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FINDING THE COURAGE TO SPEAK

By Leslie Chess Feller

"I am here to tell you about my son Ian who died at age 20 of a heroin overdose," said Ginger Katz to the 11th graders in a Health Education class at Staples High School in Westport.

"That last night, after he'd relapsed again, he came to me full of remorse. He said, 'I'm sorry, Mom. I want to go see the doctor in the morning.' But the next morning, I found him dead. Never did I think he would do it one more time." After their son's death, Ginger and Larry Katz, residents of Norwalk, formed the Courage to Speak Foundation Inc., a nonprofit organization aimed at fostering open communication about the prevention of alcohol and other drug use among young people.

"We have to break the code of silence around substance abuse," Mrs. Katz said. "Denial and deception are both part of the disease."

The couple has spent the last two years telling Ian's story to school and youth groups in Fairfield County, sharing their grief and the lessons learned with college, high school, middle and elementary school students and their parents. With perfect hindsight, Mrs. Katz said she now can recognize that, like many youngsters, her son's involvement with drugs began in middle school.

Studies conducted by the Connecticut Alcohol and Drug Policy Council indicate that the age of first use of tobacco, alcohol and marijuana, "the gateway drugs," as the council describes them, has been dropping steadily during the past decade. Eighth graders who used cigarettes, alcohol, marijuana and inhalants in 1997 said they began when they were 11 to 12 years of age. Such youngsters have an 80 percent greater chance of using cocaine by the time they are 20.

Wake-up call to parents: Drug use frequently start in middle school.

Recent surveys prepared by the council indicated that one in 10 of the state's junior high school students in 1995 did not know whether or not regular use of cigarettes, marijuana or cocaine was harmful. Drug prevention professionals say that adolescents' perceptions of the negative consequences of drug and alcohol use are accurate predictors of the choices they will ultimately make.

A 1997 survey conducted by The National Parents' Resource Institute for Drug Education focused on children in Grades 4 - 6. Responses to their questionnaires revealed that sniffing glue and other inhalants was occurring at significant levels even with the youngest students and that the incidence increased with each grade. Peer pressure and association with new friends appear to be the leading causes.

Dr. Thomas A. Kirk Jr., deputy commissioner for the Connecticut Department of Mental

Health and Addiction Services, said he doesn't think there is an age too young for a parent to talk to a child about drugs. "I can easily see doing it at the first-grade or even the pre-school level as long as the message is crafted in an ageappropriate manner," he said. "Given the risks, it is essential."

Dr. Kirk said that parents need to understand it is almost certain that their child will be offered alcohol or other addictive substances even in the elementary school years.

"The role of the parent is extraordinarily important," he said, adding that research shows a strong correlation between good family and parental communication and kids who choose not to do drugs.

"Parents have to be aware of the dangers and be accessible to their children," said Tom Hedrick Jr., vice chairman of Partnership For A Drug-Free America. Mr. Hedrick, a Greenwich resident, said "Do you want to smoke a joint with me?" is a question every school child will have to answer," Mr. Hedrick said. He added that marijuana today is as much as 10 times more potent than the variety sold back in the 60's and 70's and can be laced with angel dust or other drugs. Inhalants are epidemic in the younger age group.

Solvents like airplane glue, nail polish remover, and lighter fluid are available in local stores.

"Whipped cream cans and other aerosols are an easy source of nitrous oxide," Mr. Hedrick said. "A kid puts a bag over his head and breathes the stuff in and it can cause brain damage and death."

Some, including Mr. Hedrick, warn that paper stickers imbued with PCP, LSD or other dangerous hallucinogens are offered to children at parties. Over the counter cold medicines are easily converted into stimulants (called ice, crank or speed) that offer a high similar to cocaine at prices a middle-schooler can afford.

Prescription drugs like Ritalin and Ephedrine, hot black-market items in many suburban neighborhoods, are often sold by kids to their classmates.

"Heroin can be snorted now," Mr/ Hedrick said. "You don't have to inject it. After all, what adolescent wants to stick a needle in his vein? So the drug pushers made it easier."

Mr. Hedrick said that kids mistakenly think smoking, snorting or inhaling drugs is less dangerous and the next thing they know, they're hooked.

Louise Simpson of New Canaan, Connecticut State Representative for Tough Love, International echoed Dr. Kirk's and Mr. Hedrick's support of the Courage To Speak presentation.

"Ginger and Larry have such an impact on these kids," Mrs. Simpson said. "They make them see how much parents suffer at the loss of a child. They finish speaking and you can

hear a pin drop. Many students have told me afterward they will never do drugs again."

Mrs. Simpson said that Ian's story is an effective reality check for parents as well. "It makes them realize this family's journey could be their journey if they don't take action."

Mr. Hedrick said he wished that other parents who have been through similar experiences would step forward and talk about it.

"Ginger and Larry are real and because of that they are great motivators," he said. "Their presentation becomes the catalyst for kids and their parents to take action."

Mr. Hedrick urged people to be aware. "Drug addiction is not some haphazard character disorder," he said. "It can't be avoided by moving to some supposedly safe suburb. These days, that's a delusion."

In the Staples High School classroom, all eyes were glued to Mrs. Katz who often struggled with tears, her voice faltering as she read excerpts from journals she kept in the dark days following her son's funeral.

"When Ginger finishes, I try to fill in the gaps," said Larry Katz, Ian's step-father.

"It's so hard to relive it over and over again," he continued, "but each time, we get letters from kids and their parents telling us how our presentation has affected their lives."

A recent note from a junior high school student said it with simple eloquence: "I am changed from hearing Ian's story. I shall no longer use drugs."

The couple urged young people to find three adults, other than their parents, to whom they can talk about things that trouble them, instead of keeping it all bottled up inside.

"If someone you know is using drugs," Ginger Katz said, "don't stay silent to protect the friendship. You could end up losing the friend. Drugs are a slow death. They make you crazy. Drugs stole our son from us."

A collage of photographs made Ian seem present in the classroom. Pictures showed him playing tennis, at beach parties surrounded by friends and wearing a tuxedo for a prom. Filled with snapshots ranging from Little League to high school graduation, the family album was passed from student to student producing frequent shocks of recognition.

"Ian was bright, handsome, athletic and popular," his mother said. "If this could happen to him, it could happen to anyone."