

Norwalk Citizen

Students find courage to speak out against drugs

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Ginger Katz, CEO & Founder of the Courage to Speak Foundation, presenting at the 8th Annual Courage to Speak Empowering Youth to be Drug Free Family Night

Since finding her 20-year-old son, Ian Eaccarino, dead in his bed from a heroin overdose on Sept. 10, 1996, motivational speaker, author and anti-drug advocate Virginia "Ginger" Katz of Norwalk has told her story thousands of times to parents, children, educators, religious leaders and law-enforcement officials.

The countless retelling hasn't dulled the pain, but it hasn't paralyzed her with inaction either.

At the eighth annual Courage to Speak Empowering Youth to be Drug Free Family Night Tuesday at Norwalk's West Rocks Middle School, her voice quivered and her eyes welled up with tears as she recounted the lengths to which she, her husband, Larry, and Eaccarino's biological father went to save their child from drugs

She also talked about the devastation she felt when she discovered his lifeless body on the morning he was to go into a rehab facility.

"He made an unhealthy decision to use drugs. ... I never thought I would have to bury my son," Katz said, standing in front of a vase of bright yellow sunflowers, which have become a hopeful symbol of the organization she established, the Courage to Speak Foundation.

Katz lost her son, but she was determined to spare other parents her heartbreak, and she was determined to see that young people stayed on the path to their potential without taking a devastating detour into the influence of street drugs, prescription medications, or designer drugs.

"Although I don't have all the answers, I have a mission," Katz said.

"Her goal is to reach as many children as possible, to save them and to spread the word of the harm of drugs," said Kileen Doyle, a member of the Courage to Speak Foundation board of directors.

For almost 16 years, Katz has encouraged children, teens and young adults to reach out and speak out when they or others are in trouble, to have the courage to speak.

"If you see something, say something. It's OK to ask for help," Katz said, adding that the choice of friends someone makes can have a positive or negative effect on their life.

"Friends will bring you up or bring you down. You have to choose them wisely," Katz said to the audience of about 200 people, including many elementary and middle-school students.

"Having the courage to speak means you are capable of doing the right thing, even if you're scared or confused," said Rachel Anthony, 12, a student at Side by Side Community School. She was one of about a dozen children who read aloud letters they composed for Ginger Katz in thanks for her presentations at their schools.

The children also represented kids who have participated in the Courage to Speak Drug Prevention Education Curriculum in their schools taught by health class teachers.



Students speakers from the event listening to the Presentation

Norwalk Police Lt. Ashley Gonzalez said the best resource against drugs is parents.

"Make time for your children," he said. "Make the time to sit and have dinner with him."

Larry Katz, co-founder of the Courage to Speak Foundation, had a message for parents, as well. It is their responsibility to be a parent and not a cool friend to their children. Enabling can only compound a drug problem.

Ginger Katz defined enabling as "allowing a behavior to continue without a consequence ... and enabling perpetuates the disease of addiction." She also talked about the importance of communication between parents and children.

Art and Andrea Gioseffi demonstrated they are already doing that just by attending the event. They were there at the urging of their 10-year-old daughter, Amber, a student at Brookside Elementary School.

"Our daughter felt very strongly about it and she's generally very shy. For her to speak up was pretty intense," Art Gioseffi said.

That is the whole point of Katz's Annual Courage to Speak Empowering Youth to be Drug Free Family Night.

"It's about one thing -- bringing children and parents together to talk openly and honestly about the dangers of drugs," Katz said.

The Gioseffi's children are only elementary-school age, but, Andrea said, "It's never too early" to learn more about drug use.

Amber said she learned about the Family Night event when Larry Katz came to her classroom two weeks ago and read his wife's book, "Sunny's Story," about saving a loved one from drugs as told from the perspective of the family beagle.

"Drugs aren't good for you and I wanted to learn more about them," Amber said.

If Amber's attentiveness and the hundreds of posters and letters created by Norwalk students are any indication, Katz's message is getting through.

"Wow, that story was life changing. ... Ian taught me a lesson never to do drugs. I love the way I am and I wouldn't change myself for anything," Side by Side Community School student Noble Wilson, 10, read from his letter to Katz.

Derek Lu, 13, a student at Roton Middle School, thanked Katz for visiting his school and talking about the dangers of drugs.

Roton Middle School student Keara Meyerson, 12, said she learned from Katz the importance of being a true friend; that rather than remaining silent or keeping a secret if a friend is doing something wrong to speak up because that's the mark of real friendship and may even save a life.

"It only takes one person to make a difference in someone's life and that person is you, Ginger Katz," said Kasim Khan, a seventh-grader from Side by Side Community School.

Lynne Moore, principal of West Rocks Middle School, called Katz's Courage to Speak program and curriculum "invaluable."

"Students learn so much about the dangers of drugs, the names of drugs, the effects of drugs and what they need to do when something's not right, to gather around you three to five people you can trust. That's been her mantra from the beginning," said Moore, who received a Hero Award from the Courage to Speak Foundation, as did David Hay, principal of Brookside Elementary School.

Ria Iosifides received a Volunteer Award; Oscar Destrugue, pastor of El Camino United Methodist Church, received the Angel Award, and Katz presented Lawrence F. Cafero Jr., the Republican Leader for the Connecticut House of Representatives, with her organization's Leadership Award. Cafero served as the host for the Family Night program.

For information about Courage to Speak, its live presentations, videos and drug-prevention curriculum, visit www.couragetospeak.org. For information on Katz's book, "Sunny's Story," visit www.sunnysstory.com.



Ginger Katz presenting while a slideshow with pictures of her son, Ian, play behind her



Ginger & Larry Katz, Founders of the Courage to Speak Foundation



A student from Ponus Ridge Middle School getting up to share her letter



Students speakers from Nathan Hale Middle School read their letters



Lt. Ashley Gonzalez, Norwalk Police Dept., addresses the audience



Ginger & Larry Katz presenting the Courage to Speak Hero Awards to principals Dr. Lynne Moore, West Rocks Middle School, & David Hay, Brookside Elementary School



A student from Roton Middle School reads his letter



Community Health Educator and Courage to Speak-Courageous Parenting 101[®] Facilitator, Millie Seguinot, with 7, of the over 50, parents who took the course in Spanish this past October at West Rocks Middle School, Norwalk, CT.