

Couple tries to prevent tragedy by speaking about their own

By KIM WIEDMAN, Daily News

A picture of a baby boy held by his mother flashes on a screen in front of the crowd, followed by several more including a photograph of a small boy eating an ice cream cone upside down, then a picture of the same boy in his ball uniform with his team, then a teenager dressed in a tuxedo at prom with his date, a graduate receiving his degree, and finally, a young man sitting on the beach.

After the picture of the young man on the beach fades from the screen, the photographs started back at the beginning with the photograph of the baby held by his mother.

The young man's life wasn't further captured in photographs because it came to a tragic end when he died of a drug overdose seven years ago at the age of 20.

The photographs continued to flash before the eyes of the crowd as the mother of Ian, Ginger Katz, spoke to the those gathered about the loss of her son.

Katz and her husband, Larry, who reside in Norwalk, Conn., have given five presentations titled "The Courage to Speak" in Effingham County over the past two days, including presentations at Effingham and Teutopolis high schools and a presentation for the entire community Thursday night at St. Anthony's Memorial Hospital, Effingham. With two presentations scheduled today, the couple hopes to get the word out across the community about the dangers of drugs and to open the eyes of students, parents, teachers and community members to these dangers.

Teutopolis High School seniors Natasha Rauch and Kelsey Westendorf, who attended the assembly Thursday morning, said "Courage to Speak" was inspiring.

"It was really good, really good. It was really inspiring," said Rauch. "Hopefully, it will have a positive effect."

Parents and community members who attended the public presentation Thursday night agreed with what students had said earlier - the presentation is surely to reach out and touch lives.

Debra Bussman and Jean Schuette, both who are parents of teenagers, attended the presentation together.

Bussman said she and her daughter have an open relationship, but that her daughter is at that rebellious stage.

"I have teenagers, so it really hit home," said Bussman, in regard to the presentation.

Schuette agreed, saying that having teenagers, she has had experience

with alcohol abuse.

"(Ginger) didn't give up. Her life didn't end there," said Schuette. "She had the courage to continue to help make a difference in the lives of others who are going through this."

Katie Kroeger of Effingham County Snowball, who attended Thursday night's presentation, said she hopes parents are aware of what is going on in their children's lives.

"The power of the drug once they get into it - kids don't understand that the power is there, and parents need to be more aware and need to take a stand," she said. "I hope they will learn to have enough courage to say no. If they learn factual information and understand it, they will be able to make good decisions. It gets harder every year for the kids."

By traveling across the nation, Ginger and Larry are hoping to share their story.

On the morning of Sept. 10, 1996, Ginger Katz's life changed forever.

She woke up that morning after getting one of the best nights of sleep she can remember. The night before, her son, Ian, held her in his arms and rocked her to sleep. He said he was ready to get help and agreed to go to see a doctor the next day. He was going to be checked into a rehabilitation center. Ian had gotten help in the past, but Ginger was optimistic that this time it would work - that her son would be able to beat his addiction.

Around 4 on the morning of the 10th, Ian's dog, Sunny, came into Ginger's room and jumped on the bed, something he was not allowed to do. She shooed him down. She was still partially asleep. She didn't realize he was trying to tell her something.

The next morning at 6 she got up and got ready to meet a friend for a morning run. When she went downstairs where Ian's room was, she heard the television from his room blaring and wondered how he could sleep with all that racket.

She went into his room. There he lay as if he were fast asleep. For a minute, she thought he was asleep. His arms were outstretched at his sides as he lay on his back in bed. His eyes were closed. As she got closer, she saw blood by his mouth. She tried to wake him up. He wouldn't stir. She began screaming for help, for her husband. She called 911. Her son had overdosed on heroine.

"He couldn't help but do it one more time and that time it killed him," said Ginger.

Ginger admits that at first she didn't want anyone to know how her son died. Although she did not want to face the truth, she and Larry decided to share their suffering in hopes of preventing others from the same suffering.

"I am here today to share with you my story," she said. "Addiction is a

disease. I clearly understand it now. I didn't when Ian was alive."

When talking about her son, Ginger described him as a beautiful boy who grew into a handsome young man. She said he was very bright and sensitive. He participated in sports, made good grades in school and was popular, having many friends.

Ian's drug addiction began in eighth grade when he began smoking cigarettes, followed by smoking marijuana and drinking beer.

"I don't underestimate those drugs anymore," said Ginger. "I would not be standing here today if it weren't for those drugs. I don't underestimate them."

During his freshman year of high school, she got a call from a police officer telling her he had found her son smoking marijuana with a few other boys, she said.

Ian was taken down to the station, but the officer let him go home without as much as a slap on the wrist, which Ginger now believes was a mistake.

"He gave a clear message to Ian. Ian was probably thinking that it was no big deal," she said, admitting that she too was in denial that her son had a drug problem after speaking with him. "Ian told me he didn't even like marijuana and it was the driver who was using. This was denial on my part.

