The Fumes of Death

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Tuesday, August 10, 1994, wound down like any summer night for the Bustaque family. Sixteen-year-old Freddy had made it home by his 11:30 curfew, joked around with his younger sisters Meeghan and Erin, and downed a bowl of cereal. Then he and his dad chatted about the family construction business; Freddy had been working for his dad that summer, and was planning an early-morning trip in the company van to pick up some building supplies. With his stomach filled and good-nights exchanged, Freddy climbed the stairs of his family's modest home and headed to his room. "Everything was completely normal," his mother, Gail, says. "No one seemed any different."

The next morning, Al Bustaque woke up at 7:00 and was surprised to see his van still parked in the driveway. Figuring that his son had overslept, he went down the hall to Freddy's room. "I knocked on the door and said, 'Come on, Fred, let's get up,'" Al says. "I didn't hear anything so I opened the door." Freddy's fan was still circulating the humid air and the TV was on. But Freddy did not move. "When I grabbed him to say, 'Fred, come on, he was cold," says Al. It took Freddy's dad a stunned moment to realize that his son was dead. The killer was lying on the bed beside him: a half-empty can of air freshener.

Freddy Bustaque fell victim to a deadly new drug epidemic among American teenagers: inhalant abuse. The solvent fumes from products such as glue, correction fluid, nail-polish remover, and air freshener are purposely concentrated and inhaled for a high that is quick -- and potentially deadly. In a recent nationwide survey of teenage drug use, researchers from the University of Michigan found that inhalant abuse is especially prevalent among younger teens. One out of every five teens surveyed had experimented with inhalants by the time he or she reached the eighth grade.

Experts say that inhalant abuse is rising most rapidly in middle-class, suburban communities just like Freddy's town of Leola, which is near Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Yet it's a problem that has caught these communities off guard. The residents of Leola, a charming town surrounded by corn fields, country roads, and idyllic Amish farms, didn't want to believe that inhalant abuse was a problem among their teenagers, says Al Bustaque. Teens who abuse inhalants have always been stereotyped as underprivileged rural kids with nothing better to do.

"After he died, people were saying that Freddy was a freak," says Becky Weaver, one of Freddy's closest friends. "They were ignoring the problem; they were saying it didn't exist."

There is no official count of how many Americans die each year "sniffing," "huffing," or "bagging" inhalants like the air freshener that killed Freddy. The International Institute on Inhalant Abuse, a nonprofit organization devoted to educating parents and others about the problem, have recorded 184 deaths in the U.S.

and Canada since 1990. Most of the victims -- five out of six -- were under the age of 20.

Many experts say the extent of the problem is much greater. "It's as serious a problem in this country as heroin-related deaths, if not greater," says epidemiologist Charles Sharp, the National Institute on Drug Abuse specialist on inhalant abuse. He estimates that inhalants kill 500 to 600 people in the United States each year -- most of them teens.

Why Inhalants?

Why are so many kids risking their lives for a 15-second high? Health experts say teens use inhalants for the same reasons that they try other drugs -- peer pressure, family problems, low self-esteem, or boredom.

Inhalants, however, have a special allure for teens. "Inhalants are not perceived as harmful, they're not expensive, and they're not something that you have to go to some sleazy part of town to get," says Harvey Weiss, executive director of the Texas Prevention Partnership. Weiss figures that there are more than a thousand products that are easily available at hardware stores or in family garages.

Many teens who abuse inhalants don't realize that the risk of death from inhalants can be greater than the risk of death from the abuse of other drugs such as alcohol and marijuana. Drug-education classes, which generally focus on illegal drugs, often gloss over the dangers of inhalants. And parents, who are on the lookout for rolling papers and beer breath, generally don't question their kids about empty butane lighters or bottles of correction fluid.

Freddy's Deadly Habit

Freddy's parents, however, knew that they had a problem. In September of 1993, his dad discovered that Freddy had been inhaling turpentine when they found a gallon can next to his bed. Being concerned and attentive parents, they snapped into action. They found a drug-and-alcohol counselor for Freddy. They kept their eyes open for signs that Freddy might be huffing. And they began educating themselves and their kids. Gail Bustaque told her son that his habit could kill him.

Unfortunately, Freddy didn't believe her. "Everybody else is doing it and they're all fine," was Freddy's response. "Name one person who's dead," he'd say.

