

Family blames 'choking game' for teen's death

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Nancy Hiller knew something was wrong when she arrived home from work the evening of Jan. 2.

The house was dark. Not even the porch light was on. The dogs were running loose.

There was no sign of her 15-year-old stepson, Jonas Longacre.

He always left his bedroom door open, his family said, even when he slept. That Thursday afternoon was no exception.

Hiller climbed the stairs, flipped on a hallway light.

She found Jonas in his bedroom, at his closet door, dead from an apparent hanging.

“If he committed suicide, we would want to know the truth. It’s just that it just didn’t make sense,” Hiller said, recalling what she saw as she was on the phone with a 911 dispatcher.

The rope around his neck wasn’t fashioned into a noose, and there was padding between the rope and his neck. His feet were touching the ground. No note.

Less than 24 hours before his death, Jonas talked about studying computational linguistics in college. The day of his death, he had stacked firewood, completing some of his chores.

Hiller couldn’t shake the feeling that Jonas “wasn’t expecting to die, to go away.” She later went to the Internet, looking for answers.

Jonas’ parents — father and stepmother, Mark Longacre and Hiller, and his mother, Patti Torp — are convinced their intelligent and talented son did not kill himself.

They believe he died accidentally playing “the choking game,” and want to raise awareness about the potentially fatal adolescent activity, which is billed as “the good kid’s high” and is said to be addictive.

The activity involves intentionally cutting off the flow of oxygen to the brain to induce a brief state of euphoria. Some view it as a legal and safe alternative to drugs or alcohol. Children and teens can choke each other with their hands or use ligatures.

Someone can fall unconscious within seconds. Seizures and coma can occur.

The practice can be deadly.

It is different from autoerotic asphyxiation, the intentional restriction of oxygen to the brain for sexual arousal.

Definitely not a game

The behavior is not new. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in 2008 attributed 82 deaths from 1995 to 2007 to the choking game and other strangulation activities. Most victims were boys aged 11 to 16.

A 2008 survey of Oregon eighth-graders by the Oregon Public Health Division featured a question about the choking game. Of the survey's 10,642 respondents, 73 percent answered the question. More than a third had heard of it; 30 percent had heard of someone doing it; almost 3 percent said they had helped someone participate in the act and almost 6 percent said they had participated themselves.

Sharron Grant, of Ontario, said the statistics understate the problem.

She's heard hundreds of stories from around the world about tragic encounters with the choking game.

Grant's own 12-year-old son, Jesse, died nine years ago by choking himself to get high. Since then, she's made awareness about the choking game her life's work by creating the not-for-profit organization GASP — Games Adolescents Shouldn't Play.

She believes adolescents learn about the practice from their peers, especially at school, and start experimenting in groups before they choke themselves in private. How-to videos are posted online.

Getting awareness programs into school systems is crucial, Grant said.

"Until we start educating them, telling them it's dangerous, we're going to keep losing our kids," she said in a telephone interview. "It's really disheartening we can't get any education out there. We can talk about sex education, guns and drugs. But we can't talk about this."

Participants report feeling a euphoric jolt from the loss of blood to the head. Parents know how to look for signs of drug or alcohol use; they often are unaware of the choking practice until a child is injured or dies.

"It's not breaking any rules. That's the thing. It's not drugs. It's not alcohol. Which is terribly, disgustingly ironic, because it's actually so much more dangerous," Hiller said.

Jonas's parents said their son never expressed an interest in experimenting with drugs or alcohol.

"He didn't understand why someone would want to alter their mind, because he's so into his mind. He didn't understand why somebody would want to experience that kind of altered state," his mother said.

A self-motivated student, Jonas excelled in academics and loved languages, computer programming, math and scientific experiments.

"He was a brilliant scholar, who did not require help in striving for greatness, and who also brought his own passion to the classroom and his friends on a regular basis," Bloomington Project School administrator Catherine Diersing said at Jonas' funeral.

Casual dinner conversation with this father and stepmother usually turned to words, their definitions and etymologies. After Christmas, a Latin dictionary joined the large hardcover dictionary by the

dining room table.

Inspired by J.R.R. Tolkien, Jonas created his own languages. Then, he invented creatures, formulated creation myths and built civilizations around those languages. He also developed computer programs, dictionaries and translators for the languages he created.

The day before his death, Mark Longacre and his son talked of how Jonas would soon be leaving for college.

Investigation continues

County detectives have Jonas' computer and cellphone; his parents are waiting to hear what investigators might have found on those devices.

The 15-year-old's death is under investigation by Monroe County Coroner Nicole Meyer, who did not want to speculate on the cause until her investigation is completed and she has results from toxicology tests.

She has contacted GASP, its founder said, seeking information about the choking game.

Since Jonas' death, awareness about the choking game has gained momentum on social media. Parents have been encouraged to speak with their kids about the issue, and school officials are following suit.

"If there is ever a teaching moment, he would want us to use his name. There is no doubt about that," Longacre said. "There's been a lot of support from the community. We've all been trying to be very forthcoming about it. We want people to know what happened to him. It was an accident.

"And we don't want it to happen to anybody else's kid."

The Project School, where Jonas went to middle school, sent an email to families about the practice. It refers parents to the GASP website for more information and to a video on the site, with a warning that the video is too graphic for elementary and some middle school students.

"While we can't know what Jonas was experiencing, we do know that he was joyful and constantly making plans for his immediate and distant future. Clearly, through misinformation, he thought the game he was playing was safe," Diersing said in the message to parents.

When middle school- aged students returned to the Project School after winter break, they met with support staff to share memories about Jonas and talk about what led to his death.

The conversation continued at Bloomington High School South, where Jonas was a sophomore.

"We were open about discussing that with the students," said Becky Rose, director of student services at Monroe County Community School Corp.

Rose said MCCSC officials plan to research how they can incorporate information about the practice into programs about the dangers of risky behaviors.

Hiller said several people, of all ages, approached her at the funeral home and said they, too, participated in similar choking activities in their youth. Among them was one of Jonas' teachers, a man in his 60s.

Hundreds of people attended Jonas' visitation and funeral services on a cold Wednesday night. Jonas' ashes were placed in a wooden Noah's ark his grandfather built for him when he was a little boy.