

## **ED GRANNEY: Father relives steroid tragedy in hope others won't**

Frank Marrero didn't want it to end on that bedroom floor.

Not there.

Not with the blood-curdling scream of his wife. Not with him sprinting up the stairs. Not with the lifeless body of his son wrapped in nothing but a towel.

Not with the image of a pistol and a bullet and a shot to the head. Not with a mother's sobbing face pressed against her baby's cold forehead. Not with the family's gentle giant dead at 19.

Not that image. Not there.

"The scene of that day is ingrained into my soul," Marrero said. "The emptiness never leaves you. It took us six to eight months to sort through what had happened, but one day I told myself it would not end this way.

"It is our hope we can prevent another such tragedy. This is our mission now. I am committed to the kids and the families and communities. We need them to understand this is a real story happening to a real family. We need them to understand the dangers."

Good people with large hearts tend to be the most proactive among us, and that was the case Wednesday inside Cashman Theater. Hundreds of local prep athletes and their coaches gathered for a town hall-style meeting on steroids, to learn more about the perils of using them and to somehow comprehend the heartbreak one family felt when its oldest son succumbed to depression associated with performance-enhancing drugs and committed suicide in September 2004.

Meetings like this matter, which is why organizations like the Fellowship of Christian Athletes hold them and why people like 51s president Don Logan and former NFL running back Napoleon McCallum and UNLV football coach Mike Sanford are among those who address the gathering.

Which is why Frank Marrero tells the story of his son, Efrain.

He was a high football player in Vacaville, Calif. He was big and wanted to get bigger. He was strong and wanted to get stronger. He was fast for his 285-pound offensive lineman's frame and wanted to get faster.

He wanted what they all want. He wanted to play in college and decided there was only one way to get there, by hiding from his family a significant growth increase built through pills and a syrupy substance in a syringe.

Kids hear the word BALCO and see a Mark McGwire sweating before Congress or a Marion Jones in handcuffs, and you would think it all might act as a deterrent to using steroids. Not really. They don't see the punishment or national embarrassment. They see the home run records and five gold medals.

They see that the stuff really works.

What they don't realize is what happens after the using stops. They can't hear the bomb ticking. Life after steroids is as much about psychological decline as it is physical deterioration. It's as much about the dark side of depression as the potential for liver and heart and kidney failure.

Not one month after disclosing the truth to his parents and handing over his bags of steroids for good, and just one day before attending his first therapy session to deal with the gloomy moods suffocating his life, Efrain Marrero opted to stay home when his family ran some errands one beautiful Sunday morning.

He found his father's gun and pulled the trigger.

The family discovered a journal in the days following Efrain's death, words of a lost soul searching for answers. The thoughts of a young man in pain, wondering why rage had invaded his otherwise mild temperament. Paranoia had set in. He just couldn't stop those walls from closing in so fast.

"With the pressures of high school today, kids wanting to be the best and realize their dreams, they're cutting corners," said Eldorado football coach Leon Evans, who brought a group of his players to Cashman on Wednesday. "All you can do is educate them, to stress every day it is not worth risking your life over. Every chance we get, we remind them of that."

These were the sobering national statistics four years ago: More than 75,000 eighth-graders were using steroids, and those numbers rose to 91,000 in the 10th grade and 100,000 in the 12th grade.

Close to 500 prep athletes sat in Cashman Theater, and it's naive to think none has used steroids or that countless haven't at least been introduced to them at some level.

Maybe the words of a few speakers helped alter what could be deadly journeys. Maybe the numerous images of a smiling Efrain Marrero was the reflection they need to fully grasp the potential consequence of using.

But there is no maybe about this part: We should all thank Frank Marrero for not letting it end on that bedroom floor.

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*For more information on helping stop steroid and drug use among athletes, go to [nosteroids.org](http://nosteroids.org) or [OW2P.org](http://OW2P.org).*

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