

Mother realizes addiction 'not worth losing your kids'

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Illinois' meth epidemic has filled county jails and state prisons.

It's left behind physical and emotional scars and unknown chronic health issues. Families have been ripped apart and scattered across the state.

And while it's difficult to understand why anyone would get involved with such a dangerous drug, with such devastating and far-reaching effects, it's happening every day - right in our back yard in central Illinois.

"Even good people make bad mistakes," Denise Sturm said, speaking recently from a white concrete block and glass room at Dwight Correctional Center, where she is serving an eight-year sentence for sale and manufacture of meth,

and endangering the lives of her two children.

Sturm has admitted to her crimes, accepted her punishment and wants to put her life - and eventually her family - back together.

Telling her story is just one step.

Seven years ago, when methamphetamine manufacturing started to spread in Illinois, a relative introduced the "new" drug to Denise and her husband, Eldon, better known as John, at their Bradford home.

Denise, now 34, had heard of the white powdery drug she was told to snort like cocaine. "I didn't do drugs before this at all," she insisted, adding her only prior criminal offenses were as a teen for consumption of alcohol by a minor and fighting with her cousin.

The couple, married now for more than 16 years, agreed to try "a few lines." The drug gave them energy and caused them to talk a lot. Denise stayed awake for the next three or four days.

"I was addicted," she said.

For the next five years, Denise and her husband bought the drug from one of John's relatives. They eventually started selling the drug for a local manufacturer.

Dressed in hospital-type attire and slightly nervous, Denise struggles to keep her emotions together while

METH: its littlest VICTIMS

It has been seven years since methamphetamine has taken a stronghold in Illinois, but researchers are just beginning to grasp the physical, psychological and emotional toll the drug will have on children for years to come. The Journal Star examines the effect meth has had on our children and what officials are now doing to step up protection of these innocent victims.

talking about the experience.

She attempted to live a "normal" life and care for her children, a girl now 14 and a boy now 16, while continuing to feed her addiction.

"It was hard," she said, adding she doesn't even have a picture of her kids in her prison room.

For most of their married life, John worked and Denise remained at home caring for the children. They were a close family, always keeping in touch with relatives and Denise's parents until the last few years.

When John got laid off, Denise went back to work as a certified nurse's aide. She would go to work in the morning, then come home and snort meth in the bathroom or outside. Never in front of the children, she insisted. John stayed home, working on and off selling cars.

Then someone taught John and Denise how to make meth. For \$85 they could make an ounce of meth and sell it for \$2,800. It took only about an hour.

"The money will get you, too," she said. The stress began to consume Denise and her family. Her husband, now 39, started carrying a gun.

"It was getting stressful in the end. I didn't know if we were going to get caught, trying to find the stuff to make it and always worrying about the kids," she said.

The end

"I did say a couple of times, 'What's wrong with you?'" said Denise's mother, who now cares for the children. "I thought they were going uptown and drinking too much. And I didn't think the kids had enough supervision. And we didn't know why."

The Sturms' daughter, a mirror image of her mother, said she also had no idea her parents were involved in drugs. The shy, soft-spoken 14-year-old with tendrils of sandy blond hair framing her face shrugs off most questions.

She did, however, sense last year that something was deeply wrong.

In the end, Denise and John were using meth every day.

"We weren't home as much. It got so stressful. We were fighting all the time," Denise said. "I didn't want to do it anymore."

The children were being left home alone, sometimes for an entire day and night. Denise knew her sister who lived nearby had stepped up to keep an eye on the kids.

Chemicals were being stored in the barn, the drug and

pills were in the house. Before law enforcement officials raided the couple's home, a supplier dropped off a tank of anhydrous ammonia in the family garage. Denise said she worried about the children, but couldn't, because of her addiction to the drug, see the imminent danger they faced.

"We did wrong. We endangered ourselves, our kids and even the people we sold it to," Denise said. "But you don't think about that."

Police raided the Sturms' Bradford home last October. John had about 5,000 pills, and federal drug agents found finished meth and the anhydrous in the garage. The children were home at the time of the raid. Police took John immediately into custody. Despite being able to make \$2,800 per an ounce of meth, no money was found in the house. Denise had \$25 in her purse.

John tried to take all the blame, Denise said, adding she and the children stayed with her mother for a few days before she eventually turned herself in.

It didn't take long for the children to start asking questions. They were angry and had every right to be, Denise said.

After pleading guilty to charges in Stark and Henry counties, John was sentenced to 10 years in prison and Denise to eight years. The hearing took place in front of a crowd of weeping family members. With time off for good behavior, both of their sentences could be reduced by about half.

"I'm glad it's over, and I'm going to get all the help I can get," Denise said.

Starting over

The children continue to seek counseling and have forgiven their parents. Denise speaks to them by telephone at least once a week.

They started a new school last year and are living in a new town. They're adjusting.

John remains in custody in Danville Correctional Center and hasn't spoken with the children recently. Denise is expected to transfer to Lincoln Correctional Center soon, and with permission of the wardens, the couple can exchange letters.

"The hardest part of all this is being away from my children," Denise said, choking through tears. "I didn't know how addictive it was or how dangerous it was, for that matter.

"It'll destroy your life and everything around you."

Denise and John plan to seek drug treatment while in prison. While Denise is clean now, she admits if anyone offered her the drug, she couldn't say no right now.

There's still work to be done, for Denise and for law enforcement.

Denise said at least 10 other people in Bradford alone are making meth, with another near-dozen in Wyoming and more in Toulon. Yet state police show very little meth activity in Stark County.

"There are little kids that are not being cared for," Denise said. "My friend blew up his shed." Still another friend caught the family basement on fire making the drug while two young children were in the home, she said.

"The laws are right, it does endanger your children," Denise said. "Someone needs to step up for the children."

Anyone can fall victim to meth, she said. They won't realize they need help. Denise wishes someone would have pushed a little harder to find out what was going on in their family.

"I'm just glad it's over," Denise said. "Because, like I said, it's not worth it in the end. It's not worth losing your kids ... or the rest of your family.

The next few years won't be easy. Denise is not expected to be released until 2007.

Both children will continue to grow up without their parents and eventually, even at a new school, in a new town, someone will realize who they are. Their grandmother struggles on less than \$800 in Social Security to keep a roof over their heads and food on the table.

She couldn't even afford to purchase all of their school supplies. The 61-year-old widow is frantically searching for assistance but has found little.

"It's the pits," she said plainly. "I just think sure to God there should be some help somewhere."

Still, the woman worries about her daughter and her ability to find a job and support the family after her release from prison. She worries about the children and harps on them about the dangers of drugs.

But, in the end, she believes they'll pull through.

"I thank God my mom was there," Denise said with an obvious indebtedness. "My kids have forgiven us. John knows I'll be there when he gets out. We're going to make the most from a bad situation and move on the best way we can."