"Parents want to believe their children. They want to trust their children."

When Ginger began to realize her son had a drug problem, she took him in for a physical and asked the doctor to give Ian a drug test, which the doctor expressed was not necessary. After much persuasion, the doctor agreed to test Ian's urine and asked Ginger to bring in a sample.

When Ginger went to collect the sample the next morning, Ian didn't have it, but promised that he would give her a sample the next morning. The next morning, Ian handed her the sample, but she said the minute she looked into his eyes, she knew it wasn't his urine.

"We were very close, and I could see it in his eyes," she said. "My gut instinct told me he was doing drugs."

Ginger took the sample to the doctor, but insisted the doctor get a sample from Ian on the spot. She then asked the doctor to test both samples, and the doctor told her he thought it was unnecessary because Ian would never do anything like that. But the doctor tested both samples, and what Ginger feared to be true was true. The sample he had given her that morning did not match the sample taken later that day at the doctor's office. The morning sample was clean, and the afternoon sample showed he had been smoking marijuana.

After Ian's death, she was told by one of his friends that the urine sample was from her baby brother and that Ian couldn't get a

sample from one of his friends because none of them were clean either.

Following the testing, Ian went into counseling and took several other drug tests as months progressed. The tests came back negative for drugs. Ginger believed her son was back on the right track and had a bright future.

"We thought the problems all went away," she said.

Ian graduated by the "skin of his teeth" and showed little interest in attending college, said Ginger. When she confronted him with not applying to college, the next week Ian began to fill out applications and was accepted to three schools.

He enrolled in the University of Hartford, but Ginger said she began noticing signs that made her think her son was using drugs again. After Ian saw a counselor, Ginger was told her son was just having a hard time adjusting from high school to college - he was misdiagnosed. After Ian's death, Ginger discovered that Ian had been using drugs again.

"I found out that he used PCP that summer. The counselor had misdiagnosed him," she said.

In October of his freshman year of college, Ian was in a fight and was hit over the head with a beer bottle. Administrators at the school were ready to suspend Ian, but his biological Dad instead he was given community service hours. After completing only 36 of the 100 hours, Ian was once again let off of the hook and given a pass - once again reinforcing that it must not be that big of a deal, said Ginger.

In September of his sophomore year of college, a young man introduced three boys to heroine, said Ginger. One boy got scared, one boy got sick and one boy got addicted.

Ian began using heroine, and before he knew it, he had a major drug problem. Five months after he began using heroine, he called his biological father pleading for help and asked his father not to tell his mother or stepfather about the addiction.

His father entered him into a program, and three days later, Ian checked himself out of the rehabilitation center and was ready to move on with his life without drugs.

Eventually, Ian's father told his mother about his heroine addiction. **She say's that is one reason why she named her program "The Courage To Speak." Such silence surrounds addiction.**

Ginger said when she hung up the phone after hearing the news, Larry saw the look on her face and asked her what was wrong.

"I told him my son is snorting heroine, and my son is going to die. Ian is going to die. ... I have never felt so powerless," she said.

Shortly after, Ian moved back in with his mother and stepfather, and

transferred to the University of Connecticut for his junior year.

Once again, he started using drugs.

Ginger decided she had to get tough because Ian was in denial that he had a problem, and she couldn't sit and watch her son destroy his life.

One night, Ginger found evidence her son was using, and she took all of his clothes out of the closet and put them on the front porch step.

"I had to do this because he was not getting help. He didn't even know he had a problem," she said. "It was really, really hard, but I knew it was the right thing to do."

For the next two days, she went on runs to the beach, where Ian worked. When Ian saw her, he chased after her wanting to talk, but she ignored him.

On the third day, Ginger drove to the beach and asked Ian to meet her and Larry at the counselor's office the next day.

Ian showed up for the appointment and agreed to enroll in a drug program. He then returned home to live.

That summer, Ginger describes as the summer she got her son back. Ian was no longer using drugs, and their relationship began to redevelop into what the two had once shared before drugs came into their lives.

"Ian decided to go through with the program, and my son came back to me finally. That is the summer I got Ian back," she said.

But as the summer came to a close, her son left her once again and went to drugs after hanging around with some of his buddies, including the boy who gave him his first dose of heroine.

After his relapse, he came to his mother and told her he needed help. For the first time in several years, Ginger was optimistic. She was going to get her son back this time. This time he could finally see he had a problem and he was willing to take steps to get help. Tomorrow they would go to see the doctor, and he would be enrolled into a rehabilitation program.

And the next day the calendar turned to Sept. 10, 1996.

The man who gave him his first dose of heroine a year earlier gave him the last dose he would take that ended his life.

Ginger wrote in her journal after Ian's death that she lost her son long before that tragic day.

"The drugs robbed you and me of a relationship. I lost you long before you died."

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