVID-19 transmission began, Dr. Michael Repplinger opened Monarch Health, an addiction treatment clinic in Downtown Madison.

An emergency room doctor at UW Hospital who also works at ERs in Darlington and Portage, Repplinger said he was prescribing initial doses of the addiction treatment medication buprenorphine, or Suboxone, to ER patients who had overdosed to help them avoid withdrawal and cravings. But he said he couldn't find clinics to send them to for follow-up care.

So he opened Monarch, which treats about 120 patients a week with Suboxone or naltrexone, also known as Vivitrol, another addiction treatment medication. The clinic also provides counseling to help people become sober.

Nearly all of the patients are on Medicaid, many are jobless or homeless, and some are in and out of jail, Repplinger said.

Please see OPIOIDS, Page A10

FATAL COMBINATION | FENTANYL, PANDEMIC DRIVE OVERDOSE DEATHS



Sarah Caldwell, right, with father Jim Caldwell and stepmother Annette Czarnecki, during a trip to Washington, D.C.

# Grief and depression after losing parents

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As a teenager, Sarah Caldwell struggled with anxiety and depression, taking prescribed medications and “self-medicating” with alcohol, said her stepmother, Annette Czarnecki.



Caldwell

When Caldwell was 22, her mother died by suicide, which “led to a downward cascade and eventually increasing hard drug use,” said Czarnecki, of Madison.

In August 2019, Caldwell’s father, who was Czarnecki’s long-time partner, died from complications of cancer treatments. Caldwell did inpatient addiction treatment that fall, but grief from the death and isolation from the COVID-19 pandemic led to relapses, Czarnecki said.

Caldwell, 32, of Madison, died in July 2020 from an overdose involving the opioids heroin and codeine, the anesthetic ketamine and the antidepressants bupropion and venlafaxine, according to her death certificate.

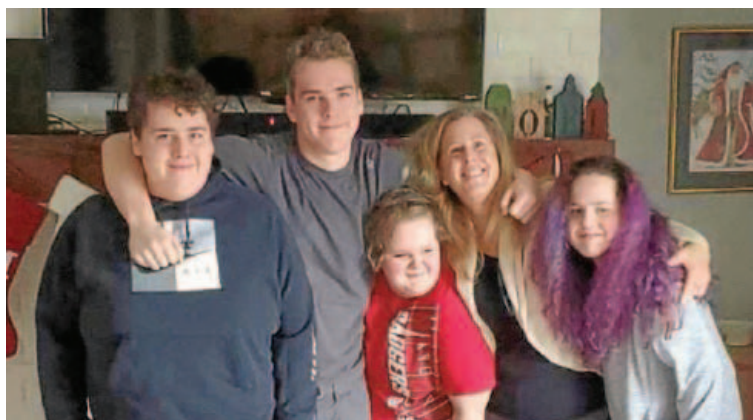
“She would say to me, ‘I know I need to stop using, but my brain just won’t let me,’” Czarnecki said.

A graduate of Middleton High School with an associate degree in graphic design from Madison Area Technical College, Caldwell struggled to find jobs following misdemeanor convictions in 2015 that Czarnecki said stemmed from a toxic relationship. Among her last jobs was being a parking attendant.

After her father’s death, she was distraught when a grief therapist refused to see her because she was using marijuana to ease the grief, Czarnecki said. “It’s a very painful, vicious cycle ... for anyone with depression who’s self-medicating,” Czarnecki said.

Such experiences led Czarnecki, a curriculum consultant for the Wisconsin Technical College System Foundation, to get involved with the Wisconsin Recovery Advocacy Project, which aims to improve policies and services for people with substance use disorders.

“I really had anger and a strong sense of injustice at the failure of our society to help people,” she said.



Abraham Bendorf, left, with siblings Sam and Moses, mother Jennifer and sister Esther on Christmas Day 2020.

# Drug user didn’t think he needed treatment

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As a child, Abraham Bendorf had migraine headaches and stomach pains. He was diagnosed with attention deficit disorder.

By high school, he smoked marijuana, which alleviated his symptoms, he told his parents.

“He convinced me that this might be OK,” said his mother, Jennifer Bendorf, a nurse at SSM Health St. Mary’s Hospital in Madison.

After graduating from West High School in 2019, Abraham moved in with friends in Madison. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit the next year, “he had a lot of free time on his hands,” his mother said. “I think that’s when more drugs started.”

