

# The Hour

## Our House Fire

By Ginger Katz

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This summer we had a house fire. It began at 10 am on a sunny Thursday morning and was confined to the attic and ceiling of our bedroom. Although the fire damage was minor, the house sustained water and smoke damage leaving us to find a hotel and eventually another dwelling until our house is repaired. In fact, I am writing this from my temporary residence only blocks away from my home.

People wondered how I took this so well. I can lose anything now because nothing will ever compare to losing my son Ian.

The fire started as I was working in my home office. The contractor and his men were fixing the flashing on the roof when suddenly he came into the house and asked me to show him the door to the attic. I followed him as he quickly ran up the stairs and looked into the attic. "Oh my God," he said. I asked if there was fire. He responded with a "yes." My first reaction was to grab my dog Abby and my computer. Never mind the jewelry, important papers, paintings, stuff like that. The only thing on my mind was Abby and the computer with all the years of work with families, drug prevention curriculum development, speaking engagements, board of director's files. My work has been my saving grace. Since Ian died we have worked with children and their families and created programs to be sure children keep their vow to not use drugs after hearing Ian's story.

As I went outside the house I grabbed the two hoses and instructed the men to spray the roof before the firemen came. My energy seemed enormous. Within five minutes the firemen were rushing in the door extinguishing the fire. Neighbors and many other people were there with offers for dinner and shelter.

Insurance people and clean up people gathered around and within a few hours I learned a new business: the fire damage business. By now it was 4 in the afternoon: several hours since our fire had started. Then came a new scare. Abby was missing. All of us took off in our cars, searching the surrounding neighborhood to help find her. She was not to be found.

Arriving home with great remorse and sorrow about losing Abby, I was so exhausted I headed for the hammock in my yard. We continued to talk how our family had to do to deal with the consequences of the fire. Material things are nothing to lose. But when someone in your family is missing or hurt that is a different story. Finally Abby came home on her own the next morning never to run away again (I hope).

I think back to the day I lost Ian. I woke up in the early morning for my usual run. When I went downstairs to the living room, I heard Ian's TV blaring in the basement where he slept that summer. I found him at 6 am. He had died in his sleep after snorting heroin for the last time. The night before we had talked for a long time. He realized he had relapsed and that I was afraid for him. Earlier that summer, he had agreed that if he relapsed he would go into a long term program. That moment had arrived and we were going to see a physician the next morning who would help Ian into a rehab program. Ian said goodnight, went down stairs and used the drug just one more time. My baby did not have a second chance. Neighbors told me my cries for help to 911 that morning were heard two blocks away. I remember sitting on Ian's bed the day he died. I looked around his room, which will be my office once construction on our house is completed, and asked myself how this could have happened. Why did Ian slip away in the night? On the top of Ian's desk was a DARE (Drug Abuse Resistance Education) eraser. We were good parents. Larry, Ian's stepfather, was devoted to my children and was Ian's coach in several sports. We thought we had everything taken care of. What went wrong? The guilt was overwhelming.

Within several months after the funeral I started the Courage to Speak Foundation. I called it the Courage to Speak because I saw so much silence around the disease of addiction. I often say, the silence killed Ian.

I have learned many things since Ian's death and one of the most important thing is that life has mountains and valleys. I remember when Ian was born. I was so grateful he was healthy. I was the happiest mom alive. I loved being a mom of my two beautiful children and I knew I had been blessed. I told my two children that many times.

Yes, I was blessed with Ian. I treasured the years we had Ian and now I have a lot of work to do. I do not want to see what happened to him happen to another family. I have worked hard these past years after Ian's death and I have been given many opportunities to share his story and our experience about our journey into the world of drug prevention. I have learned that communication is key to preventing a child from using drugs. And I have learned that parents need to learn everything about any drugs that their child might be exposed to even if they think their child is immune. Every child will be asked by somebody, "will you smoke this with me, try this pill, it won't hurt you."

I am honored to write this column for The Hour and hope that by sharing my experience and our story, we can shine a light on this problem that threatens the well being of our families, our communities and our nation. And that together as a community we can make a difference.

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