



FOOD: Where to find the best vegetarian burgers in Baton Rouge, p. 9

BASEBALL: Ibarra adjusting to new position in first year at LSU, p. 5

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A Daily Reveille
Exclusive:

Sophomore's death illuminates growing drug abuse problems in Baton Rouge community

Prescription drug abuse a prevalent issue in BR

Emily Herrington
Managing Editor

Luke Reisinger, a 19-year-old undeclared University sophomore, died Feb. 4 after taking a combination of Suboxone, alcohol and possibly Xanax.

Reisinger's untimely death shook his unsuspecting friends and family members, but it calls attention to a prevalent issue affecting Baton Rouge and the rest of the nation: prescription drug abuse.

The combination of the three substances Reisinger took — an

Commonly used prescription drugs:

· Opioid: a synthetic narcotic with opiate-like effects but not derived from opium.

· Opiate: any drug derived from opium. It has sedative and pain relieving effects.

· Benzodiazepine: a class of drugs with antianxiety, muscle relaxing, hypnotic sedative effects.

investigations for the East Baton Rouge Parish Coroner's Office, explained. No diaphragm movement means no breathing.

According to data from the coroner's office, 27 deaths in 2012 in East Baton Rouge Parish were due to overdose. While this includes all drugs such as heroin and other substances, Evans said prescription drugs are to blame for the vast



photo courtesy of the REISINGER FAMILY

Luke Reisinger, an undeclared LSU sophomore, poses for a family photo outside of his home in Conyers, Ga. Reisinger died of a drug overdose Feb. 4.

majority. Of those 27, eight weren't yet 30 years old.

Mary Jackson, clinical supervisor for the Baton Rouge Area Alcohol and Drug Center, sang a tune similar to Evans'. The average age of clients coming in is 23, and most are there for a detox from opiates or a combination of pain pills, she said.

"We're seeing a lot of young people come in," Jackson said. "We didn't use to see this 13 years ago."

The vast majority of the cases Evans said he sees sound a lot like Reisinger —

18- to 29-year-olds combining an opiate such as codeine or Lortab, a benzodiazepine like Xanax or Valium, and alcohol. This is appealing because the opiate mixed with a benzodiazepine produces a better high, Evans said.

"Opiate is the new crack cocaine. It's very prevalent," Jackson said.

Jackson said this is a relatively new trend, with an audience decreasing in age. The center's clients are about evenly divided between

Family sees lesson in Reisinger's death

story by CLAYTON CROCKETT • NEWS EDITOR

Luke Reisinger had every reason to move from Georgia to Louisiana. The undeclared LSU sophomore loved anything outdoors — fishing, hunting, working on his farm — and he loved to celebrate with a fervor reflective of a good day's work. He carried an air of invincibility that assured all around him nothing wrong would happen with the 6-foot-tall Reisinger at the helm.

Reisinger died Feb. 4 from a mixture of alcohol and prescription medications including Suboxone and potentially Xanax, which he consumed while partying in the days before. Two weeks later, his father, Michael Reisinger, reached out to The Daily Reveille from Reisinger's hometown of Conyers, Ga., to tell the story of his oldest son.

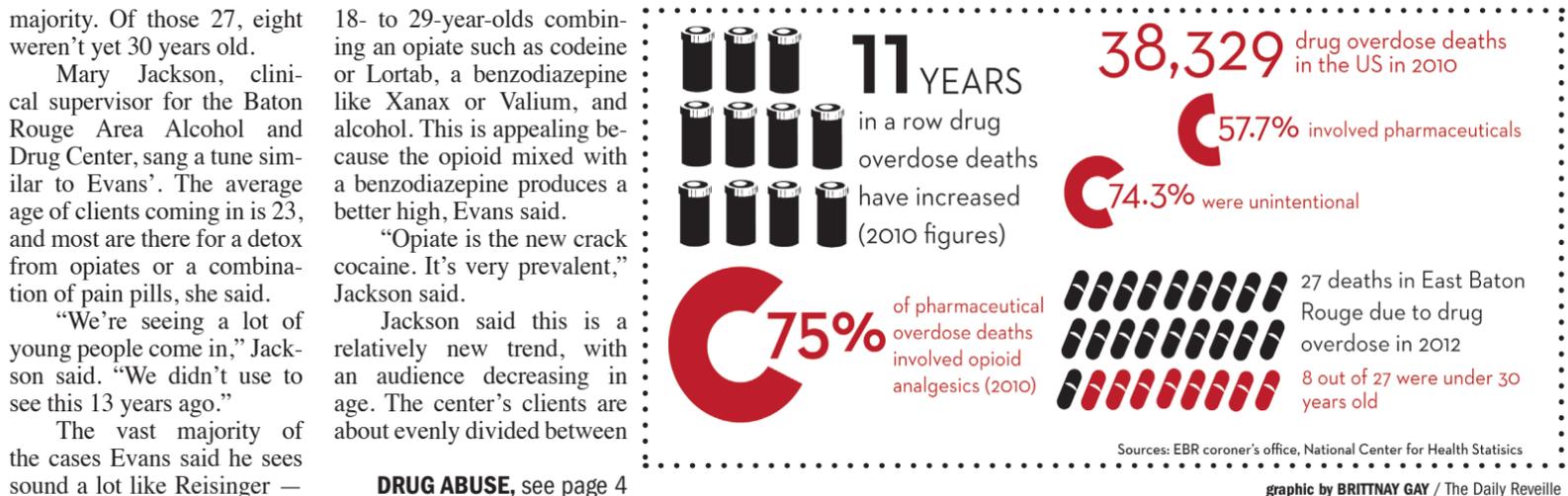
And it's a story almost any student could relate to:

