

'You don't want my pain' Heroin addict's mother makes impression with eighth-graders

By Eileen FitzGerald
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Even with the 500 Broadview Middle School eighth-graders jammed together on bleachers the day before Easter break, the gym was silent.

Ginger Katz stood before the students and spoke quietly about her son, Ian, who died from a heroin overdose in 1996 at the age of 20.

The day Ian died, she told the students, as pictures of her son flashed onto a screen, he had used drugs for the first time after being clean for three and a half months.

She described how her only son had rocked her to sleep that last night and then returned to his own room to take the fatal drug dose.

In eighth grade, Ian started smoking cigarettes and tried marijuana and beer. His spiral into drug abuse reflects national research. It shows that if a child smokes marijuana before he or she is 15, then 60 to 80 percent of them will use cocaine by the age of 18.

"Some of you will never do drugs. Some of you will. And some of you will get addicted,"

Katz of Norwalk, told the students. "If you go home, your parents can't save you."

She relayed the message that is the heart of her work and the organization she began, "The Courage to Speak Foundation."

"Find three to five adults you can say anything to. We all have pain," she said simply.

"Adults have life experience. Tell some of your secrets, something deep inside. It is so healing and will help you get to the other side" of the pain, she said. "Have the courage to speak if you have a friend in trouble or if you have a problem."

Katz told the students that Ian always would promise to do better, and would tell her not to worry. He straddled both worlds for a time before addiction collapsed both worlds and killed him.

He played baseball, soccer, and lacrosse in middle and high school and had a black belt in karate. He would do well for a while and improve his grades. Then the drug user's deception would cause him to do things like switch a urine sample so the drug would not show.

He started college at the University of Hartford.

"A person who is addicted has to lose everything," she said. "They steal, deal and find ways to be enabled by others."

That means they are allowed to continue a behavior without a consequence, she said.

Alyssa Gorski, 13, said the talk would affect her decisions in the future.

"I think that I would say something to an adult I can trust. I wouldn't want anyone I know to end up like this. It's really sad," Alyssa said. "I think people will look at this and reflect on it and know they don't want to get into it."

Christopher Waldo, 14, was surprised people can't stop doing drugs.

"It's scary that that was really happening and that he kept on doing it," Christopher said.

"He couldn't stop."

Ginger and Larry Katz created the Courage to Speak Foundation in 1997 and have shared their story more than 300 times to schools and parent groups in their effort to reduce drug use among young people.

"It's smart what they are doing," said Gabrielle deAquino, 14. "They're alerting us to what is wrong and right. It will help a lot of teen-agers. It will open kids' eyes and show teen-agers how dangerous this was to do."

Still, Stephanie West, 13, wasn't certain she could tell an adult about a friend's activities.

Stephanie said she would encourage a friend to talk to a counselor but would be reluctant to talk about their activities to an adult.

"I would go to counseling with them if they wanted and help them. I would support them," she said. "Sometimes I separate myself from other kids. Even if you don't do anything and you're around them you can smell like you were smoking."

Katz has found that her perspective as a mother captures the attention of the students as she urges to them to avoid Ian's path.

"Kids go to risky behavior if they keep things inside, it could be promiscuity, driving too fast, or doing drugs. They don't know how to get it out," she said in an interview following her presentation.

"And that's my message, to have the courage to speak," she said. The world has changed and parents don't have the time or make the time to spend with their children. Yet, she said, the priority is for parents to talk to their children and find out what's going on in their lives.

Research by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University showed that the number one deterrent to children using drugs is parent conversations about the topic, she said.

The reality is that every child will be approached to use drugs, so it is their resolve that will be crucial, she said.

But, once a child is suspected of using drugs, it must be confronted.

"There's a world of pain when you find out your child is using drugs and many parents retreat," because the challenge is daunting, she said. "If you see something, take action. It doesn't go away and the addiction is very rapid."

A child under 15 can suffer health damage from chronic alcohol abuse within 15 months. In contrast, it takes a 30-year-old 10 years to suffer the same damage. Young people have growing organs, which means their substance abuse causes organ damage and chemical changes to the brain.

"The number one risk for adult addiction is young age. The younger you are when you start using the more likely you are to become addicted," said Elizabeth Jorgensen, coordinator of adolescent substance abuse services at Danbury Hospital.

One of the problems for adolescents today is the change in the drug culture, she said. No longer are kids clearly divided into groups called freaks or drug users, the jocks, who might drink a little, and the brains.

"Marijuana is acceptable. There is a lack of a cultural stigma against it," Jorgensen said. Connecticut has the highest rate of substance abuse among young people in the country, with the median age for marijuana use 11.9 years of age; that means seventh graders, she said.

"Developmentally, at this age, acceptance by peer groups is absolutely primary. Even if they know substance abuse is against everything they've been taught to believe," Jorgensen said. "Drugs are so much more prevalent and it's harder for kids to find uncontaminated groups. That's the reality today."

Many kids who don't use drugs or drink illegally today are sitting at home weekends.

Parents who don't believe that have their heads in the sand, she said.

Another problem for middle- and high-schoolers today is that their parents grew up in the 1970s and 80s, which had the highest drug rate of all time, she said.

"We have a high expectation that our children will experiment with drugs and alcohol and if we don't keep checking up on them they are going to," she said. "It's our job to set limits. It's their job to test the limits."

The growing number of drugs, the increasing strength of available drugs and the increasingly young age kids are using drugs make it urgent for parents to intervene.

Still, drug use is not a given. The culture can change, if one considers that a decade ago no one would have imagined that smoking could be banned in public places or restaurants.

"Drug and alcohol use does not need to be a guarantee. It's a learned behavior. Even if a certain percentage of adults would take responsibility, we could reduce the number one reason for deaths among 16 to 24 year olds," Jorgensen said.

Students need to hear the message about avoiding drugs and alcohol over and over, from people like Katz as well as, repeatedly from parents.

"Parents have to be the first voice, the 100th voice and the 1,000th voice on the issue," Jorgensen said. "Parents have to pay attention. We've got to catch them early."

Katz said she tried to address her son's addiction but failed. She insisted early on that he had a problem but came upon doctors and counselors who did not agree and that stalled interventions. Soon, his age gave him rights to reject treatment or tests that could have helped.

That's why she urges students and parent groups not to stand by once they know there is a problem with a child.

"If you do not address it you could have my experiences and you don't want my pain," Katz said.

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Mission Statement

"Saving lives by Inspiring Youth to be Drug Free."

The Courage to Speak Foundation, Inc. is a nonprofit organization, which fosters open communication about the prevention of alcohol and other drug use among young people through education and awareness.

The Purpose of the Program

n To encourage every person to take responsibility to combat substance abuse and addiction.

Create a safe environment for an honest dialogue.

Inspire the courage to decline the offer of drugs and alcohol.

Inspire youth to find adults in their lives with whom they can share their secrets and get the help they need.

To offer a support group for parents and other family members to come together and heal.

To create a speaker's bureau consisting of individuals whose children lost their lives to substance abuse.

"There is not a day that goes by that we don't think about Ian. He is in our hearts and he always will be. We will never forget the way he made us laugh or how he cared about his family and friends. We know God is holding him in the palm of his hand."

Because the sunflower looks up to heaven, I chose it as our logo.

— *Ginger Katz*

www.CouragetoSpeak.org is funded by the Connecticut Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services.