On Feb. 14, 2021, his roommates found him dead in his room after the group partied the night before, his parents said. According to the medical examiner’s report, the 20-year-old died from an overdose involving fentanyl, the antihistamine diphenhydramine, or Benadryl, and mitragynine, or kratom, an herbal extract with opioid-like properties.

“He did not talk to me about any of that type of drug use,” said his



Bendorf

father, Mark Bendorf, who runs a painting business and was divorced from Jennifer in 2015.

In June 2020, Abraham lost his best friend to an opioid overdose, which seemed to accelerate his substance abuse, his parents said. In his last months, Abraham talked about moving away from his roommates because of their drug use, but he didn’t think he needed substance abuse treatment, Jennifer Bendorf said. “I don’t think he thought he was at that point yet,” she said.

His parents remember him as someone who was friendly to all kinds of people. “He really pulled kids in,” his father said.

Abraham said he had anxiety, but his mother was puzzled by that. “He was easy-going,” she said. “He didn’t seem to be anxious about anything.”

Mark Bendorf said parents and directions other than drugs. “Stop buying the stuff off the streets and let’s find some other answers to life’s problems,” he said.

# Mother of two tried detox, treatment

DAVID WAHLBERG  
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Auriel McNutt would sometimes use opioid pills with a boyfriend who died from an overdose, said her mother, Lora Hudson.

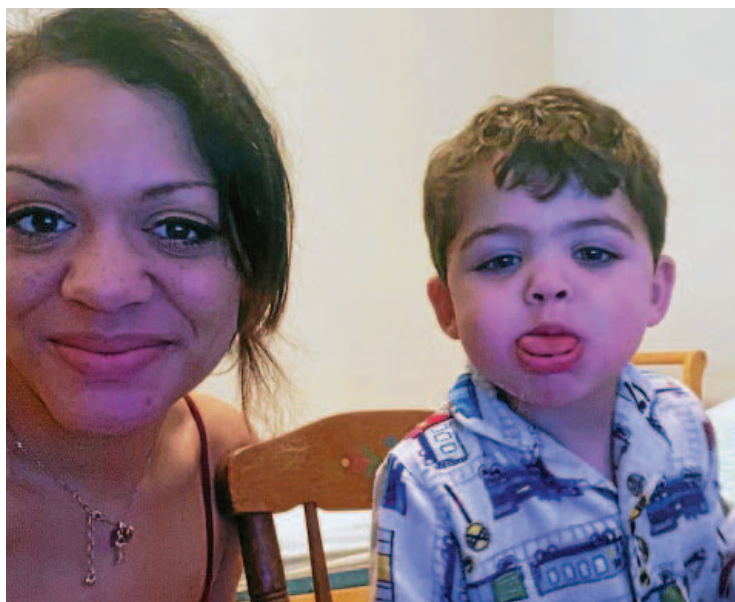
At inpatient addiction treatment, McNutt met another man with whom she eventually used heroin, Hudson said. He, too, died from an overdose.

On March 15, 2020, just as COVID-19 was shutting down most activity, McNutt gave birth to her second child. She had tried a hospital detox program during the pregnancy but used drugs after the delivery, unable to try rehab again because of pandemic restrictions, Hudson said.

McNutt

On June 28 of that year, seven weeks after being in jail for drug charges, McNutt died in Madison from acute fentanyl intoxication, according to her death certificate. She was 27.

“We were trying to get her inpatient (treatment),” said Hudson, a mental health and substance abuse therapist in Madison. “But you couldn’t get it. My patients couldn’t get it. There was nothing available except for video.” Hudson and the father of McNutt’s daughter, now 2, take



LORA HUDSON

Auriel McNutt with her son, now 4. After the birth of her second child in March 2020, she was unable to enter rehab because of pandemic restrictions.

care of the baby. McNutt’s first child, a 4-year-old boy, lives with his paternal grandparents.

After graduating from Craig High School in Janesville, McNutt for a year attended UW-Milwaukee, where Hudson believes McNutt started drinking a lot. Then McNutt and a friend traveled around the country for more than a year. Soon after her return, she was abusing opioids, Hudson said.

The overdose deaths of her two boyfriends should have served

as warning signs, but the emotional losses may have led her to use drugs more, said her father, James McNutt, of Milwaukee. “You can’t keep dodging the bullets,” he said.