Reisinger had a younger brother and two sisters; he loved hunting, fishing and basketball; he made above-average grades in high school, though he could have tried harder; he loved playing Super Smash Bros.

and Halo online with his friends back home; and although his friends say he wasn't necessarily the wildest of them all, Reisinger loved to party and sought a good time with a confident optimism.

"He was a bit of a redneck, so it was a big adventure to go to Louisiana," Reisinger's father joked, recalling the trip to LSU orientation with his son — particularly the part where they got lost enjoying themselves in New Orleans. "He had an adventurous side. He liked the athletics there [at LSU], but he also liked the people he met there."

REISINGER, see page 4



DRUG ABUSE, see page 4

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REISINGER, from page 1

The Reisingers received a call at 5:30 a.m. from the Baton Rouge Police Department the Monday after the Super Bowl, notifying them that Reisinger had died. It is not known whether he died Sunday night or Monday morning. Reisinger had partied Saturday night until 9 a.m. on Super Bowl Sunday, when he went to sleep. A notoriously hard sleeper, Reisinger did not wake up for the game and could not be awoken the next morning.

Reisinger had borrowed some money from his parents Saturday night, which wasn't unusual for him, and bought some beer. According to investigators, Reisinger's friends said he had taken Suboxone and maybe some Xanax.

"His best friend checked on him after midnight to see if he was OK, and he had passed away," Michael Reisinger said. "It affects all people differently — no person can say what one person's amount is that's

going to cause something like this."

Around 8 a.m., Reisinger made his last phone call, dialing his high school sweetheart Kristin Rodgers, a sophomore at Cape Fear Community College in North Carolina.

"It's kind of a hard relationship to describe — he always called me his future wife. I always played hard to get. I just liked to mess with him," Rodgers laughed. "He was my best friend, and he probably would've been my boyfriend if I hadn't played so hard to get."

Rodgers said Reisinger would joke that one day they would get married, buy a yacht and move to Australia.

"He says stuff like that, but he totally could've made it happen," she said with a laugh.

Rodgers said Reisinger often texted her late at night, and sometimes while intoxicated, though such phone calls are not out of the ordinary for most students.

Even in his "altered" state, Rodgers said Reisinger expressed

concerns for his former high school teacher and mentor Darrell Huckaby's struggle with cancer when he called that Sunday morning.

"Growing up with him in high school, stuff like this isn't considered that weird. I got phone calls all the time where people were altered and didn't think to worry all the time," she said. "No one makes a big deal out of it. ... Stuff like this is regular; It happens all the time, and he wasn't even the wildest of the people we went to high school with."

Reisinger's friends and the connections he made with them had special places in the hearts of his parents.

"I'd hoped he would marry her some day," his father said about Rodgers.

Reisinger was also frequently in contact with his best friend Cody Dailey, a sophomore at the University of Georgia.

"We hung out a lot; we called each other when we woke up pretty much every day," Dailey said. "He

was always going to have a good time no matter what he was doing — always had a big smile on his face."

Dailey recalled days out on Lake Oconee with Reisinger and two other friends, "shooting the shit and talking about nothing and everything at the same time."

Dailey last heard from Reisinger about two weeks before his death. Reisinger left a funny voicemail about the two of them hanging out, Dailey said.

"I haven't deleted it, and I don't plan on deleting it for a while," he said.

Even with the devastating loss of a child or a friend, Reisinger's family and friends know he was no exception to the rule when it came to drugs and alcohol use — as are other college students. He may have gotten busted in high school getting drunk or "smoking pot," but as his friends would note, the 19-year-old did not party at a rate unusual for a college student.

Everyone with anything to say

about Reisinger would swear by his unwavering good nature and magnetic sociability, and his loyalty was both unflagging and unbiased.

"He was so much more than that, as are most people," said his mother Wanda Reisinger through tears. "Yes, he made choices and he did things he shouldn't have done, but it doesn't define who he was. Everyone thinks it's not going to happen to them, and that's normal and it's a natural thought process. It's just not true."

It was with this in mind that the Reisingers sought to have their son's story told.

"If it could help one young person make a decision at any point in their life, then I would like to share that story," Michael Reisinger said. "It's like taking the worst blow in your life and turning it around to help someone."

