

Drug's impact on city can't be ignored

Badrock, chemical, crunch & munch, gravel, grit, hardball, hotcakes, nuggets, paste, prime time, scrabble, sleet, snow coke, troop.

Crack cocaine.

Call it what you like, but make no mistake; the drug has slowly but steadily, like an oil slick washing across a beach, found its way into Guelph, poisoning everything it touches.

This week, the Mercury is presenting a five-part series by my colleague, Deirdre Healey, looking at the impact of crack cocaine on our city.

Around Guelph's criminal courts, where I spend most of my time, the impact is impossible to miss.

Several years ago, someone charged with possessing or dealing crack cocaine would surely get my attention. Such charges were uncommon — the drug was a big-city problem yet to rear



SCOTT TRACEY

its ugly head in Guelph in any significant way.

That is no longer the case. When someone shows up these days in court on a crack-related charge it barely registers on my radar.

Those peddling this poison in our city are counting on us becoming complacent.

We cannot. The consequences are too high.

Some of you might read Deirdre's

series with detached interest and a sense that Guelph's drug scene is someone else's problem.

That's what Benjamin Mannhardt's victims thought.

The 34-year-old Guelph man pleaded guilty recently to several charges, including break and enter and stealing a car that had been left at a local garage for repairs.

Left by someone, probably, who pays little attention to the drug scene and would never think crack could touch his or her life.

Trained as a cabinetmaker, Mannhardt managed to stay on the right side of the law for 32 years until falling into crack's grip in early 2004. Standing in the prisoner's box with tears running down his face, Mannhardt listened as his lawyer described how the drug has ruined his life.

He quickly amassed a record of theft and fraud convictions, each of them evidence of his desire for another 20-minute high, and desperation to avoid the resulting catastrophic crash.

Mannhardt's story is a typically tragic one.

Valdemar Neves was co-owner of a Kitchener construction company, drove a sporty Nissan 300 ZX and was engaged to be married.

And then he started smoking crack. He lost his share in the company, lost his worldly possessions, lost his fiancée. He once arrived at a Kitchener court bare-chested, having sold his shirt that morning for drug money.

Crack makes people do bizarre things.

A few years ago I covered a case of a young addict who tried to steal his father's television — while his father was

watching it. The lad, not yet 20, walked into the living room, past his father's chair and unplugged the TV. When his dad asked what he was doing, the accused responded simply, "I'm selling it."

The number of assaults and armed robberies in the city have increased along with the number of cocaine-related charges, and the connection is obvious.

"Crack addicts more than anyone else will do anything to get money for the drug," Guelph Police Chief Rob Davis told the Mercury recently. "If they can't get the money, they will assault their dealer or someone else to get the drug."

• *Scott Tracey's column normally appears Wednesdays and Saturdays. He can be reached at 822-4310, ext. 232, or by e-mail at stracey@guelphmercury.com.*

Crack: Still part of his life

CONTINUED FROM PAGE A1

The money he did have was earned working as a runner for a dealer. He soon became known in the local drug world as McVinny.

His job as a runner was to collect the cash from the customers, run it back to the dealer and then deliver the drug.

This way the dealer could ensure he wouldn't get caught by police.

Vince would then be paid in crack cocaine for his services.

"I was running about 36 customers a day sometimes until 4 a.m.," he said. "But no matter how good I was, I was always worried I would get caught."

Vince isn't a runner anymore, but admits crack is still a part of his life.

"At any one time I could have six or seven phone numbers in my head that I could call to get a hit!"

MIKE VINCE
CRACK ADDICT

He lives on his own in an apartment and has a friend who drops in to make sure he has food in the refrigerator.

He is trying to keep himself as far away from the Guelph drug scene as possible and occupies his time by working at the Fresh Start Housing Centre on Wyndham Street.

Ed Pickersgill, a co-founder of Fresh Start, has watched addicts like Vince hit rock bottom and try to pick themselves back up.

Pickersgill has also worked at Serenity House, an addiction residence in the city that shut down last year, and has become a trusted friend to crack addicts in Guelph, including Vince.

Each month Pickersgill builds up a collection of switchblades, hunting knives, branch cutters and any other weapon given to him by crack addicts who are either on the verge of getting arrested or contemplating treatment.

"Their fingerprints are all over the weapons so they don't want to give them to someone they don't trust," he said. "I exist in the seam between two worlds — the drug world and the real world. They trust me."

Weapons are essential for protec-



NATHAN DENETTE, GUELPH MERCURY

Ed Pickersgill, a co-founder of Fresh Start, builds up a collection of switchblades, hunting knives, branch cutters and other weapons given to him by crack addicts who are either on the verge of getting arrested or contemplating treatment.

tion in a world where everyone is high on crack and on the edge of exploding.

"The rage that comes with crack is deep and fierce," Pickersgill said.

"I have seen it. The need for the next hit is so strong that people will do anything."

