http://newiprogressive.com/images/stories/S5/opioid-overdose-s5.jpg



Sen. Vinehout shares a story about her discussion with members of the Ho-Chunk Nation who are working to get the resources necessary to address addiction.

MADISON - The day was busy. Filled with bills voted on by Senators. Bills that, someday, will change people’s lives for better or worse. Senators do not often see the faces of those whose lives changed.

Bev, Bonnie and Jamie are working to put a face on the lives affected by the actions of lawmakers. The women are showing Wisconsin the faces of those suffering from addiction.

With the help of Senator Erpenbach, these strong women brought three panels of a very large quilt to the Capitol. On the quilt were the faces of those suffering from addiction. The background behind the face tells a story. The person may be in recovery (white), in prison (gray), or died (black).

Bev told me stories of children who died. Bev pointed out the quilt square around her beautiful daughter. She also told me about the problems: finding treatment, crisis care, inflexible sentencing. How it’s sometimes impossible to get people into treatment court or alternatives to incarceration because of the way the laws are written.

A necklace and two stories brought Bonnie, Jamie and I closer.

As fate would have it, I wore a necklace that day given to me by a Ho-Chunk woman recovering from addiction. She gave me the necklace during a Blanket Ceremony I participated in this summer at the old Ho-Chunk Pow Wow grounds. Two groups - #StoptheStigma and Natives Against Heroin sponsored the Pow Wow.

I told the story of the necklace. Bonnie told me the story of her son (and Jamie’s nephew) Cody, who had died of addiction four years ago. Through their shared experiences, and through extended family, Bonnie and Bev met. They began work with several groups.

One group is called “HeD Peace” and pronounced Head Peace. The group raises money to help those suffering from addiction by selling headbands. Bonnie has a background in marketing. She thought about how the name had several meanings, for those suffering from addiction and for those who lost loved ones that suffered.

Wearing the headbands, Jamie told me, opened the door to conversations about addiction. “We were stopped by people we didn’t know,” Jamie said. “They would ask us, at the grocery store, at the hospital, ‘what does the headband mean?’”

“It started a huge dialogue,” Bonnie added. The conversations “opened the door for people to let off steam.” Bonnie told me how those who lost loved ones to addiction “Keep the pain and misery bottled up inside… People [who are addicted] are still loved. They still exist in our memories. They [discussion of the headbands] open the door to let the love out, and the grief. It’s an amazing cathartic tool for people who suffer.”

“The quilt lets people see the faces of people who are suffering, when they see the magnitude of people who are suffering…and there are many, many more that are not on the quilt” said Bonnie. “We’re not just losing one generation, we’re losing several generations. No one understands the depth.”

The women came to the Capitol to influence lawmakers by showing the faces of those who suffer from addiction. “It’s shameful we don’t have the services – especially in rural areas,” Bonnie told me.

I was interrupted several times during my conversation with the women as the Senate President called my colleagues and me to the Senate floor to vote. Ironically, the votes were part of a “tough on crime” package of bills. Some of these bills kept children in detention longer, left less flexibility for judges sentencing those with addiction and put people back in prison for being accused (not necessarily convicted) of offenses.

Bonnie later told me that she listened to the Senate debate. “They don’t have someone suffering from addiction in prison, or in Lincoln Hills [juvenile detention]. They don’t care about the people attached to those bills.”

Caring about the people behind the statistics became the life work of these resilient women. They want to make real change happen and make a real difference in the lives of those suffering from addiction.

“It’s not a Democrat or Republican thing,” said Bonnie. “It’s everyone’s. It’s up to all of us to get together. It’s a human problem.”