

Courage To Speak aims to get parents, children reading and talking

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NORWALK - At Brookside Elementary School yesterday, Ginger Katz shared difficult life lessons with fourth-graders. It's never too early to discuss the dangers of alcohol and drugs, said Katz, whose 20-year-old son, Ian Eaccarino, died of a drug overdose in 1996.

To help start the conversation, she self-published a children's book, "Sunny's Story." Katz co-wrote it with Marci Alborghetti

"It's so hard for parents to talk to their children about drugs," Ginger, said. "This book is a tool to help parents open up a discussion."

Katz, who founded The Courage to Speak Foundation Inc., a nonprofit organization that educates youths and their parents about substance abuse, has spoken to more than 800 schools, conferences and forums nationwide. She also helps develop drug prevention curricula for schools.

Yesterday, she launched a program at Brookside.

"Everybody always questions how early you can get that information on drug use. We decided fourth grade was a good lead-in to the program," Brookside Principal David Hay said. "Middle school is good but might be too late."

The reading of the first half of Katz's book kicked off the month long program, taught by three fourth-grade teachers, a physical education instructor and a nurse. The second half will be read today.

The book, told from the perspective of Ian Eaccarino's brown and white beagle, Sunny, describes the ups and downs of life with his young master.

The fourth-graders shared their thoughts about the first half of the book.

"It made me happy when they got the dog and said they'd be best friends forever," said Jocelyn Zuniga, 9.

But the optimistic story of a puppy meeting its new family turns into one about a boy's downfall. "I feel sad because he was doing drugs," said Tyler Bernier, 9.

The students said they wanted to know what would happen to characters in the book.

As part of the program, students will discuss alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, steroids and decision-making, Katz said. She said she hopes the program, which is now part of the curriculum at West Rocks Middle School, will expand to other schools.

"We have to prepare them," she said of students. "The earlier we reach children with this message, the more effective it becomes."

"Sunny's Story" can be purchased for \$12.95 at www.couragetospeak.org
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