The Melsbergers of Lebanon, Ind., adopted grandchildren Raiden, 2, Zoey, 6, and Estelle, 4, after their parents struggled with addiction.

THE CHILDREN OF THE OPIOID CRISIS

Left behind by addict parents, tens of thousands of youngsters need a new home

BY JEANNE WHALEN

The police officer who entered Mikaya Feucht’s Ohio apartment found it littered with trash, dirty dishes and plastic milk jugs full of the opioid addict’s vomit.

He also found two toddlers, aged 3 and 2, who watched as the officer uncovered the track marks on their mother’s arms and looked in vain for any food to feed them.

That was three years ago. By the time Mikaya overdosed and died from the elephant tranquilizer carfentanil this summer, her sons were living with their grandparents. But the chaos of watching their mother descend into addiction will burden them for years. They were often hungry and dirty in her care, and spoke of being hit with a belt by her boyfriend, according to their grandparents.

At the funeral home before Mikaya, 24 years old, was cremated, her younger son, Reed, clung to her through the open casket. “And it wasn’t just a quick hug. It was heartbreaking,” says Chuck Curran, his grandfather.

Widespread abuse of powerful opioids has pushed U.S. overdose death rates to all-time highs. It has also traumatized tens of thousands of children. The number of youngsters in foster care in many states has soared, overwhelming social workers and courts. Hospitals that once saw few opioid-addicted newborns are now treating dozens a year.

And many of the children who remain in the care of addicted parents are growing up in mayhem. They watch their mothers and fathers overdose and die on the bathroom floor. They live without electricity, food or heat when their parents can’t pay the bills. They stop going to school, and learn to steal and forage to meet their basic needs.

“They are out there in the thousands. And they are our kids,” said H. Jane Sites, director of a mental-health treatment program for traumatized children at Cincinnati Children’s Hospital Medical Center. She was speaking to a packed conference convened last month to address the impact of heroin addiction on
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Social workers say the scale of the problem exceeds anything they saw during the crack-coke or methamphetamine crises. Unlike those drugs, and other opioids are so addictive they can overwhelm the strongest parental instinct to care for a child, doctors and social workers say.

The recent black-market arrival of fentanyl’s more potent cousin is raising more than a little concern with parents and law enforcement.

Images of parents overdose- ing in front of their children have gone viral. Authorities in one Ohio town pooled data on a child in the back seat of an SUV with two adults unconscious in the front, saying they wanted to raise awareness about the desperate circumstances many children face. In Ohio, opioids are the main cause of a 3% increase in the number of kids removed from parental custody and placed with relatives or foster homes since 2010, according to an asso- ciation of Ohio’s children’s services agencies. In Vermont, 15% of children born between 2012 and 2016, according to the University of Vermont’s Health & Human Resources.

Facebook support
A Facebook support group for grandparents raising grandchildren now has 2,500 members nationwide. One is Michelle Curran, who took custody of her grandchildren three years ago, as her daughter, Mikayla, overdosed.

Mikayla lives in a rural house in central Ohio, that she and her husband built for their retirement. They used the money from the sale of the house to drive to her daughter’s apartment in Safford, Arizona, south of the border, to babysit the toddlers. As a young mother, Mikayla wasn’t sure how to handle the situation. Ms. Curran says, and went to become an employee at a dresser.

About three years ago, Ms. Curran started noticing more and more children at home and children growing more impatient. And Mikayla was constantly asking for money.

During one babysitting trip, Mikayla’s son Lane, then 3 years old, slunk into the room with a tin can full of weeds, scorpions and a powdered substance. Ms. Curran later learned was fentanyl.

“I said, ‘where did you get that? He showed me. It was in a drawer. He’d been stealing from you. I remember, ’

Mikayla confronted her daughter, and offered to take the boys, saying she could give Mikayla and her kids a break for a few weeks. Mikayla agreed. Meanwhile, the boys moved into an apartment building right off the police to the sagittal. An of- ficer came to pick the boys up at the apartment with the boys.

The day she returned, Reed, then 10, came to her bedroom, saying “as they walked toward the apartment, Ms. Curran remem- bers. “You told us we didn’t have to come back,” he shouted. Soon after they arrived at Mikayla’s, so did the police. As the children stood by crying, the officer made Mikayla pull up the sleeves of her hoodie to show the track marks on her arms. “How are you going to take care of these boys? Where is your toddler,” he asked.

