



A lifetime of struggle

Elmhurst couple work to bring local awareness to fetal alcohol syndrome

By Jim Harris
Staff writer

For more than 14 years, doctors and psychologists believed Walt Teichen's adopted son, Kevin, had an attention deficit disorder.

Kevin showed many of the signs of ADD: erratic behavior, and a difficulty learning and concentrating. Doctors gave him medication to treat the condition since his diagnosis at age 6, and the medications seemed to work to control some of his more severe impulse control problems, his father said.

While attending school as a special education student, Kevin had troubles learning and retaining his lessons, but didn't often act out.

"Growing up for him wasn't easy, but he wasn't too difficult (to raise) because he had a structured day going to school," said Walt Teichen, an Elmhurst resident. "When he came home, he didn't do a lot, and had no real hobbies or interests, but he didn't necessarily get into trouble."

After Kevin graduated school and that structure no longer existed, things changed. Teichen's wife, Kathy, soon began to think there was more to their son's behavior than just ADD.

"He started making bad decisions, bouncing checks from my account, hanging out with (drug) addicts," Walt Teichen said. "With the psychiatrists and psychologists, he would pretty much run the show, and there was nothing they could do; the medications didn't control his overall problems, and therapy didn't help him."

In 2001, when Kevin was 20, the Teichens received disturbing news after admitting him to Northwestern Memorial Hospital for a weeklong analysis. Kathy Teichen's intuitions proved correct: Kevin did not merely have ADD.

"A (hospital) psychologist told us Kevin had fetal alcohol syndrome, which we had never heard of," Walt Teichen said. "(The psychologist) told us Kevin would be arrested soon, and would prob-



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Staff photo by Sidney Thoms

Kathy and Walt Teichen of Elmhurst began a nonprofit foundation in 2003 to raise awareness of fetal alcohol syndrome after their adopted son, Kevin, was diagnosed with it after years of being told he suffered from attention deficit disorder.

ably be arrested many more times in his life, and end up in a group home."

One week after his parents received the news, Kevin was arrested for shoplifting.

'Not an ideal setting'

Fetal alcohol syndrome occurs when a birth mother drinks alcohol while carrying a child. Alcohol is proven to have detrimental effects on the physical and mental development of an unborn child, according to the National Organization on Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, based in Washington, D.C.

After Kevin's diagnosis, his parents tried several times to get him into a program to assist with his disability, to no avail.

"We tried sending him to camps, but they didn't know how to deal with him," Teichen said.

Two more arrests — a December 2002 felony burglary charge and a 2004 credit card fraud complaint — followed, with Kevin being convicted of both charges as well as the earlier shoplifting arrest. He is on probation until next June and lives in a group home near Joliet run by

Trinity Services, a nonprofit social service organization based in Lockport.

Teichen attributed his son's legal problems to his difficulty to make quick decisions and a vulnerability to outside negative influences, including others pressuring him into criminal behavior.

While Teichen said Kevin, now 24, is faring better in the structure of the group home, the agency works with people with many emotional or mental disabilities, and no services exist to specifically address Kevin's condition.

"He's not in an ideal setting, but it's better than jail," he added. "He needs to be with other people with FAS and be treated specifically for it, but he's living with people who are schizophrenic, bipolar or have other mental (disabilities)."

Teichen and his wife formed a nonprofit charity in 2003 to address the lack of options for his son and other children or adults with FAS. The organization, Know Him Ministries, is a nondenominational organization that ultimately seeks to raise enough funds to found and staff a group home to specifically treat the condition.

Teichen's group plans to partner with

Trinity Services to form the home near Kevin's home in Joliet, he said.

Falling through the cracks

Naz Dayanand, legal advocacy and program director for the National Organization on Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, said the condition encompasses a range of physical and mental symptoms, and can be difficult to diagnose.

"The issue is such that whatever disability it is these children suffer from depends on the amount of alcohol intake their mother had or how much they've been affected by prenatal alcohol exposure," he said.

"There are several different disabilities and behavioral patterns, so it is difficult to find services because they seem normal and they look normal and it's difficult to use indicators," Dayanand said.

Some children and adults with the disability have facial indicators such as an elongated ridge between the upper lip and nose, small eyes or a short upper nose. However, others have no facial deformities, Dayanand said.

SYNDROME

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The condition's emotional and mental symptoms are often confused with conditions such as ADD or obsessive compulsive disorder, which often occur as secondary conditions for those with FAS.

"Many parents at first don't know what's wrong with their child, and (FAS) is not often spoken about by pediatricians or doctors," he added. "In most cases, these kids are told they have ADD or OCD or autism, so parents are not able to give them proper attention or treatment."