Hudson, who has been in recovery from substance abuse for 20 years, said experiencing addiction herself and working with people who struggle with it didn’t soften the blow of losing a daughter to drugs.

“It was crippling,” she said. “She’s never coming back.”

# Anxiety derailed promising year

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After struggling with anxiety and cocaine abuse for years, Erin Kjellstrom in January 2020 finally found a therapist she liked, someone she thought could help her stay sober. A hair salon she opened the previous March was doing well.

“2020 is going to be the best year ever,” the 27-year-old from Middleton told her mom.

But in March 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic shut down most activity — including in-person therapy sessions and the salon — her anxiety “skyrocketed,” said her mother, Sharon Marshall.

On May 8, 2020, Kjellstrom contacted a man she knew and asked for drugs, her mother said. She died the next day from an overdose involving fentanyl, methamphetamine, marijuana and the sedative clonazepam, according to her death certificate.

“She threw caution to the wind that night and just wanted to get high, to escape the feelings,” Marshall said.

Patrick Menting, 34, of Stoughton, was convicted of fel-



SHARON MARSHALL

Sharon Marshall with daughter Erin Kjellstrom. After the pandemic disrupted her life, Kjellstrom “just wanted to get high, to escape the feelings,” Marshall said.

ony narcotics delivery in the incident. In October, he was sentenced to five years of probation, with one year to be served in jail as a condition of his probation.

Kjellstrom’s substance abuse seemed to start when she was a student at Oregon High School, Marshall said. She was treated with Xanax, a sedative, for anxiety and apparently started taking oxycodone, her mother said.

Kjellstrom later revealed that she had been raped during high school, which her mother be-

lieves exacerbated her anxiety and contributed to her substance abuse. In her early 20s, Kjellstrom frequently went to music festivals, where drugs were common, Marshall said.

The day before she died, mother and daughter made plans to take a walk the next day with Anya, a terrier, Chihuahua and Pomeranian mix Kjellstrom adopted from an animal rescue organization.

“She had no plans about dying that night at all,” Marshall said.

# He ‘didn’t show any signs,’ mother says

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As a teacher at La Follette High School in Madison, Jennifer Coakley participated in training sessions to identify signs of opioid addiction, such as moodiness, changes in sleep habits, a tendency to steal.

Her son Isaac Weires “didn’t show any signs at all,” she said.

On Dec. 1, 2020, while at La Follette, Coakley got a call from Weires’ dentist. He hadn’t shown up for his check-up. She called and texted her son, and got no answer.

She went to their home in Madison and found him dead on a recliner in his bedroom. Coakley and her husband, Curt Gruber, thought maybe Weires had succumbed to a hidden heart defect. “Drugs did not cross our mind at all, especially opioids,” Gruber said.

Weires, 19, who graduated from West High School in 2019, died from acute fentanyl intoxication, according to the medical examiner’s report. In hindsight, Coakley and Gruber believe he must have been buying opioid pills, some of



JENNIFER COAKLEY

Isaac Weires at his graduation from West High School in 2019 with his mother, Jennifer Coakley, and stepdad, Curt Gruber.

which were found beside him. Weires had taken medication for anxiety as a child but stopped by high school, when he started smoking marijuana, Coakley and Gruber said. A doctor prescribed opioid painkillers when Weires had kidney stones several months before he died. But he didn’t take many of the pills, saying he didn’t need them, the couple said. After his death, several of the pills remained in the bottle.

“We just thought he was smoking some weed,” Gruber said.

Weires worked at Metcalfe’s

Market and EatStreet. He had plans to attend a Masons meeting and go on a trip to Colorado the week after he died. “He was excited about upcoming things,” Coakley said.

To try to get a fresh start, Coakley and Gruber moved in February to Denver. Weires’ death “ruined the happiness in our lives,” Gruber said. “We’ve got to pick up the pieces.”

His message to other parents: “If this can happen to Isaac, it can happen to anybody,” he said. “It’s everywhere.”

# FATAL COMBINATION | FENTANYL, PANDEMIC DRIVE OVERDOSE DEATHS

## Opioids

From A8

“Trying to get them to prioritize addiction care above some of these other issues, rightfully so, is difficult,” he said. “But there’s clearly a need.”

