

strong one at the funeral. I held the many young girls, pretty in their long black dresses, in my arms as they cried uncontrollably. And I comforted the boys, who to me now looked more like men than boys although they sobbed like little children. Their grief left me even more determined to devote myself to halting the creeping evil of drugs. But before I could teach others, I had much to learn. I applied for and received scholarship money to attend courses on addiction and recovery, and I researched drug abuse on the Internet. Once I felt ready, I had to decide where to begin.

A Principal Becomes an Ally

Armed with my new wealth of substance abuse information, I approached Dewey Amos, the principal of Norwalk (CT) High School. When Dewey came to Norwalk in the late 1980s, he was the housemaster in charge of Ian's house. Later, he became the school's principal. He knew Ian well and was rocked by his death. The two of us talked about Ian's high school years—his friends; his sports; and his mercurial relationship with his first love, their public displays of affection and sometimes anger, and how Dewey had called them into his office more than once to tell them to behave. As we reminisced, we both cried. He had not lost one of his students to drugs up to that point, and Ian's death had a profound effect upon him.

Our meeting was cathartic, but more than that, it was motivating. By the end, Dewey promised to devise a plan for halting drug abuse in his school, and I agreed to develop a program to relate Ian's story to students. We both knew that what we were proposing to do would take courage because the silence that surrounds the disease of addiction is deafening. To succeed, we would have to find a way to inspire others to break through the patterns of denial and squarely face the risks and consequences of drug abuse.

Taking Action

True to his word, Dewey began working with his staff to develop a plan to fight drug use at Norwalk. He knew that if he was going to change behavior, he would first have to change attitudes. There are many reasons why schools—private as well as public—cover up their drug problems and claim not to have them when, in fact, nearly all schools do. People move into a community based partly on the reputation of its schools and drugs scare them away. Teachers and staff members with career ambitions want to be associated with a winning school, not one tarred by rumors of drug abuse or police arrests. Worst of all, hostile parents often storm the principal's office complaining and refusing to believe the truth about their children.

In spite of the resistance he knew he would face, Dewey devised a bold zero-tolerance drug prevention plan that includes many elements:

Consequences. Any student caught with drugs will be suspended for 10 days and not allowed back in school until that student's parents agree that upon readmission the school may drug test their child at its discretion.

Security. A beefed-up security team of six will be stationed in the halls to monitor student activity during school hours and after-school activities.

Parents. Parents who protest the school's disciplinary measures against their child will be invited to a conference with their child and all others involved in the incident that required the discipline. The meeting will go on until the truth comes out, and once it does, parents, school officials, and the student will agree to a course of action.

Police. The school will maintain a relationship with local police to identify students who are serious violators (e.g., gang members, drug dealers, and gamblers), and appropriate measures will be taken to rehabilitate these students or isolate them if they are repeatedly breaking the law. (Parents' fear of arrest is understandable, but few realize that student offenders are usually required to do community service and that once that requirement is satisfied, the stain is removed from their record. Kids get a second chance.)

Counseling. The school will expand its partnership with local adolescent counseling services to provide professional help (both in-house and off campus) for troubled teens. Counselors, who often don't see drug abuse in their clients because they are concentrating on other dysfunctions, will be encouraged to consider the possibility of drug use as a catalyst to the behavior that got the teens into trouble.

Positive alternatives. The school will create clubs and programs to offer positive alternative activities for students, such as an Entrepreneur's Club, which takes students to markets to buy goods at wholesale prices and bring them back to the school to sell at retail; links to programs run for youths by local clergy; and a school Jobs Program that allows kids to make honest money.

It took time, but Dewey's plan became fully implemented and widely praised. It has reduced drug use among Norwalk's students by their measure and has eliminated dealing in the school. Today, the school's teachers and staff members who were reluctant to go along with the plan are glad to be associated with a school that backs up its zero-tolerance policy with action, and they take pride in being part of a school that has successfully stood up to its drug problem. Norwalk students who feel pressured to try drugs use the school's swift and sure action policy as an excuse not to. It gives them a badly needed refusal tool.

The last facet of Dewey's plan called for speakers to be brought into the school on a regular basis. Some carry messages to students to inspire them to lock onto a plan for their future. Others, like me, talk directly about drugs and behavioral problems related to drug use. This drug prevention-speaking plan began with my presentation in early 1997, when I took my first stab at telling Ian's story.

