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She died after a night of partying

Date: February 16, 2007

Source: Seventeen Magazine

Author: Here is Seventeen's story, by Ben Montgomery:

Around 12:15 a.m. on Friday, June 30, 2006, Sarah Rinaldi, 17, and her friend Julia Hultz, 19, used fake IDs to get into Club Prana, a popular bar in Tampa, Florida. Wearing identical outfits—a white spaghetti-strap top and a denim miniskirt—the girls got vodka drinks and hit the dance floor.

While at the club, Sarah took one and a half Xanax pills. They stayed there until 3 a.m., when they headed to Julia's apartment. But by the time they got there, Sarah had passed out, and her boyfriend, Nick Palmer, 20, had to carry her up three flights of stairs. Julia thought she'd be okay. She'd seen Sarah like that before—she'd sleep it off, and the next day they would talk and laugh about their wild night. So Julia just assumed Sarah would be okay, and she helped Nick put Sarah into her bed. But less than 24 hours later, Sarah was dead.

Losing control

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Growing up in Tampa, Sarah lived with both of her parents until they divorced when she was 9. She moved in with her father, the president of a local printing company, and stayed with him until she turned 14. Then she decided to try living with her mother, Julie Rinaldi, who was a few miles away. Soon after moving in with her mom, Sarah started hanging out with a group of kids who skipped school and smoked pot.

One day in the spring of 2003, Ms. Rinaldi got a phone call from a school official who told her that Sarah had skipped her classes. "Where were you?" Ms. Rinaldi demanded to know when she got home that evening. "Just hanging out," Sarah responded. Her mom didn't believe her—and Sarah finally admitted she'd been smoking pot. "You're not to leave this house again without my permission!" Ms. Rinaldi yelled. But Sarah just laughed and walked out the front door.

Growing problem

Sarah continued rebelling—and trying new drugs. At a house party a few months later, she took someone else's Xanax—a prescription drug used to treat anxiety—to get high. She told her friends that it made her less stressed out. By early 2004, her use of a variety of drugs had gotten even worse. It was so bad that Ms. Rinaldi decided to leave Tampa to get Sarah away from her friends, who she thought were a bad influence. They moved to Ocean Springs, Mississippi, where Ms. Rinaldi had a close friend.

But that summer Sarah was once again hanging out with kids who took drugs—and coming home high. Ms. Rinaldi discovered that Sarah was using cocaine and decided to check her into rehab. Sarah went willingly—yet once she was there, she begged to leave. But her mom forced her to stay for treatment. At first it seemed to have worked. After the two-and-a-half-week program ended, Sarah was clean, and they moved back to Tampa to be near family. But her recovery was short-lived: Soon she was hanging out with the same friends.

Several months later Sarah again began taking Xanax that wasn't prescribed to her, telling her friends that the drug helped clear her mind. Then she met a guy who enabled her habit: In the spring of 2006, when she was 17, Sarah began dating Nick Palmer, who she'd met at a party. Nick told her that he was a premed student at the University of South Florida. "I thought she had met a really good guy," Ms. Rinaldi says.

But it turned out that Nick wasn't in college—and he was the one giving Sarah prescription drugs, like Xanax and OxyContin. "Nick would basically give her whatever she wanted," says one of her best friends. So Sarah started taking more pills, often mixing different drugs. Her grades started to slide, and although her mom drove her to Wharton High School every day during the spring semester, Sarah missed 22 out of 45 days of school, spending the time sleeping and getting high. Her friends kept warning her to slow down. "I would say to her, 'One day you're going to end up dead or in jail,'" says her friend Mireille Fernandez, 20. "She'd say, 'I'm fine.' She just loved partying and taking pills."

Fateful night

Before going to Club Prana on June 30, 2006, Sarah took some Xanax pills. She and Julia drank vodka and danced throughout the night, then reportedly Sarah took more Xanax. When they left the club at 3 a.m., Julia was reportedly so drunk, she urinated on the ground in the parking garage. Still she got behind the wheel of her car to drive home. On the way she blew a tire, lost control of her Volkswagen Cabrio, and hit a concrete median. Three sheriff's deputies arrived soon after and noticed Julia and Sarah were wasted. But instead of giving Julia a Breathalyzer test, they let Sarah call Nick, and he drove over to get them.

By the time Sarah, Julia, and Nick arrived at Julia's apartment at around 6:15 a.m., Sarah was unconscious and barely breathing. Nick carried her upstairs and into the apartment and put her on a bed. Then Julia's roommate, Andi Meade, 21, who had worked until almost 4 a.m. and was still awake, saw Sarah and immediately got worried. "You should take her to a hospital. She's got alcohol poisoning," Andi said. "No," Julia insisted, "she's all right." So Andi went to bed. Later on Nick and Julia smoked a joint, and they stayed awake to make sure Sarah was okay. She awoke around 10:30 a.m., went to the bathroom, and asked for a glass of water. Then Julia fell asleep next to Sarah in bed, and Nick crashed on a futon in the living room.

When Julia woke up around 9 p.m., she started screaming: Sarah was unconscious, and vomit was coming out of her mouth. Julia called 911. "Um, the girl is not breathing," she told the dispatcher, as Nick performed CPR on Sarah. Ten minutes later the paramedics arrived and rushed Sarah to a nearby hospital, where nurses cut off her clothes and pumped epinephrine into her 95-pound body to try to revive her. But their attempts to save her failed. At 10:38 p.m. a doctor pronounced Sarah dead.

Lasting pain

As word spread about Sarah's death, many of her friends blamed Nick. "You're a piece of s***," one of them wrote on his MySpace page. But Nick defended himself. "I can still taste her vomit on my lips," he wrote on his own MySpace page. "Trust me, no one is more hurt by it then [sic] me."

A few weeks later the medical examiner—who found two prescription drugs (OxyContin and Xanax), a cough-syrup derivative, and other drugs in Sarah's system—ruled her death an accidental overdose. Today, Ms. Rinaldi wants to prevent other drug-related tragedies. She started the Pink Star Foundation (myspace.com/pinkstarfoundation; pink was Sarah's favorite color) to raise money to send teens to drug rehab. "What happened to Sarah is every parent's worst nightmare," she says. "Now there's an empty place inside me that will never be filled."

GET HELP

For more information about resources for parents and teens regarding prescription drug abuse and other youth behavioral issues, please visit www.notMYkid.org.

Julie Rinaldi has started the Pink Star Foundation (myspace.com/pinkstarfoundation) to raise awareness about what happened to her daughter. Donations can be mailed to:

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