Dr. Christopher Harkin also sees growing demand at Addiction Services and Pharmacotherapy, which he and another doctor opened on Madison’s South Side in 2018. It’s one of four methadone clinics in the city and 24 in Wisconsin. They mostly provide methadone, the first medication approved for addiction treatment, along with counseling.

Methadone clinics, also called opioid treatment programs, are tightly regulated, which includes a limit of 50 patients per counselor. The cap will be raised to 55 in October, but Harkin said he wishes it would go even higher so he could enroll more patients.

“The biggest issue is access,” he said.

## Restoring Roots

In April, the Dane County Sheriff’s Office started letting jail inmates continue taking buprenorphine if they were already on it. The jail had already provided Vivitrol injections for inmates who had gone through withdrawal. Sheriff Kalvin Barrett said he wants to expand the buprenorphine program to inmates with addiction who haven’t started the medication once a long-delayed jail expansion and

renovation is done.

Many addiction patients try inpatient treatment, or rehab, which typically lasts 28 days, but that’s not long enough for some people, said Julia Schwab, president of Restoring Roots in Middleton. The nonprofit aims to build a 50-unit recovery housing complex in the Madison area to provide longer-term support, including for people leaving inpatient treatment.

Dane County has several sober living houses, including four places listed on a new state registry, which operate on a smaller scale than what Restoring Roots envisions. With \$500,000 in last year’s county budget, the nonprofit aims to invest \$13 million to \$15 million to set up a staffed facility to serve up to 70 clients at a time, Schwab said.

“A person suffering with addiction needs time for the brain to heal,” said Charles Tubbs, a board member of Restoring Roots, director of Dane County Emergency Management and former chief of the Wisconsin State Capitol Police. “They need love, understanding and compassion, as well as people holding them accountable.”

Tubbs has personal insight on the topic. He lost his son, Charles Jr., also known as CJ, of Madison, to an overdose of fentanyl and marijuana in May 2019. Like many people wrestling with addiction, CJ, 32, was frequently in jail and didn’t get treatment soon enough, his father said.

“We all know that jail is not going to solve this problem,” Tubbs said.

## A day too late



Lily Kolb

Lorre Kolb remembers when her teenage daughter, Lily, told her she had overdosed on heroin and been revived by Narcan. Soon, Lily showed Kolb how to use Narcan so she could rescue her if she overdosed again.

“It was really a kick in the gut,” said Kolb, who retired last year as a public information specialist for UW-Extension. “It’s not a world I ever thought I would live in.”

In March 2021, Lily, who had been living in a car with her boyfriend, moved back in with Kolb in Madison. On that March 29, a Monday, she set up an appointment with her doctor to start addiction treatment that Friday. But the day before the appointment, she died from an overdose of meth and fentanyl, according to her death certificate.

Lily, 20, had given birth to a son the year before. The boy is in foster care.

Kolb wonders if the outcome might have been different if Lily could have started treatment the day she called. “We need places where, when someone says they want to try to get sober, we can take them there right then,” she said.

Lily started using marijuana around eighth grade and likely tried other drugs before turning to heroin about a year before she died, Kolb said. A painter who wanted to

be a tattoo artist, Lily was loving but often felt unlovable, her mom said.

“She would make you prove every day that you loved her,” she said.

Kolb adopted Lily at age 5 after taking her in through foster care at age 3. Her biological parents struggled with substance abuse.

Despite the challenges, Kolb cherishes the time they had together. “She was such a gift,” she said.

## Turning to pills

Aidan Sweet started using marijuana in middle school and later bought Percocet, or oxycodone, pills on the street, his parents said.

His father, who coached Aidan and other students in football at West, points to the August 2019 homicide of Shay Watson in Fitchburg as a trigger for opioid abuse in Aidan and others. Myjee T. Sanders, who was 15 at the time he shot and killed the 17-year-old Watson during a marijuana robbery, was sentenced last year to 20 years in prison.

The death of Watson, who played football at Verona High School, hit friends around the Madison area hard, said Jim Sweet, a UW-Madison history professor. “Their immediate move was to go to pills,” he said.

After his parents divorced in 2018, Aidan lived with his mother, Margaret Sweet, a Delta Air Lines customer service representative at the Dane County Regional Airport. In the fall of 2019, when she found

marijuana in Aidan’s car, she took his car away and cut off his phone, hoping the moves would deter substance use.