Most of the addicts Pickersgill knows are living in low-income housing and were introduced to the drug by dealers who offered them money or free crack in exchange for the use of their apartment.

The dealer sleeps on the couch and conducts business out of the apartment, he said.

"That way if the place gets busted, the dealer doesn't take the hit."

In the spring, there was a string of apartments above the stores along Wyndham Street filled with dealers who had taken over people's places. Po-

TAKING THE HIT

A five-part series on Guelph's crack scourge

lice recently cleared them out, but it won't be long before the dealers swoop down on another spot in the city, Pickersgill said.

"Crack has taken a hold of this city. It's making Guelph scary."

Despite Vince's efforts to disconnect himself from the drug scene, he is still viewed by the local crackheads as McVinny.

Every time he walks through downtown on his way to work or stands outside the housing centre to smoke a cigarette, Vince is approached by the

friends he is trying to leave behind and asked if he wants to buy a hit.

Sometimes he is able to fight back the urges and refuse the drug, other times he can't.

"It's too easy to get around here," he said.

"At any one time I could have six or seven phone numbers in my head that I could call to get a hit."

Kerr said it is very difficult for crack addicts to cut off ties with the drug world because they are involved in the subculture more than any other type of drug user.

Since the high is so short, crack addicts are in constant contact with their dealers, she said.

"Some will just stay at a crack house because they know it won't be long before they need the next hit."

Pickersgill said very few crack

addicts at Serenity House ever got off the drug.

"I would be surprised if it was as high as one per cent," he said.

An addict could stay off the drug for four months and still get cravings, Kerr said.

However, she said a majority of the crack addicts who take part in Stonehenge's six-month treatment program do leave rehabilitated.

"When clients come to us, they have often been through a couple 21-day treatment programs. We are the end of the line for them."

Vince has chosen to try to battle his drug addiction on his own and knows he has a tough road ahead.

He admits he isn't sure if he will succeed.

"It just takes one wrong decision. I don't know if I have a grip on it yet."

Ouch! Gas prices are taking toll on city's drivers and commuters

New high is leaving many wallets empty

BY JOANNE SHUTTLEWORTH
MERCURY STAFF

GUELPH

Gas prices broke the buck-a-litre milestone this week at most stations in and around Guelph — a new high that left most wallets hurting and drivers fuming yesterday.

"I don't like it," said Jackie Dale as she pumped \$40 worth of petrol into her car. "But I don't have a choice do I?"

Dale, who lives in London but often visits her parents in Guelph, was one of a steady stream of drivers who lined up at the pumps at the Pioneer gas bar in Aberfoyle to catch one of the last great deals in the area — gas at 99.6 cents a litre. In Guelph, gas prices reached \$102.9, \$103.9 and even \$106.9 a litre.

Pioneer station owner Karen Bris-

her so-called bargain price, they still grumbled that gas prices are soaring in general.

"Most people want to know why the prices are going up. And they really want to know when they're coming back down," Bristow said. "Some of my customers are filling jerry cans when they fill their car, just to save a few cents."

"People aren't too happy with the high price," agreed Jeffery Aseltine, a gas station attendant at the Congo gas station in Aberfoyle. Even though the Congo station was selling gas for 99.9 cents a litre yesterday, "the day before it was 95.9. That's a four cent a litre jump overnight. That's hard to take," he said.

It's certainly putting a significant dent in Keith Yipchoy's pocketbook.

Yipchoy has lived in Guelph for 13 years and commutes daily to his job in

Mississauga, near Pearson International Airport.

With a round-trip commute of 160 kilometres a day, Yipchoy said he fills his tank twice a week, currently costing him a total of about \$80. After years of gas prices rising by a cent or two each month, Yipchoy said he's feeling the financial pinch. And that's made him think about moving closer to his job. "But I have a problem. I like where I live and I like where I work," he said.

To save money, he's also thought about purchasing a smaller, more economical car than the four-door sedan he currently drives. "But with all those trucks on the highway, you want a car that makes you feel protected as well," he said. For a series of articles that ran last November, the Mercury calculated it costs about \$9,800 a year to commute from Guelph to Toronto by car.

At the time gas prices hovered around 75 cents a litre. That's a considerable cost that is now 25 cents a litre more expensive. And that affects a lot



CANADIAN PRESS

Record-high oil prices pushed the Canadian average price for regular gasoline above \$1 per litre for the first time ever.

of commuters.

Statistics Canada reports that in 2001, the latest data available, some 1,500 Guelphites commuted to work in Toronto.

The same year some 465 Torontonians commuted to work in Guelph and some 9,000 folks made the daily trek from their homes in Kitchener, Water-

loo or Cambridge to work in this city.

"It's just nuts," exclaimed Sherri Snow, who was heading from Cambridge to Guelph yesterday.

"Somebody needs to do something. Everybody needs gas, even if they're not making a long commute to work. It's like bread and milk. How are we supposed to keep up?"