

Butane hash oil: Gresham explosion shatters lives, leaving 1 man dead

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Kevin Tveisme was in his Gresham garage with a buddy last spring making a popular form of hash oil, something he'd learned to do from watching YouTube clips and talking with friends.

It wasn't his first time using butane, a cheap and flammable solvent used in lighters, to extract tetrahydrocannabinol, or THC, from marijuana flowers and leaves. But this time it went horribly wrong.

When the furnace clicked on that afternoon, it ignited a blast that tossed Tveisme through the air, slamming his back into the closed garage door. He was on fire. Stumbling to the side entry of his house, he flung open the door. He thought he'd drop and roll on the carpeted floor of his living room.

But then Tveisme, whose melted skin hung from his hands like gloves, spotted his family sitting on the couch, watching TV. He couldn't bear the thought of his two young sons seeing him burn alive so he bolted through the house and out the front door, collapsing in the yard. He rolled back and forth until the flames were out.

It was then that Tveisme had a sickening realization: He was alone.

He scrambled back to the garage, now engulfed in flames. His friend, Joseph Westom, lay on the concrete floor. Tveisme tried to carry him out but couldn't. He grabbed Westom's legs and dragged him into the yard.

Tveisme heard can after can of butane -- they'd picked up four cases at a convenience store to make hash oil that day -- detonating like bombs, rocking the usually quiet neighborhood. The heat melted an orange nail bucket from Home Depot. It blasted the blue and white webbing off the pair of folding chairs in the garage.

Westom was now alert and on his feet. The old friends limped to the other side of the street to wait for help, neighbors gathering to watch as a fireball consumed the garage of the tidy ranch house. His girlfriend, who had hustled the couple's sons out of the house to protect them from seeing their burning father, waited at the home of a next-door neighbor.

"I'm burned real bad," Westom told his friend.

"We'll be OK," Tveisme said.

The men were rushed to Legacy Emanuel Medical Center, home of the region's only burn unit. Nearly two dozen nurses hustled around Tveisme's charred body, carefully snipping away his blue jeans, the only thing that had protected his legs from burning.

Tveisme never saw his friend again.

Burned over 90 percent of his body, Westom, a bartender from Northeast Portland known by friends and family as a generous guy, died June 14, 18 days after the explosion. He was 35.

Tveisme, 28, spent six weeks in a coma and underwent a dozen surgeries, all involving grafting healthy skin from his legs onto his arms and upper body.

He spent two months in the burn unit and another six weeks at Legacy Good Samaritan Medical Center. He had to learn to walk again. The area around his mouth burned; he underwent speech therapy to help him talk again. He couldn't move his wrists. His right index finger was so badly burned that doctors amputated it. He continues to see a specialist to help move his hands.

His younger son, a toddler, was afraid of him when he first returned home.

"He was pretty scared for a long time," he said.

On a recent spring afternoon, Tveisme sat in the living room of the home he shares with his longtime girlfriend and their boys to talk about what happened. Photos of the couple, taken before the blast, and their kids decorate the room. The skin on Tveisme's arms, once sleeved in pirate tattoos, is now rippled and taut, the result of skin grafts. His face, too, is ruddy, the lower half hidden behind a bushy beard.

A soft-spoken man, Tveisme said he misses Westom, one of his best friends. He thinks of him whenever he steps into his garage, now so meticulously kept it's hard to imagine the horror that unfolded there last spring.

Tveisme reluctantly agreed to talk with The Oregonian. He dreads subjecting himself to criticism and ridicule for something he continues to feel guilty about. But he believes it's important for people to understand the potential toll of making BHO.

His medical bills, covered by health insurance through his employer, amounted to \$1.3 million. He never intended to put his family in harm's way. He thought he was being careful when he turned on three fans to circulate the air in his enclosed garage.

Tveisme at the time was an Oregon medical marijuana cardholder – he cited severe pain as his qualifying condition -- and a daily pot consumer. Since the blast, he's left cannabis behind to focus on his recovery.

He realizes now that he didn't understand the risks involved in making BHO.

"All the things I watched on YouTube," he said. "They never tell you it's dangerous."

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