The Courage To Speak Foundation Is Born
Dewey assembled 150 kids to hear my debut. I told this first audience of Ian's academic and sports successes, and I showed them pictures of my handsome son smiling his

blinding smile from grade school to the last days of his life. I spoke openly and plainly about the down days, describing bizarre events like the night a boy set Ian's car on fire in front of our house and burned down a tree on the lawn. I thought it was an accident until the next day when we found beer bottles next to the car with gasoline in them—crude Molotov cocktails—and realized that it was arson. I later learned that violence such as this goes hand in hand with drug use because of money owed, drugs undelivered, or just plain drug-induced hostility. At the time, Ian's car fire made no sense to me because at that point I had no knowledge of his drug use. A fight he picked at school concerned me, but I chalked it up to youthful indiscretion.

What was ultimately Ian's fatal addiction, I explained, began in eighth grade with a puff of tobacco, a sip of beer, and a bit of weed. As he progressed through high school, Ian's grades were respectable, and he played dazzling lacrosse his junior and senior years. Ian won the lacrosse "Attackman" award during his last season with 26 goals and 17 assists.

Because of his success in sports and academics and his popularity throughout high school, I did not realize that he was using and dealing, except for one incident that made me vigilant. When Ian was in 10th grade, he and some friends were picked up by the police, who found marijuana in the car. Ian denied smoking it, but I decided to have him drug tested just the same. I insisted that he be tested twice, the second time without warning because I had a gut feeling that he had switched his first urine sample. I was right. The test results declared the first sample negative and the second positive for marijuana.

Parents, I told my audience, have good instincts and they must learn to trust them. I discovered after Ian died that the negative sample belonged to a girlfriend's baby brother because, the girl told me, "None of the kids were clean." After that incident, Ian continually tested clean. I believed that Ian was back on track and I had high hopes for my son, especially when he went off to college.

I stopped worrying about drugs until Ian's dad called to say Ian was snorting heroin in college. My breath was taken away. My life changed. When Ian first came home from college, I was ashamed. I spoke to him about his drug abuse and vigilantly looked for clues that he might be using. But the better I got at sniffing out clues, the better he got at hiding any evidence, wearing sunglasses to hide his eyes; stashing pot in his stereo speakers; and changing his clothes before he came home so I would not smell tobacco, alcohol, or pot.

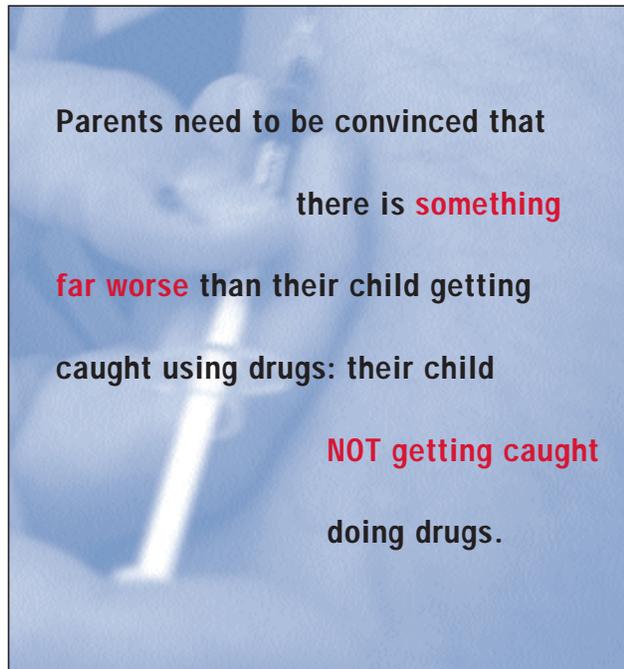
With some difficulty, we convinced Ian to enter a day treatment program in June of the summer he died and, once again, the problem appeared to be fading. Ian's last summer was the best summer of all. From June through September, he played tennis with me, golf with his father, and worked reliably and responsibly for the town park system. But more than that, our charming, athletic son was



back smiling his blinding smile. That happy summer filled me with optimism.

