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Common Sense and Drug Woes
by Thom Marshall

MAMA always says we need to teach people social skills so they know how to manage their lives without drugs.

MAMA says that a lot. As a matter of fact, Sandee Burbank, 54, director of Mothers Against Misuses and Abuse since she co-founded the organization in 1982 in Oregon, is going about the country with a slide show called "Listen to MAMA, We Can Solve Our Drug Problems."

Sandee believes that education and individual common sense can be far more effective than the government's oppressive war on drugs.

Just look at nicotine addiction, for example. The more folks learn about its dangers and harmful effects, the more they avoid it. And Sandee pointed out that this has been accomplished without putting people in prison, without seizing property, without officers bursting into apartments and shooting people.

She said the idea for starting MAMA grew out of conversations she had with a friend about the ways drugs had been hurting so many people close to them.

The friend's husband was an alcoholic, Sandee's grandmother was overmedicated to the point she could no longer communicate, a cigarette-smoking uncle was dying from emphysema, a friend was addicted to nasal spray.

Mostly legal substances

Maybe you notice that all these problems involved substances that can be obtained legally — booze, prescription medicine, tobacco, over-the-counter stuffy nose sniffers.

Sandee and her friend noticed that, too. They noticed that a person who misuses or abuses legal drugs can be just as sick or just as dead as a person who misuses or abuses illegal drugs.

We should teach kids to consider the health issues of all drugs, legal or illegal, Sandee said. Before taking anything, a person should be aware of the main effects to expect, the possible side effects, the appropriate dosage for the person's weight, possible interactions or allergic reactions.

Will a person develop a tolerance and have to increase dosage or switch to another drug? Can a person develop a dependence upon the drug?

While information can be obtained on legal drugs, Sandee said that a person cannot know the extent of risks involved with illegal drugs because it isn't possible to make the producers and dealers adhere to any standards of purity.

"Our laws actually increase the negative health effects," she said.

Having worked almost two decades for changes in the way society deals with drug problems, Sandee said that lately she is noticing an increase in the number of others who want reform.

The national discussion, she said, is picking up steam. More people are expressing concern about problems with prescription drugs. The issue of medical marijuana has fueled the debate.

More people are starting to question the federal government's war tactics, the seizing of assets, locking so many people in prison when it would cost less to provide treatment and fact-based education.

Sandee said she is starting to see more and more “mature moral outrage” as she takes MAMA’s message around the country. “It will take a bunch of us who can really see what is going on to say: ‘Wait a minute. Tell me how this makes any sense.’ “

Right now, she said, many kids are dying because of heroin and “what is killing them is the ignorance. And it’s so tragic.”

Improving people’s lives

The war on drugs is about money and power, Sandee said. While it is being conducted under the guise of protecting people from illegal drugs, it actually has nothing to do with health.

Obviously, there is no easy answer to the complicated drug problem, but Sandee said we should examine our social fabric for causes and solutions.

She cited illiteracy as one example — so many people landing in jail who cannot fill out simple forms. We must teach them to read and write before we can realistically expect them to absorb much information about the health effects of drugs.

I’ll bet when she is in our town Thursday, Sandee will be impressed if someone tells her about the new Houston READ Commission KEYS (Keep Educating Your Self) program that is using donated computers with locally developed software to teach reading and writing to inmates in some area lockups.

She is bringing her MAMA slide show to Houston at the invitation of the Drug Policy Forum of Texas. It will begin at 7 p.m. at St. Paul’s United Methodist Church.

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