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# CONNECTICUT POST

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## Decade of Dedication

*Ginger Katz's Courage to Speak anti-drug program marks 10 years*

No matter what Virginia "Ginger" Katz has accomplished in the past 10 years there is one cold, hard fact of her life that will never change. The Courage to Speak Foundation, an anti-drug program she co-founded with her husband, Larry, has helped thousands of kids stay off drugs. The couple has collected a wealth of local and national accolades for their work. But the bottom line is that Ginger's son, Ian, whom she lost to a drug overdose a decade ago, is never coming back.

"I would give all the awards back if I could have Ian back," she said. In 1996, Ian, 20, who had battled drugs for some time, died the day before he was going to enter a drug rehabilitation program. The loss was devastating, but Katz took her pain and parlayed it into something positive — encouraging other teens and preteens to stay drug-free.

She and Larry Ian's stepfather co-founded Courage to Speak in 1997. Through the organization, they travel throughout the country, telling their story to students, teachers and parents, and hoping it gets through. Ginger has also developed a drug prevention curriculum for seventh-graders, implemented at about 10 schools throughout Fairfield County.

The goal of all of this was to start a conversation about drugs and teens, to keep it from being the taboo subject that it was around the time of Ian's death.

"When Ian died, one of the big things I noticed was that there was this

silence around the illness of addiction," Katz said. "I wanted to speak out. [I thought] if it's happening to our family, then it's happening to other families."

In January, it will be the foundation's 10th anniversary — at least by their count. Though the organization was technically founded in 1997, Katz said she counts the anniversary from

prevention, including keynote speaker Robert C. Charles, former assistant secretary of state for international narcotics and law enforcement under former Secretary of State Colin Powell, and former staff director for Speaker of the House Dennis Hastert.

Charles, who lives in Maryland and now works as a consultant in the private sector, said he's been aware of Courage to Speak for several years and has even exchanged some e-mails with Ginger. As a longtime anti-drug advocate, Charles, a former Bridgeport resident, said he's impressed with her strength and honesty. "This is a deadly serious topic and what Ginger does brilliantly is get people [involved in it] in a personal and compelling way," Charles said. "It takes enormous courage for her to relive a nightmare every time she gets in front of a group."

Since the foundation started, Ginger Katz has delivered more than 600 prevention presentations. In addition to her middle school drug prevention curriculum, she's developing corresponding curricula for high school and elementary school students. She's also been involved

with the issue on a national level, on the advisory board of the Partnership for a Drug Free America, and in 2004, she received a Recognition Award from the federal Drug Enforcement Agency and the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Other honors include being named the



the year that Ian died since that was when the idea for Courage to Speak sprouted. She is kicking off the celebration a few months early, with a legislative and community breakfast Oct. 26 at the Shorehaven Golf Club in Norwalk. The event will feature major figures in the field of substance abuse

Connecticut Post Woman of the Year in 2000.

To the couple, the landmark anniversary represents a decade of watching kids connect with their anti-drug message.

Katz said she gets piles of correspondence from students, parents and teachers who've been affected by her presentations. Their letters often mention a friend or loved one with a drug problem, or talk about how the presentation has persuaded them to banish drugs and alcohol from their own lives.

Maggie Meriwether, health educator at Ridgefield High School, has brought Katz to speak at the school three times. Meriwether said the students respond to Katz because she's telling a story, and not just giving them a lecture.

"What I like about her story and what the students like about her story is that it's so personal," Meriwether said. "Because it's so personal and so painful, it grabs their attention and holds it."

Not only does she keep students captivated while speaking, but Meriwether suspects that Katz's message sticks with the kids after the presentation is over. "Kids need this message reinforced," Meriwether said. "Every little bit helps."

Larry agreed that people — particularly kids — seem deeply affected by the talks, which is a sad irony. "Ian didn't listen to us, and now we have thousands of kids who listen to us."

One of the goals of Courage to Speak has been reaching out to parents as well as kids. In addition to sponsoring a support group for parents who have lost children to substance abuse,

the organization holds family nights, where parents and kids can hear Ginger Katz speak together.

Many parents don't know what kind of drugs their kids will encounter, how common these drugs are, or even how they'll be used, Katz said. At one time, that included her. "When my son called me up from college, crying, because he was snorting heroin, I didn't even know that you could snort heroin," she said. "The reality is, it's a lot more dangerous out there than when I was growing up."

Since the couple started the foundation, she said, attitudes about drug addiction have changed somewhat. In particular, people are less antsy about discussing the topic than they were a decade ago. "The subject prior to this seemed like a taboo subject," she said. "We're talking about this more."

Still, they recognize that there's a long way to go in educating kids, parents and the community at large about the pitfalls of substance abuse.

"Many parents are still totally surprised, for example, that the average age for alcohol use in our state is 11 and the national average is 12," Larry said. "There's a denial factor here. It's very painful for parents to face up to the reality that their son or daughter is on drugs."

The anniversary may be important to the Katz's and their cause, but it also comes near the end of what has been a whirlwind year for the couple. Having lived through one tragedy — Ian's death — they recently went through another, albeit it more minor, one.

In June, the attic of their home caught fire. Though no one was hurt and the house is still standing, it did

require the Katz's to move out temporarily while the damage was repaired. And, to an already emotional situation even more intense, that same day, their dog, Abby, ran away.

The Katz's, as usual, bore the situation well, but the people they've touched were devastated for them. "I had calls from principals and teachers [asking if we were all right]," said Ginger Katz. "One little boy wrote me and said 'First your son dies, then your house burns, then your dog runs away. You do so much, you deserve to have the best things happen to you.'"

But this story, at least, has a happy ending. Abby returned early the next morning and has been with the family ever since. And, the Katz's have found temporary lodging while their home is under repair — and what lodging.

They're renting a house on the water in Norwalk, and Katz said that her new digs are something of a blessing, a place to recharge from all the hectic stuff in their lives while contemplating the lovely view. "A friend told me that God works in mysterious ways," she said. "He probably thought I needed a rest and time to reflect on where I was going."

The community and legislative breakfast "The Courage to Speak — A Decade of Empowering Youth to Be Drug Free" will take place from 7:30 to 9:15 a.m. Oct. 26 at Shorehaven Golf Club in East Norwalk.

Seating is limited and reservations are required. For more information, call Ginger Katz at 247-3975 or e-mail her at [gkcourage@aol.com](mailto:gkcourage@aol.com) and visit [www.couragetospeak.org](http://www.couragetospeak.org)