Dr. Shahida Tanveer, a pediatrician for Elmhurst Memorial Healthcare, said the condition can be difficult to diagnose or predict, as many mothers may not see a risk in casual alcohol use.

Tanveer advises expectant mothers to not consume alcohol at all at any point in their pregnancy, as even a small amount could trigger future problems.

Teichen said one way to distinguish between OCD, ADD and fetal alcohol syndrome is the child's social skills.

"If a child has ADD but plays baseball or has friends, there's probably a 99 percent chance he or she do not have fetal alcohol syndrome," he added.

Only one group home for those with the disability exists in the country, and many states, including Illinois, do not fund agencies or programs to deal with FAS. Most of those affected have IQs slightly above 65, the legal maximum for a person to be considered developmentally disabled in Illinois, Teichen said.

Structured lifestyles such as group homes are only one way to treat a person with the condition, Dayanand said.

"The treatment depends on the child

or adult; some of them have been able to manage maintaining a very structured lifestyle where everything goes according to a plan they understand very well. But there is not one particular treatment or medication that can be prescribed," he added. "Because the children are very different from each other despite having the same condition, it is difficult to have one common program."

Early diagnosis is key to preventing future problems in adulthood, Tanveer said.

If diagnosed early enough, children with FAS could be placed into special education programs, counseling, vocational programs and other services that could help their future development, she added.

Ultimately, Teichen said he is looking to increase awareness of FAS and its symptoms to help other parents who may be just as shocked as he or his wife were to learn their child has the disability.

"This is a very difficult disability to understand, to say the least, and unfortunately very few people seem to know about it," he added. "The good news, at least, is it's 100 percent preventable: if women do not drink (alcohol) during pregnancy or while they're trying to conceive, it won't happen."

For more information about Teichen's efforts to establish a group home to serve those with fetal alcohol syndrome, call him at (630) 418-3300 or e-mail walt@knowhimministry.com.

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Addison man found dead near Fullerton School

A man was found dead in a field near Fullerton School in Addison Dec. 7, and the DuPage County coroner's office has scheduled an autopsy to determine the cause of death.

Ryszaro Sitarz, 41, 529 Michigan Court, Addison, was found face down laying in a field at about 8:45 a.m. on school grounds at 400 E. Fullerton Ave., said Addison Police Department spokesman Larry Stoll.

"There were no signs of foul play," said Stoll, adding police do not believe the victim was murdered. "He was basically found frozen to the ground."

Stoll said police notified the victim's family. He also said he was not aware that any schoolchildren witnessed the body laying in the field.

Fullerton School Principal Mary Ellen Reeves was not available for comment; however, a school staffer who asked not to be identified confirmed there was no disruption to the school day at Fullerton.

"We didn't even talk with the children about it because none of them actually saw what happened," the school employee said. "There was no disruption whatsoever."

Stoll said a passing motorist who pulled into the school parking lot to make a cell phone call spotted the body and called police.

The DuPage County coroner's office said officials would conduct an autopsy Dec. 9 to determine the cause of death.

Police and Fire Elmhurst

Attempted home invasion

A resident in the 500 block of Michigan Street told police he heard a man pounding on his door and then run to his car and drive away after the resident went to the door at about 11:45 a.m. Dec. 5, according to police reports. The man kicked a hole in the door before leaving, causing \$500 in damage, police said.

Vehicle burglary

A dashboard gauge valued at \$1,100 was reported stolen from a Jeep Cherokee

parked in the sales lot of Larry Roesch Chrysler Jeep, 260 W. Grand Ave., between 8 p.m. Dec. 2 and 4:30 p.m. Dec. 5, according to police reports.

A bank bag containing \$7,500 was reported stolen from a 1999 Toyota Corolla parked in the 100 block of Robert Palmer Drive at about 3 p.m. Dec. 6, according to police reports.

A portable digital music player and a pair of sunglasses valued at a total \$280 were reported stolen from a 1998 Chevrolet Prism parked outside First Baptist Church, 343 S. York Road, between 7:30 and 10:30 p.m. Dec. 7, according to police reports.

Burglary

Several items of jewelry valued at a total \$2,500 were reported stolen from the bedroom dresser of a home in the 400 block of Emery Lane between Nov. 14 and Dec. 6, according to police reports.

Damage to property

The driver's side panel of a car parked in the 100 block of Larch Avenue was reported damaged between 9 p.m. Dec. 1 and 1:30 a.m. Dec. 2, according to police reports. Damages were estimated at \$700, police said.

Lombard

Burglary

Three bank deposit bags containing a total of \$7,681 were reported stolen from the front seat of an unlocked vehicle as its driver was outside of the car pumping gas at a station in the 500 block of West North Avenue at about 6 p.m. Dec. 5, police said. While pumping gas, the victim said a man repeatedly asked him for directions while he believes another person stole the money.

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