Mikayla said she was going on here?”, Ms. Curran recalls him asking. He made Mikayla open her kitchen cabinets, which were empty. In the apartment were plastic milk jugs that had been cut open to hold small amounts, signs that Mikayla was suffering withdrawal symp- toms because she had run out of money to buy drugs, Ms. Curran says.

A court awarded Ms. Curran emergency custody, which turned into a long-term ar- rangement as Mikayla bounced in and out of rehab through periods of homelessness. The boys’ fathers were never a strong presence in their lives, Ms. Curran says.

Living with the Curran, Lane spoke about Mikayla’s boyfriend hitting him. And for a long time boys cling to their grand- parents’ side at all times, even when they went outside to smoke. “They were afraid we were going to leave them,” Mr. Curran says.

Lane and Reed also worried about going hungry. “They would constantly look in our pantry and freak out if there was a bare spot. I had to con- stantly move food forward to calm them down,” Ms. Curran says. “I think if you’d be having fun for breakfast and lunch the next day.”

In July, after many attempts at rehab, Mikayla overdosed and died in a Florida hospital. Authorities found fentanyl and a trace of heroin in her blood.

Dressed in Spider-Man and Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles gear, she sat on the couch at the Curran’s house, Lane and Reed, now 7 and 5, had a bed- side snuggle and shared photos of their mother, and an uncom- fortable conversation.

“She went to Florida to get better,” said Lane, holding up a picture of his mother, a beach. The Currans are adopting Lane and Reed. The boys are doing better these days, though the Currans worry about provid- ing for them. Ms. Curran, 47, is a production support analyst for a company that finances credit cards. Ms. Curran, 61, is retiring as a manager of an automotive plant. “So my poten- tial to save for college is little,” she says. He worries about not being around to care for the boys in their teenage years.

Similar conversations are cur- ring across the U.S., in every socio-economic group. Many who were preparing for retirement are suddenly faced not just with the unreliability of a previously functional adult child, but with several young mouths to feed.

Paula and Jim Meinsberger, of Lebanon, Ind., adopted three of their grandchildren last year, af- ter heroin addiction overcame the youngsters’ parents.

“For my husband’s 35th anniver- sary at the company everyone as usual asked if he was going to re- sign. He said, ‘no I have a newborn,'” Ms. Meinsberger says. Ms. Meinsberger and a 59-year-old UPS driver. ‘Don’t get me wrong, I love the kids with all my heart and soul. But this is too late, remember,” Ms. Horton’s heart stopped. Ms. Horton answered.

For the past four years, Ben has received counseling at a special program for trau- mated children (Cincinnati Children’s Hospital Medical Center. His therapist, Francesca Pierroen, says he benefited greatly from the love and secu- rity the Hortons have given him. But his history remains a heavy burden.

In 2009, Stephanie and Doug Horton of Batavia, Ohio, founded the Ben Meinsenger Foundation, which was born addicted to the drug, and went through months of painful withdraw- nal marked by tremors and high-pitched crying.

Looking for food
Ben’s biological mother quickly dropped out of his life, but his father, David Meinsenger, cleaned up and regained custody when Ben was 20 months old.

When he was healthy, Mr. Meinsenger was a warm, loving father who had a strong bond with his son, says Ms. Horton, who often helped out as a babysitter. His sobriety didn’t last long.

Soft Ben was watching his father shoot up and sometimes pass out, Ms. Horton says. When Ben was hungry, he would climb on the kitchen counter to look for food, she says.

When she baby-sat Ben, he would describe his drug use in detail. He talked about the blue rubber band his father put on his arm, and the spores he used to cook the heroin. “He would say, ‘He puts a needle in his vein and then he snorts it back from the vein into his arm,'” she says.

“Honestly, if something doesn’t happen with this addic- tion crisis, we can turn a gener- ation of kids,” Ms. Reese says. “God knows I would hate to see orph- anages come back, but the child-protection system is being inundated now.” In 2009, Stephanie and Doug Horton of Batavia, Ohio, founded the Ben Meinsenger Foundation, which was born addicted to the drug, and went through months of painful withdrawal marked by tremors and high-pitched crying.

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