

## **'Sunny's Story' Tells of Loss of Dog's Best Friend**

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Fourth graders at Brookside Elementary School got a sneak preview last week of "Sunny's Story," a not-yet-released book by Norwalk resident Ginger Katz, along with Marci Alborghetti, that tells the tragic tale of how a young man became involved in using drugs and eventually overdosed and died.

Katz and her husband, Larry, are the founders of The Courage to Speak Foundation, Inc., whose mission is to save lives "by empowering youth to be drug free and encouraging parents to communicate effectively with their children about drugs." They established the foundation in 1996, shortly after losing their son, Ian, to a heroin overdose at the age of 21.

"Sunny's Story" is a tool parents can use to facilitate discussions with their children on the difficult subject of drugs, said Katz. Youngsters who talk about drugs and alcohol with their parents have a 57 percent chance of reaching age 21 without using those substances, she noted.

"Sunny's Story" is told from the viewpoint of the family's beagle, who is adopted when Ian is 7 years old and serves as his guardian angel, watching the boy at night until he falls asleep. Through Sunny's eyes, the reader sees Ian grow from a pleasant little boy into a moody, stubborn, risk-taking and argumentative teenager, who keeps from his parents his use of tobacco and drugs.

Katz stressed that the book is not only for elementary school students, but for people of all ages. In focus groups, she said, parents indicated that they would read the book to third, fourth and fifth graders if they could discuss the story with the children afterward. High school students said they really enjoyed the book, but that it would be most appropriate for middle school students, said Katz.

According to Katz, the book is to be required reading at West Rocks Middle School, and she hopes other schools will follow suit. The book will be released at The Courage to Speak Family Night on March 6 at West Rocks.

At Brookside, "Sunny's Story" was read in two parts, on Feb. 8 and 9, after which the fourth graders were to participate in eight follow-up activities meant to help them explore the book's messages. The activity topics included grown-ups to trust; friends and friendships; denial, truth and courage; and how alcohol, marijuana and other drugs hurt

the human body.

"There's always a question as to how early to start" talking about drug and alcohol use, said Brookside Principal David Hay. "By middle school, some kids are already engaging in that kind of behavior, and it can be too late."

Since fifth graders already participate in the Drug Abuse Resistance Education program, Hay said, fourth grade seemed the best time to have students read "Sunny's Story" and participate in the accompanying activities.

This substance abuse prevention and education program is being partially funded by an \$18,000 grant that recently was awarded by the Fairfield County Community Foundation. It is being run as a pilot program at Brookside with the support of Hay, social worker Robin Rockafellow, psychologist Paula Ortiz-Torres, health class teacher Tim Downey, and fourth grade teachers Dottie Brown, Alison Kesney and Jeri Macgrath.

Katz said she self-published the book, and the 3,000 copies she ordered should be arriving within the next week. Anyone interested in purchasing a copy can do so at [www.couragetospeak.org](http://www.couragetospeak.org). The cost is \$12.95.