But drug addiction has a way of recurring. On September 9th, Ian spent the afternoon with the kids he had shared drugs with at college and, in their company, he relapsed. That evening, I discovered that he had snorted heroin. When I asked him about it, he cursed and threatened to storm out of the house. I stopped him at the door and said softly, "If you want my help, just ask me." He did ask for help and agreed to call his doctor to be admitted to a rehabilitation program the next day. Because he made this choice willingly, I was soothed and hopeful, but the sad truth is that it was too late. Ian had ingested too much heroin on September 9th, so his resolve to get help had not come in time to save him. He died in his sleep that night.

I wrapped up my first presentation with advice that I have continued to give to children for six years. I urge each and every one of them to find adults in their lives who will listen to their issues and concerns and their frustrations and fears. Find a trusted relative, a favorite teacher, a coach, or a



clergy member and talk out your problems. Hold nothing in, I tell them. When kids are downhearted, angry, or confused, they often make bad choices and turn to alcohol, drugs, and sexual promiscuity that lead to depression, feelings of isolation, and increased anger. Ian had bottled things up, and it had killed him.

When I finished speaking, teachers and staff members, as well as students came forward to tell me their personal stories and reveal problems in their inner circles. One student sent me an e-mail message that read, "I don't want to use drugs because I wouldn't want to hurt my mother." Others confessed problems to me and asked me to help them find adults to confide in. An adult wrote to me, saying, "Expecting another drug abuse prevention presentation, we were completely unprepared for how powerful this...would be." If I had any doubts about speaking out, the reaction of my first audience dispelled them. With my presentation, I hoped to encourage others to summon the courage to speak out about the substance abuse problems affecting their lives and look for solutions to them. Hence the name of my foundation: The Courage To Speak.

The Signs of Abuse

I speak to students and adults, and in the adult program, I point out that if I did not fully appreciate the seriousness of Ian's habit, I was not the only one. His pediatrician, his teachers and counselors, even some of his friends failed to notice his drug abuse. In fact, the psychiatrist who counseled him during his last summer wrote in his notes, "Ian is not at risk."

What 20-year-old who has been snorting heroin for four months is not at risk? It is human nature for people to deny the unthinkable. We have been raised to think that drug

addicts are down-and-out people living on the streets, not winning kids on track for success. Yet it is just those kids who, seduced by drugs, become tomorrow's homeless or addicted adults. If we are going to save our students from drugs, we must recognize and acknowledge the unmistakable signs of drug abuse early and take action, as Dewey Amos does, as soon as the signs of drug use are sighted.

Some signs of substance abuse are:

- A sudden drop in grades or change in social performance
- Withdrawal, isolation, depression, or fatigue
- Truancy
- Excessive influence by peers or change of friends
- Hostility and lack of cooperation
- Deteriorating relationships
- Loss of interest in hobbies or sports
- Changes in sleeping and eating habits
- Evidence of drugs or paraphernalia
- Physical changes, such as red eyes, runny nose, frequent sore throats, rapid weight loss, or bruises from falls.

Each year, 15,000 children die from abusing drugs and many more fall short of their potential because of addiction, but they can be saved if their abuse is nipped in the bud. When teachers and school staff members see students exhibiting behavior that conforms to the signs of drug use, they should take swift action for those caught with drugs, get parents involved, and followup with drug testing and rehabilitation. Parents need to be convinced that there is something far worse than their child getting caught using drugs: their child *not* getting caught doing drugs. By the time Ian's use was uncovered, he was already in the grip of addiction.

Using discipline and a guiding hand as his tools, Dewey has markedly reduced his school's drug problem. With candor and honesty as my tools, I have changed the way tens of thousands of people approach drug abuse. We both have been honored for our work by schools, service organizations, and government for which we are grateful. But the greatest rewards seem to come when we least expect them.

A father whose family was falling apart because of his daughter's drug abuse called me to say "My daughter is alive, safe, and drug-free and our marriage is on solid ground because we listened to the Courage to Speak presentation and got help." At the 2002 Norwalk High School graduation ceremony, a girl who had been caught with Ecstasy, suspended, reinstated, and drug tested, thanked Dewey as she picked up her diploma. "You saved me," she said, "and I will never forget you." PL

Ginger Katz lives with her husband in Connecticut. The Connecticut Post named Ginger Katz Woman of the Year in Connecticut, and the Honorable John G. Rowland, governor of Connecticut, proclaimed October 3, 2002, "Courage To Speak Day" in Connecticut. For more information about the Courage To Speak Foundation, call 877-431-3295 or visit www.couragetospeak.org.