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Loud and clear drug message

Mother whose son died of overdose spreads frank message

By Chris Gosier

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STAMFORD - A school auditorium full of children was silent yesterday as Ginger Katz described the day her 20-year-old son, Ian, said he wanted to break his addiction to heroin.

She went to sleep that night feeling relieved - Ian seemed to be taking responsibility for the drug problem that had plagued him since he was a student at Norwalk High School. The next morning, Katz found Ian sprawled in his downstairs bedroom with blood on his mouth, dead of an overdose. Her neighbors heard her screams two blocks away.

Eleven years later, her voice trembles as she tells the story.

"Kids, you have no idea what parents go through when their kids are using drugs," she told Scofield Magnet Middle School students.

In the past decade, the Norwalk woman and her husband, Larry Katz, have spoken at more than 800 schools, churches, law enforcement seminars and other forums to encourage families to talk about the dangers of drugs. Her nonprofit Courage to Speak Foundation works to prevent alcohol and drug use among youths.

Yesterday, she coached the students on how to resist the pressure to take drugs.

"Many people will respect you for your choice, and if they don't, they're not your friends," she said.

She implored them to seek help if they or their friends have drug problems.

"Have the courage to speak, because it's OK to ask for help, and if you see a friend in trouble, tell someone," she said.

Adults and children need to know the dangers, she said. Ian was bright, sensitive, charismatic and popular, and at first she found it hard to believe he was using marijuana. When he was 14, Ian and two other boys were arrested after police found marijuana in their car. They let him go with a warning.

"The message to Ian probably was 'Oh, it's no big deal,' " she said.

On the way home, Ian told her he didn't even like marijuana, and the drug belonged to the driver. She believed him.

"I wasn't quite ready to believe that my son smoked marijuana, but he did," she said.

Later, when her suspicions grew stronger, she had Ian take a home drug test. But she suspected he substituted someone else's urine. When she told a doctor, he replied, "Oh, Mrs. Katz, he wouldn't do that."

But she insisted her son take a drug test at the doctor's office. It showed marijuana use. Next came counseling and treatment that seemed to help, but Ian's drug use continued. She found out after his death that he used PCP in high school and was using cocaine by his freshman year of college. He tried marijuana, alcohol and tobacco in the eighth grade, she said.

She learned the real reason for a romantic breakup that left Ian brokenhearted - the young

woman told Ian to choose between her and the drugs.

Larry Katz showed slides of warning signs, such as a change in friends, secrecy, use of incense or other odors to hide drug smells, or disciplinary problems at school. It's easier for young people to get addicted to drugs because their bodies are growing and changing, he said.

Ginger Katz described the business of drug use. Dealers try to get children addicted so they'll be regular customers, she said. To finance their habit, users may steal or become dealers themselves.

"It's all about the money, and you are targets," she said.

Students seemed to absorb her message.

"I was surprised (at) what drugs can do to you, and I'm sorry for what happened to her son," said Dewis Polonia, 13.

Taniesha Ferguson, 13, found the story "scary, because that could happen to any one of us in the school."

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