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By Meg Barone

Correspondent

2000 Woman Of The Year - Ginger Katz

Virginia "Ginger" Katz has been chosen the 2000 Woman of the Year, an honor the 52-year-old Norwalk woman could live without. It's not that she is ungrateful for the designation as the Connecticut Post's ninth annual Woman of the Year from among 87 nominees, but, truth be told, she'd rather have her son than all the awards the world could bestow.

It was the tragic death of her son Ian - who would have been 25 today - that fueled Katz's crusade against substance abuse, which, in turn, brought her numerous accolades and this year's nomination by Louise Simpson, 53, of New Canaan.

"There is no one more deserving than Ginger. She has taken a tragedy in her own family and turned it into something positive for the community," said Simpson, a state representative for Tough Love International, a non-profit self-help organization aimed at getting people to take responsibility for their actions.

An accidental drug overdose on September 10, 1996 claimed Ian's life. Katz found her unresponsive son lying in bed hours before he planned to enter a drug treatment facility.

There is no pain like a mother's loss of a child, and Katz said she thought she would never again see the sun peek through the clouds that hung over her life. But several rays have pierced the darkness.

She has the love and support of her husband of 17 years, Larry - Ian's stepfather; she is proud of her daughter Candy, a special athlete who has won numerous medals in Special Olympic competitions; she is competing herself on the state and national level in Senior Olympics events; and, most importantly, she is empowering families to deal with drug abuse.

Katz found the courage to reach out to parents and teens to prevent other families from experiencing a similar tragedy within six months of Ian's death. With encouragement from Dewey Amos - principal of Norwalk High School where Ian had gone to school, and her parish priest - the Rev. Jim Murphy of St. Thomas the Apostle Church, Katz and husband Larry began making drug prevention presentations in their own community.

Katz recognized a great need for honest discussion about youthful addictions, so she established the non-profit Courage to Speak Foundation, and since 1997 has made about 160 drug prevention presentations here in Connecticut, and several more in New York. She is now getting calls from throughout the country, and will speak to parents and students in the Bahamas in April.

"Every child will be exposed to drugs, so parents need to find out everything they can," she said. Children are educated about the dangers of alcohol and drug abuse by teachers, medical professionals, law enforcement officials, but they can never hear it enough, she said. "Drug dealers are relentless because it's a business, so we have to be relentless," Katz said.

"I just hope I'm making a difference in someone's life, in kids' lives. When a child comes to a crossroad in their life, when they're going to make a decision about drug use, I want them to remember Ian's story and take the path that shines Ian's light. I want them to have

the courage to say No,' I want them to know drugs and alcohol are not healthy for them," Katz said.

"Her story, as a mother, impacts on kids doing drugs now who say, after hearing her, they'll never do drugs again; and her story impacts kids who have never experimented who realize it's not worth it to even try. There is no way to measure how many kids have been prevented from doing drugs, but I'm positive she has impacted thousands of young lives," Simpson said.

"I feel that Ginger has enormous courage. Her ability to speak again and again from the heart is inspiring. In each presentation she relives that pain over and over and over, but she wants to prevent other parents from experiencing the horror she went through," Simpson said.

The name Katz gave to her foundation - The Courage to Speak - was not incidental. It sprang from her own private fears, and her desire to motivate others to confront substance abuse. "I used to be afraid of public speaking, but now I can't wait to get up there to get the message out and talk to people about it. Denial is such a big piece of drug abuse. We have to confront it, we have to talk about it. I talk about the code of silence among families, among friends," she said.

"There are so many things that happened to Ian and we were not privy to it," Katz said. Some of Ian's friends, and even some parents of friends, were aware of his drug problem but didn't divulge it to the Katzes or to Ian's biological father.

During a presentation earlier this month (Dec) Katz told about 600 Milford middle school students, "Your parents love you very much. It would pain them so much if you harm yourself (by abusing drugs or alcohol)." Larry Katz told them that parents are a child's "number one support system. Talk to them about what's going on in your life."