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DRUG ABUSE, from page 1

court-ordered, family and self-referrals, she said.

A NATIONAL TREND

Baton Rouge isn't the only place where prescription drug abuse is prevalent. This sort of drug abuse has been taking the nation by storm in recent years.

Pharmaceutical overdose deaths in the United States have increased for the 11th year in a row in 2010, according to the most recent data released by the National Center for Health Statistics and published in the Journal of the American Medical Association.

The report found that of the 38,329 drug overdose deaths in 2010, 57.7 percent involved pharmaceuticals, and 75.2 percent of those pharmaceuticals were opioids. The second-most common was benzodiazepines, responsible for 29.4 percent of overdose deaths. About two-thirds of those deaths were accidental.

Terry Davis, public information officer for the Drug Enforcement Administration's New Orleans division, said the abuse of pharmaceutical drugs is high on the list of the DEA's priorities.

The DEA has labeled pharmaceutical drugs as the No. 2 drug threat around the world, second only to cocaine, Davis said.

"It's at the epidemic stage at this point," he said, noting the number of overdose deaths associated with prescription drugs.

Davis said the DEA has seen a marked increase in the abuse of pharmaceutical drugs in the last two to five years.

Louisiana ranks above the national average for frequency of nonmedical use of prescription pain relievers from 2010-11, according to the National Survey on Drug Use and Health Report released in January 2013.

According to the report, 11.6 percent of 18- to 25-year-olds in Louisiana had used prescription pain relievers in the year 2010-11. The national average was 10.43 percent.

THE SOURCE

Why has this type of substance abuse become so popular in recent years?

Accessibility is a major reason. Open a family member's medicine cabinet and chances are prescription drugs will be there — a free, easy way to get high in your own home.

This is where the majority, or 54.2 percent, of prescription pain relievers for nonmedical use are obtained. The next most common source is from individual doctors, comprising 18.1 percent of sources, according to 2010-11 data from the National Survey on Drug Use and Health.

Once doctors who will prescribe benzodiazepines or pain relievers have been identified, it doesn't take much longer for those drugs to hit the streets, Evans said.

In addition to nabbing pills from cabinets and legitimate prescriptions from doctors, Cpl. Tommy Stubbs of the Baton Rouge Police Department said forgeries are also "a big deal right now."

Forgeries occur through people stealing prescription pads from doctors' offices and forging their signatures for pharmaceuticals, Stubbs said. Stealing prescriptions from others is also a problem, he added.

"There are people that will go through desperate means, even if that means they have a high chance of getting caught," Stubbs said.

Evans said another reason for prescription drugs' popularity is the low risk of law enforcement intervention and arrest for possession. If a person's name is on a pill bottle, chances are, an officer is "more likely to accept that than a bag of white powder."

An online subculture has emerged to guide people in "safely" mixing substances like benzodiazepines and opiates. However, Evans said there are no specific parameters for doing so since there are numerous unknown factors and the effects depend on individuals' body sizes and tolerance levels. "It's people that are online that are giving advice saying, 'If you take these amounts, then you should be OK, but I'm not responsible,'" Evans said.

Type "mixing op" into a Google search and the second suggested search is "mixing opiates and benzos." The first result leads to a forum discussion on the website Blue-light, with the first post reading:

"hey guys, hope everyone's

doin' goooood. Gotta quick question maybe you guys can help me out Maybe some of you have seen me writing on other people threads how I have had friends die from heroin/benzo combinations... well recently I've been using OP 80s mixed with my benzo prescription and have found it very enjoyable. I would like to hear some people's opinions on whether this is dangerous so I can make a good decision if I should keep using this combo." [sic]

SEARCHING FOR SOLUTIONS

In an effort to take unwanted prescription drugs off the street, the DEA has collaborated with state, local and tribal law enforcement agencies to implement national drug take-back days.

For four hours on a Saturday, residents are invited to dispose of

any prescription drugs they may have sitting around. The next event is from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. on April 27.

At the April 28, 2012 take-back day, Davis said the DEA's New Orleans division, which comprises Louisiana, Alabama, Arkansas and Mississippi, collected more than 19,000 pounds of unwanted prescription drugs.

"Those particular programs have led us to collect tons of unwanted prescription drugs that would've potentially ended up in the hands of an unwanted abuser or our water system," Davis said.

Davis said the DEA's take-back days were a stepping stone for the Safe and Secure Drug Disposal Act that President Barack Obama signed into law in 2010. The law helps people dispose of controlled substances more easily and safely.

In an attempt to combat forgeries, Stubbs said pharmacists are undergoing more training to be able to identify fraudulent prescriptions. They're working more closely with doctors and are taught to look for unusual quantities.

Baton Rouge has numerous drug rehabilitation and detox centers. Jackson said the Baton Rouge Area Alcohol and Drug Center utilizes the 12-step program, but said "there are a lot of relapses between successes."

"The success rate isn't very high, depending on how you look at it," Jackson said. "But the time [patients] relapse eventually decreases."

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