The family, including Aidan’s older sister, went to group therapy, which helped address Aidan’s anxiety and depression, his parents said. But as 2020 began, his substance abuse increased, his father said. By the time the Sweets believed Aidan needed inpatient treatment, they said COVID-19 had shut that option down.

Online sessions seemed to help. But in June 2020, Margaret found empty Percocet packets on the floor of Aidan’s bedroom. He said they helped him sleep.

They found a new therapist whom Aidan seemed to like. One day in August, however, he didn’t show up for an appointment. The next morning, his mother found him slumped over on his bed, dead from an overdose of fentanyl and marijuana, according to his death certificate.

Margaret Sweet, originally from South Africa, started the Aidan Sweet Isintu Foundation, incorporating the Zulu word for “humanity.” The nonprofit helps parents and children who struggle with substance abuse, offering free rides to treatment.

She said people need to talk more about substance abuse, especially with fentanyl killing so many people like her son.

“People are so afraid to talk about it because of the stigma,” she said. “But if you talk about it, you could save someone’s life.”

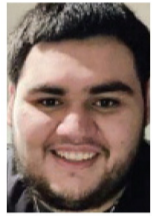
# Son’s death prompts mom to help plan rally

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After Steven Welnetz survived a drug overdose in July, his mother, Iris Guzman-Garcia, saw him nodding off from drugs a few times.

She would try to get him to go to substance abuse treatment. He would say he was fine. “I’m going to stop,” he would say.

On Nov. 6, when Guzman-Garcia went to wake up Welnetz, the 21-year-old was dead from an overdose involving fentanyl, the tranquilizer xylazine and the sedative alprazolam, or Xa-



Welnetz

nax, according to his death certificate. The death has prompted Guzman-Garcia to help organize a rally, scheduled for June 3 outside the state Capitol, through a group called Association of People Against Lethal Drugs. “I still have two high school boys at home,” she said. “I don’t want to lose another child.”

Welnetz, who attended La Follette High School, spent

time “on the streets,” his mother said. He was in and out of jail.

“Every time Steven was using, he would get himself into something,” Guzman-Garcia said.

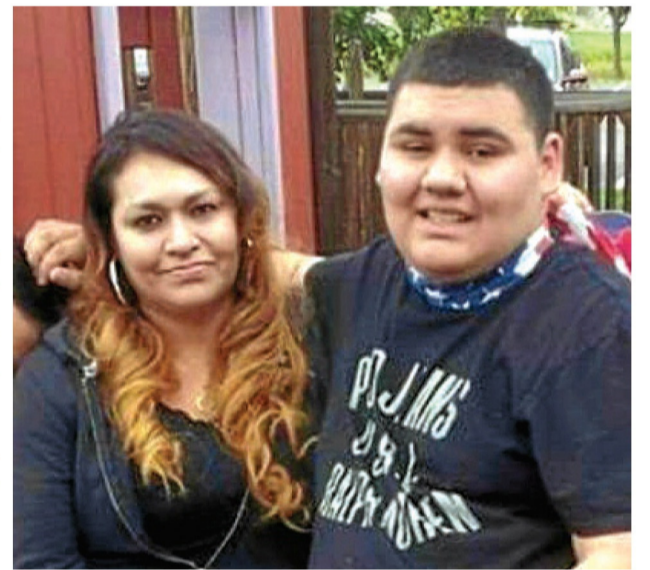
He started using marijuana while in middle school and turned to Xanax in high school, she said. Later, he bought Percocet, or oxycodone, pills. His drug abuse became worse in January 2020, after Welnetz was in the room when his best friend died from an overdose, Guzman-Garcia said.

Welnetz received a few injections of naltrexone,

or Vivitrol, an addiction treatment medication. But he didn’t get the intensive treatment he needed, his mother said.

As a single mom, she worked multiple jobs while raising her boys. For the past five years, she has had steady work as a lab technician at Future Foam in Middleton. Shortly before Welnetz died, she moved from a crowded house in Sun Prairie to a quieter place on Madison’s West Side.

“When I was finally able to give my kids everything they needed, I lost my son,” she said.



IRIS GUZMAN-GARCIA  
Iris Guzman-Garcia with her son, Steven Welnetz, when he was about 14.

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