Ginger Katz urges those students who may not be able to talk with their parents to find three to five trusting adults with whom they can discuss anything. "There's pain in growing up. If you keep it inside, risky behaviors come out, whether it's drug and alcohol abuse, sexual promiscuity, even driving too fast," she said. It's great to discuss serious issues with peers but adults can often help solve problems, whether it's speak," Katz said.

Through the Courage to Speak Foundation Katz helps parents recognize risky behaviors and warning signs, and confront denial about their own children's substance abuse. "We discuss denial and the enabling that surrounds the disease of addiction. We discuss early use of marijuana and alcohol as a gateway to other, more serious drugs," Katz said. Some people scoff at the idea that marijuana and alcohol use contribute to more serious addictions later, but Katz said the proof is indisputable.

Marijuana is minimized because people remember back to the 60s, but marijuana today is 50 times the strength and is often laced with other drugs such as angel dust (PCP), cocaine and heroine, she said. "It isn't the same as when they were growing up. The drugs are stronger and more lethal. It's a different ballgame," Katz said.

Citing some troubling statistics from Drugs Don't Work!, The Governor's Prevention Partnership, Katz said oil is the number two industry in the world. Drug trafficking is the number one industry. It's a \$400 billion a year industry "and the targets are our children," she said. The first drug and alcohol use by children in the United States is age 12. In Connecticut it's age 11, she said. And in the state's most recent survey, 13 percent of seventh graders and 28 percent of eleventh graders admitted to being drunk in the last week. The term drunk' was defined as consuming five or more drinks. "Make no mistake, alcohol is a drug, Katz said.

Originally from Queens, N.Y., Katz has lived in Norwalk for 20 years. As the mother of a daughter with developmental disabilities, Katz worked as an advocate for more support in the school system for special needs students, and was instrumental in organizing the first special education PTA in Norwalk. "That served as a training ground for what I'm doing now," she said.

And her physical prowess on the basketball court, in a boat and in running shoes has given her some insight into handling the media, which Katz expects to do more of as she takes the Courage to Speak to a larger audience in coming years, with national speaking engagements, and, perhaps, a book. Katz is the founder and team captain of the Hot Shots Senior Olympic Basketball team, ranked ninth in the country in the age 50 to 54 category. Husband Larry is the team's coach. The team, and Katz, have been featured several times on national television, including on NBC's NBA Inside Stuff.

Katz has won numerous medals - gold, silver and bronze - at senior Olympics events in basketball, tennis (singles, mixed, and doubles), and track. She is currently ranked seventh in the US in the 100-meter dash in her age category. "I love running. It's a passion," Katz said. Larry and Ginger together won a silver medal in tennis, mixed doubles, at the state games last June which served as a qualifier for the national competition this summer. "I'm looking forward to going to Baton Rouge, Louisiana, in July 2001 for the senior national games. I'll be competing in basketball, tennis and four individual running events. I'm getting tired thinking about it," Katz said, yet in the next breath she expressed disappointment that she cannot compete in rowing. Although she qualified, national regulation only allow athletes to compete in three sports at the national games.

Katz has found a way to merge her love of sports with her mission to end drug use. She created the Hot Shots Hoops Challenge last April to raise money for the Courage to Speak Foundation, in which municipal officials were pitted against her senior basketball team. Teresa Weatherspoon, of the WNBA's New York Liberty, served as celebrity coach. This year, the Cablevision Courage to Speak All Star Girls Basketball Classic will be held at Norwalk High School, April 6, 7 p.m., featuring an exhibition game with 24 high school girls, and at half time, a foul-shooting and slam-dunk competition for elementary through high school students.

The first public viewing of her new drug prevention video will be held on Jan. 30, 7 p.m., also at Norwalk High School, and will be followed by a panel discussion on youth drug abuse. The program is open to the public free of charge, and Spanish interpretation will be available.

"I think that Ginger is an outstanding woman. She has drive and enthusiasm, she visualizes something and makes it happen," Larry Katz said.

For more information about The Courage to Speak Foundation call Katz at 1-877-431-3295, or visit her website at www.couragetospeak.org.