

How a little-known drug shocked Alberta, killed hundreds and became 2015's deadliest story

When he turned seven, Tristan Parkes decided he would spend his birthday money buying groceries for the local food bank. The gesture came out of the blue for his parents, but his mom drove him to the grocery store and let him spend half, thinking the first grader may want to keep the remaining \$75.

The son of a power engineer and a stay-at-home mom, Tristan had deep blue eyes and blond hair, then trimmed down to a buzz cut. He was goofy with a knack for deadpan humour. And he was timid. In the first grade, he continued riding his bicycle with training wheels because he was afraid of falling off.

Born in the mountain town of Grand Cache northwest of Jasper, Tristan grew up in three communities as his father kept the family moving in search of work. In Kitimat, B.C., Tristan was known among old-time fishermen on the local river as the “barefoot fisherman,” because he’d kick off his rubber boots and wade knee-deep into the water to cast his line.

The boy who had been nervous to play on a slide at the age of three would grow up to live a perilous lifestyle, eventually becoming addicted to dangerous drugs.

During his teenage years in Fort McMurray, his parents began to see signs of trouble. He was angry. He had problems at school. He fell into bad crowds. His mother suspects it all started when he was picked on and bullied, and felt authority figures — teachers and principals — did little to stop it.

Tristan’s parents panicked when he stole jewelry from home to buy cocaine at the age of 15, and placed him under court-ordered detox. But things seemed manageable back then. After he moved to Calgary two years later, in July, 2013, he landed a well-paying construction job with the potential of an apprenticeship.

The young man, once worshipped by his younger sister and brother, began to slip away when he got into fentanyl. He spent six months on the street, later telling his mom, “You don’t even want to know what I did.” He stole family heirlooms. He pawned his mother’s engagement ring. He withdrew \$6,000 from his mom’s bank account by forging cheques. He also convinced his parents to pay off a \$10,000 drug debt and he called them to bail him out of jail.

In September, Tristan’s body was discovered in the janitor’s closet of an underground parkade, dead from what his parents believe was a fentanyl overdose.

He was 19.

His body may have been there, all alone, for days. His mother keeps his ashes in an urn on her bedside table, so he will never be alone again.

“It’s like watching a child die from a disease that slowly takes them,” said Liam Parkes, Tristan’s father.

“You watch them slowly deteriorate as a person for a long time. Love’s always there, but you lose trust, and hope slowly starts to diminish. And it’s sad when it ends; they don’t come out of it. Unfortunately, it’s a story that many people are seeing and hearing. It’s not one of a few; it’s one of many.

“It’s more like an epidemic.”

Fentanyl emerged from obscurity less than three years ago to become the single-largest public health threat in Alberta. Up to 100 times more potent than morphine, the drug is on track to become among the leading causes of death in Alberta this year. Both the premier and Calgary's mayor are now warning about the severity and scope of the crisis.

This meteoric rise caught senior health officials by surprise, without an effective strategy to reduce the harm of abuse and prevent deaths at the outset. But critics say these officials should have been far more prepared.

The crisis traces back to March 2012, when the notorious prescribed painkiller OxyContin was pulled from pharmacy shelves in the face of mounting public outcry over widespread abuse, addiction and crime to feed that dependency. The crushable pills were replaced by a tamper-resistant painkiller called OxyNeo, designed to discourage misuse.

Read more at: <http://calgaryherald.com/news/local-news/how-fentanyl-shocked-alberta>

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