

Alaska Dispatch

News and voices from the Last Frontier

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January 10, 2014

The state has ruled 18-year-old Kurtis Hildreth's cause of death as "undetermined." But the aunt he had been staying with in Wasilla, Kerri Stevens (pictured), believes he was killed by the synthetic drug Spice -- and she and Hildreth's family plan to fight for answers. Loren Holmes photo

Kurtis Hildreth, 18, came to Alaska after graduating high school. He was living with his aunt's family in Wasilla to get a head start on the next phase of his life. But Hildreth's life didn't get a new beginning in the Last Frontier -- it ended abruptly, the young man found dead inside his room, a pipe filled with the synthetic drug known as Spice and a lighter, on the floor next to him. His family believes the drug killed him. But the state medical examiner and Alaska State troopers aren't sure.

Hildreth moved from Florida to spend time with his aunt, Kerri Stevens, and her family at their Wasilla home. Stevens said she wanted to show Hildreth around Alaska and offer him a job in her family's commercial glass shop. Stevens said she has always been close to Hildreth, her sister Kelli Farquer's oldest child, and was even there when he was born. She was also there when he died on Nov. 16, 2013, opening Hildreth's bedroom door to find her nephew's body crumpled against the wall. Hildreth's arms were still propped on the windowsill.

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"Whatever hit him, (it) hit him hard and hit him fast," Stevens said as she recounted her nephew's death. "The pipe was right there by his feet. He was a healthy kid. The lighter was right there. The pipe was right there. He never had any kind of heart problems or seizures." (See the entire interview of Stevens)

Inside the pipe was some partially burned synthetic marijuana, commonly known as "Spice." The drug is gaining popularity as a legal marijuana alternative. It is, in reality, an unknown combination of chemicals usually made in China and shipped to the U.S., where it is sprayed

on plant material and packaged as incense or potpourri. Most of the packages have labels that say “not for human consumption” on them. And at \$20 for two grams, it is extremely expensive -- for incense. But everyone knows what the mixture is really used for: to get high.

Stevens and Farquer are certain Spice killed the otherwise healthy Hildreth. But the Alaska Medical Examiner’s Office has listed his death as “undetermined.”

Video of She found him dead, clutching spice pipe

Officially, no one has died as a result of smoking Spice in Alaska. As in many suspected cases, an autopsy of Hildreth’s body did not turn up any medical conditions or problems. A toxicity screening of his blood, bile and other body fluids did not turn up any signs of illegal drugs or alcohol. Hildreth’s death -- like an average of 28 others each year in Alaska -- will likely go unsolved, medically speaking. But not if Hildreth’s family -- and an Illinois mother who started an Internet crusade after the Spice-related death of her own son -- has anything to do with it.

The number of people killed by synthetic drugs each year is relatively unknown because most Spice-related deaths are listed as undetermined or as a result of something else. In September, Colorado officials began looking into three deaths that may have been caused by the drug. Internet sites like To the Maximus are rife with stories of both suspected and officially designated Spice-related deaths.

To the Maximus is a nonprofit anti-synthetic drug foundation started by Illinois mother Karen Dobner. Her son Max was killed in June 2011 after he smoked synthetic marijuana then ran his car into a house at more than 100 mph. Dobner had reportedly called his brother to say that he had smoked “that legal stuff” and was “freaking out.” But, as with Hildreth, Dobner’s death was not officially attributed to Spice.

“Currently only 22 of several hundred synthetic cannabinoids can be identified in blood fluids. They are actually looking for metabolites in blood, and it is a difficult and slow process to identify these chemicals,” Karen Dobner said.

Hildreth’s blood was tested for 300 known illegal drugs, including outlawed combinations of Spice. But when it comes to designer drugs, police and prosecutors are far behind the dealers. The chemists change their formulas often, trying to dodge laws aimed at their product. Such is the case in Alaska, where packages of synthetic drugs -- easily found on the shelves of dozens of Anchorage and Wasilla area stores -- have not tested positive for banned substances in months.

“It’s not a marijuana alternative, and these newer chemicals have never been seen on earth before -- the kids are the lab rats,” Dobner said.

In Hildreth’s case, the drugs themselves were not tested to determine their composition. The state medical examiner has refused to discuss Hildreth’s case, citing the privacy of the family. The Alaska State Troopers have finished their report into Hildreth’s death, but it has not yet been released to his family.

Simply put, testing for the exact chemical composition in synthetic drugs can be a challenge. But it’s not impossible. NMS labs, in Willow Grove, Pa., does the body fluids drug and chemical testing for the state of Alaska. And while synthetic drugs are difficult to find in blood because the body metabolizes them, they can be identified in the drug itself. It is this test Dobner and Hildreth’s family want the state to carry out. Farquer said the troopers told her they could not submit the drugs to the lab because there appeared to be no criminal intent in Hildreth’s death. Farquer said she is hiring a private attorney to get the drugs to the lab for testing.

“I know Spice killed my son,” Farquer said.

Meanwhile, the Municipality of Anchorage is looking to rid itself of the drug. The Anchorage Assembly is set to consider a new law that will outlaw possession and sale of Spice, not based on the chemical makeup of the drug, but because of what officials say is deceptive marketing.

The drug can be bought in Alaska at local smoke and head shops. It’s usually packaged with a cartoonish character and a devious-sounding name. Popular varieties include “Dead Man” and “Mr. Nice Guy.” It is the latter -- inside a package adorned with a smiley face that has been shot through the head -- that Hildreth was smoking when he died.

“They market this crap to 12-year-olds. It has Scooby-Doo on the front of it, smiley faces, SpongeBob -- I mean, that’s who its being marketed to. It’s horrible,” Stevens said.

Hildreth’s best friend, Brandon Jenkins, said the 18-year-old called him the night before he died. Jenkins said Hildreth told him he was smoking Spice. Jenkins advised his friend to stop. Now that Hildreth is dead, Jenkins is warning other teens to stay away from Spice.”

“It isn’t worth it,” Jenkins said. “Life will lead you in better directions than this stuff will. Life has many opportunities, and death only has one.”

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