

150 attend drug-free program

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NORWALK — A couple's 10-year quest to get young people to avoid substance abuse continued Tuesday evening with their foundation's annual family night dinner and speaking program at West Rocks Middle School.

About 150 people attended the program, which included Ginger Katz, co-founder of the Courage To Speak Foundation, retelling the story of her son Ian's tragic slide into drug addiction, resulting in his death in September 1996 at age 20.

Don't underestimate the significance of youths smoking cigarettes, using pot and drinking beer, Katz warned the audience in the school's auditorium. "Addiction is a disease, and I'm completely clear about that now. When he was alive, I wasn't as clear.

Katz advised parents to "go with your gut" if you think your child is involved in substance abuse, and "nip it in the bud." And she told the young people in the room to find caring adults they can talk to about things that are troubling them.

Katz and her husband, Larry, run a national campaign to warn youths about the hazards of using drugs, which includes anti-drug curriculums taught in Norwalk schools' fourth and seventh grades.

New to the program in the last few weeks has been the release of Katz's book, "Sunny's Story," in which the family's dog, Sunny, relates the story of Ian's ordeal with drugs to his death from heroin.

The book is now included in the foundation's curriculum for fourth-graders.

Before moving into the auditorium, attendees had the opportunity to read essays, poems and posters prepared by Norwalk elementary and middle school students expressing their feelings after participating in the Courage To Speak curriculum.

Included was an essay by Amanda, who attends the Side By Side School in South Norwalk, saying, "I was feeling my eyes wanting to let out my tears."

A poster by West Rocks Middle School students Karolyn and Anastia said, "Friends who smoke together choke together."

And a poster by Adam Robertino at Nathan Hale Middle School said, "Don't take drugs or you'll turn into a thug."

During the program, a number of students read their essays, variously expressing their sorrow about Ian's death and their determination to avoid drug use.

A Nathan Hale Middle School student said that after hearing Ian's story, "I couldn't believe that someone that went to my school — a regular kid — could end up dying from drugs."

The most remarkable statement from a student was that of 13-year-old Ronnie Horton, who stunned the audience by saying, "I also had a terrible loss of an overdose. My dad, Harry Horton, died of an alcohol overdose. Yes, alcohol is a drug, too."

Ronnie, who attends Roton Middle School, went on to describe finding his father dead on the kitchen floor, "with his skin green and glass shattered all around."

Horton said his father was 48 when he died Jan. 4, 2005, "23 days before my 11th birthday."

Several people received special recognition during the program, including Police Chief Harry W. Rilling, who won the the Courage To Speak Community Leadership Award; and Charles Howell, CEO of Patriot Bank; Brian Lessard of Affinion Group; and Ryan Moran and Miles Spencer of Kayak For A Cause, who received the foundation's Community Recognition Award.

Schools Superintendent Salvatore Corda told the audience that it is the job of parents to make sure their children know right from wrong, and what they may and may not do.

Corda said that by participating in the school system's drug prevention curriculum, young people should come to know that, "there is nothing, nothing that compares to learning that a friend of yours died because they put something in their body that they shouldn't have."

During his remarks, Rilling said Katz's program sends a powerful message, and there was no doubt in his mind that she would be responsible for saving many young lives.

Looking at Katz sitting in the front row, Rilling said, "As a result your efforts, Ginger, this world, because of those young lives, will go on to do great and wonderful things, this world will certainly be a better place."

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