

Norwalk Citizen

Students have courage to say 'drugs aren't part of the plan'™

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Ginger Katz remembers how her son Ian James Eaccarino liked to cuddle on the couch with her, his sister and his stepdad Larry Katz. She remembers how Ian became the captain of his soccer team at age 8. She remembers how, two years later, he earned a black belt in karate and, at age 11, came in second to a 14-year-old boy in a competition at Madison Square Garden. She remembers how he was voted the most popular boy in his fifth-grade class.

And Katz will never forget September of 1966, when Ian died of a heroin overdose at the age of 20. He was an honor student at the University of Hartford the semester before his death.

Tuesday evening at West Rocks Middle School, parents, teachers, students, administrators and the Katz family came together for the seventh annual Courage to Speak Empowering Youth to Be Drug Free Family Night.

"It's about one thing," Katz said in a statement about the program. "Bringing children and parents together to talk openly and honestly about the dangers of drugs. We know the pain of watching drugs take a child's life. The Courage to Speak Foundation exists to prevent another family from feeling the heartbreak of losing a child. We want you to see and feel the danger that is present before it comes a disaster....For the past 14 years, we've told Ian's story to hundreds and thousands of parents and children here in Connecticut and across the nation. We know that the Courage to Speak live presentations, videos and drug prevention curriculum your child participated in this year have saved lives."

Shortly after Ian's death, Katz founded The Courage to Speak Foundation to inspire people to step forward, assess their situation and address problems. Katz speaks words of hope and promise that the courage to speak -- about fears, drug dependence, or any troubling issue -- presents an ideal opportunity for healing.

Through Ian's story, students and parents begin to recognize the telltale signs of alcohol and other drug use. Katz also describes the veils behind which those signs hide: anger, denial, fear, pain and deception.

Norwalk students shared their thoughts Tuesday evening about the Courage to Speak curriculum and Katz's presentations.

"I have no doubt that Ian is smiling down at you at this moment," Maeve Bustell, a Nathan Hale Middle School seventh grader, wrote in a letter to Katz.

Bustell's classmate Kyle Brenn said Katz's presentation brought "an added level of clarity" to his life.

"Drugs aren't a part of the plan," he said.

State Representative and House Minority Leader Lawrence Cafero (R-142) acted as emcee for the evening.

"We hope you walk away from tonight with the courage to have that conversation [about drugs]," he said.

"The most important people in the room are our parents and our young people," Norwalk Mayor Richard Moccia said. "To the parents: thank you for being involved. To the young people: we care about you. We really do."

Norwalk Police Chief Harry Rilling and Superintendent of Schools Susan Marks also attended the drug free night.

Marks said Katz was one of the first people she was introduced to when she took up the post of superintendent.

"It's so important that when you come to school, you learn a lot," Marks told the students in attendance. "And you need to be able to trust adults....Talk to...whoever takes care of you. If you're feeling badly or if you have some questions, go to the adults in your life. There are people in our schools who care for you very much."

The evening also included presentation of The Courage to Speak Community Leadership Awards and Recognition Awards for parents who participated in the Courage to Speak-Courageous Parenting 101 drug prevention education program. The award winners were as follows:

Courage to Speak Community Recognition Award

Luis Solis, Courage to Speak Foundation Board Member, Owner, Norwalk Pizza & Pasta

Courage to Speak Community Leadership Award

Milagrosa Seguinot, Courage to Speak -- Courageous Parenting 101 Facilitator, Southwestern Area Health Education Center

Courage to Speak Volunteer of the Year Awards

Wendy Blattman, Chelsey Garcia, Sasha James, Kathleen Lawrence, Naki Mourtides

Courageous Parenting 101 available in Spanish

Drug and alcohol addiction affect people of all ages, sexes, races, religions and nationalities. Recognized by the medical community as a 'disease,' addiction could begin in young people even before they hit their teenage years.

The good news is that the Courage to Speak Foundation teaches parents how to combat these challenges by providing information about effective communication, identifying drug abuse, what to do if they suspect their child has a problem and services available.

However, after attending a parenting seminar presented by Courage to Speak, Norwalk's Milagrosa "Millie" Seguinot became concerned that this message wasn't being appropriately conveyed to the Spanish-speaking community.

As part of her responsibilities as a community health worker for Southwestern Area Health Education Center (AHEC), Seguinot educates the Hispanic community through outreach work about various health-related services and programs in the Greater Norwalk region.

When she approached Ginger Katz, Courage to Speak's founder, Seguinot was told that the organization was already making plans to provide information to the Hispanic population in their native language. Shortly after, Courage to Speak received funding through a grant to translate its Courageous Parenting 101 curriculum into Spanish. In collaboration with Courage to Speak Foundation and Southwestern AHEC, Seguinot helped to proofread the Spanish translation.

"I'm a trained medical interpreter and this was the first time that I had the opportunity to use these skills," Seguinot stated.

She also became certified to teach the course in Spanish to the Hispanic communities in Norwalk and Bridgeport. The Courageous Parenting 101 program provides parents with comprehensive information about substance abuse and communication skills in three to five workshops, she explained.

"I'm so happy that this is happening," said Seguinot. "I told the parents in my first class that we are pioneers. I'm the first Spanish speaking facilitator providing this training and they are the first parents enrolled. I became involved in this program because I want to help the community. I knew more or less what the Spanish-speaking community was dealing with."

Although substance abuse wasn't an issue for Seguinot's own two children, now 28 and 24 years old, she attended the Courage to Speak's program because, as a single parent, she wanted to "raise my children right," Seguinot said

One of the most important parents Seguinot learned was to listen to her children and be calm during their conversation.

"Don't over-react," she stated. Sharing her own personal experience of raising two children as a single parent, Seguinot humorously recounted how she used to get worried when her daughter would say, "Mom, I have something to tell you but I don't want you to get mad."

"Thankfully, it was something simple, but I would have to sit down so I wouldn't fall over," she laughed. "Then I would try to listen quietly as she spoke. I tell the parents that it's important to listen."

Seguinot said that many adults don't realize what is going on in their children's lives "because of the lifestyle we are having today."

"It's no one's fault but sometimes as parents we are so busy working and then coming home and doing what needs to be done," Seguinot stated.

Seguinot said that she was "surprised" to learn that the program's facilitators would be honored at Courage to Speak's annual meeting. "It's very nice," she stated. "This whole organization is great. I think Ginger has a great message that she is giving." Visit www.couragetospeak.org.