Freddy's sister Erin heard her mom's warnings, but she also doubted the message. "I always thought, yeah, right. What's she talking about? I just thought it might hurt him, like people smoke and it hurts them but it doesn't kill them right away."

Many kids do, in fact, experiment with inhalants without becoming chronic users like Freddy. "Kids who see it as a good time may use it once or twice, then move on," says Theresa Jacobson, a drug counselor and executive director of the Colorado Inhalant Abuse Program. Most move on for the simple reason that inhaling isn't a good time at all. The same solvents that make you dizzy for 15 seconds cause a headache and nausea that last from 15 to 45 minutes as the solvents dissolve fatty areas in the brain and other parts of the nervous system. Inhaling can also cause unpleasant symptoms such as temporary loss of control over the body, loss of hearing, and blindness. And it can kill a person, even on the first try. (See "The Damage Done" on page 33.)

Things Only Nuts Do

Freddy's friend Becky remembers him telling her about the pain and nausea. Once she say him inhale air freshener in the back seat of her car. She says he sat very still for a long time as if it hurt to move. "His voice sounded so strange after he did it; he sounded like a zombie." Becky told him to get out of her car -- that if he wanted to screw up his life he could do it somewhere else.

Despite knowing how much it angered Becky and frightened his parents, Freddy continued to abuse inhalants. Becky says that to Freddy, inhaling may have been just the kind of risky behavior he seemed to relish, like speeding down Lancaster County's winding two-lane farm roads. For a journal project in his sophomore English class, Freddy wrote that if he had just one week to live, he would spend it sky-diving or bungee-jumping and doing things "that only nuts do."

Experts, however, usually interpret longterm inhalant abuse, like Freddy's, as an escape from emotional pain. "Kids who keep using it for a year or two," says Theresa Jacobson, "are getting rid of a pain they're feeling; emotionally something is lacking."

Like any 16-year-old, Freddy felt pressures and anxieties. He got flack from his parents, for example, for underachieving in school. "Freddy never got A's because he wouldn't do homework or take notes, but he got A's on every test," says Kerrie Snavely, his 10th-grade biology teacher at Conestoga Valley High. Freddy's parents knew their son was highly intelligent. They expected better.

But the people who were closest to Freddy that summer didn't see any signs of emotional pain or anguish. They saw a 16-year-old who was high on life itself: happy and carefree. Friends like Becky remember late nights playing video games at the Dutch Lanes bowling alley or driving Freddy's favorite back roads. "I can't think of a night we didn't spend together that summer," she says. Freddy would wait for her to get off from her job waiting on tables at a local deli, and they would hang out with friends who had been in his life since he first learned to throw a baseball.

Freddy was full of dreams and plans for the future. He had his heart set on a black Honda CRX, and he had saved $700 toward it which his parents were going to match dollar for dollar. He would carry ads for used cars to show his friends and boast about the rad stereo system his wheels would carry.

And with the school year behind him, life at home was more relaxed. He enjoyed working with his dad, and both he and Al felt that the summer was making their relationship stronger. Just the morning before Freddy died, in fact, they went out for breakfast together and Al said, "We should do this more often. Would you like that?" Freddy said, "Yeah Dad, I'd like that."

Even his sister Erin, who remembers Freddy's big-brother insults more than anything, says Freddy seemed happy that summer: "He didn't seem to be making fun of me or picking on me as much."

An Empty Space

So despite lonely hours of soul-searching, no one who loved Freddy understands how he could be dead. The members of the Bustaque family are living their individual

lives. And yet there is pain, and there is guilt, and there is an empty space.

Meeghan thinks about Freddy all the time. "I write letters to him and talk to him in my diary," she says. Erin misses Freddy's teasing. She even misses the way he used to blast his stereo and keep her up at night.

"Sundays," says Al, "when I take flowers to the cemetery, it's a big inner soul search for me." Freddy's mom, Gail, reminds herself how much they gave Freddy: a computer, trips to Europe, their love.

"He got every bit of my attention -- he got everything." To fight her feelings of guilt and pain, she is alerting other parents to the risks and realities of inhalant abuse. And she's trying to help her daughters understand their loss and go on with their lives.

But she remains haunted. She thinks of Freddy's killer: the can of air freshener that she herself had bought at the supermarket. "Why did I buy it?" she asks. "I never bought it before." She remembers seeing it on Freddy's counter, unaware of what he might be using it for. "You think you know when your kids are at home at night and they're in bed that everybody's safe," she says. "Well, it doesn't work that way."