

Byron Williams gripped the hands of people beside him as he released a purple balloon into the air in honor of his friend who died of drug overdose.

Williams was one of many survivors, volunteers and family members who gathered for the third annual Texas Overdose Awareness Day at the Capitol last month. Participants wore purple ribbons and bracelets, comforting one another, exchanging stories and letting tears flow freely after talking to people who cried when they would share stories. Organizations like Recovery Unplugged ATX, CARE, and the Texas Overdose Naloxone Institute (TONI) gave information on options of recovery places and their tactics.

Williams began the remembrance event with a prayer, asking all to bow their heads. Throughout his speech, Williams pointed to the disparate posters held by families and friends with pictures of those who had fatally overdosed.

“I should probably be one of those people on the poster right now, but I’m not,” Williams said. “As I pulled up here I saw a lot of moms and loved ones, and I didn’t have to ask ‘Did you lose someone?’ I could see it,” he added.

For the first time in history, overdosing is now the No. 1 accidental cause of death in America. Street opioids and prescription drugs are driving this epidemic in the United States. Opioids are chemicals most commonly found in heroin, fentanyl, oxycodone and hydrocodone. The American Society of Addiction Medicine stated that opioid addiction in 2014 reached a total of 47,055 overdoses.

At the event, the Austin City Council declared September 2016 as Recovery Month. Williams who was once a daily drug user, said he is now clean and ready to help others who are struggling with addiction.

Potency plays a major role when taking pain relievers and other disparate drugs. There is rarely ever a way to tell how strong the dosage is after buying it regardless if someone bought it from a friend or from a stranger on the street.

Jane C. Maxwell, a UT expert on substance abuse trends in Texas and the United States discussed how potentially fatal even the smallest dosage could be.

“You don’t ever know what you’re taking. These chemicals come from China and people who aren’t chemists are mixing them up,” she said.

Sociology freshman Carlos Diaz said he was interested in trying drugs despite the risks. Diaz said he understands the precautions needed with trying new drugs but this does not change the fact that he is “like any other college student” and curious of their effects.

“I feel like I have the chance to try more drugs and experiment now that I’m not under my parents’ roof,” Diaz said.

Survivor Joseph Gordon, who works for Recovery Unplugged ATX, was at the event to inform others about the potential consequences of drug abuse and to caution college students who claim they will only try a drug once.

“Even just trying something one time I encourage people to think twice and to look at why they’re thinking they want to try it,” Gordon said.

“I could tell you that what I thought was one time for me, turned into six years of active drug use,” he added.