

## Mother recalls son's losing drug battle

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Ginger Katz tells the story of losing her son to drugs... For the Connecticut Post)



BRIDGEPORT — Fifth- and sixth-graders listened intently in the basement library of Garfield School as Virginia "Ginger" Katz talked about her son Ian's death from a heroin overdose more than a decade ago.

It was a story they already knew.

During last week's 90-minute program, some of the youngsters clutched copies of Katz's book, "Sunny's Story," that they read in class. It tells of Ian's life and death through the eyes of Sunny, the family's beagle.

Others held index cards filled with questions.

Giovanni Rodriquez wondered if his mother might have the same strange feeling about his friends that Katz had about the friend Ian brought home.

Brandon Martinez wanted to know, what happened to Sunny? And what about Candi, Ian's sister?

Odalys Reyes wondered if Katz ever made a mistake like Ian's when she was young.

Carlos Perez asked if Katz ever felt like telling Ian if he used drugs, he would have to move out.

Katz was ready with answers — and advice.

She has, after all, given this talk about her son's death and the dangers of drugs a thousand times to students all over the state and nation since her son's death on Sept. 10, 1996. He was 20.

"Ian made a decision. He was a good kid. He made a bad decision. You're all good kids. You need to make good decisions," said Katz, as Garfield teacher Earl Mastri handed her a box of tissues.

Behind her, photos of Ian playing baseball, Ian graduating, Ian with his dog, were projected onto a screen.

Mastri said students in his class were engrossed in the story when they read it for a literacy class. They then wrote letters to Katz, who lives in Norwalk.

After Katz read the letters, she said she felt compelled to come to Garfield and share her story.

She will give another talk after April vacation to students at Cesar Batalla School.

Katz was also drawn to the city's schools because she knows Supt. of Schools John Ramos, who was principal at Norwalk High School when Ian was a student there. Ramos was one of the many people who came to his funeral.

She praised Ramos for suspending her son once for fighting.

"He showed them there were consequences. He didn't enable him," said Katz, after telling the students of another time Norwalk police caught Ian in a car with marijuana but let him off with a warning.

Katz believed her son, a charismatic young man who loved sports, started smoking cigarettes in the eighth grade. She later learned from friends he was smoking marijuana and possibly even snorting heroin by then.

Ian, however, lied, and his mother believed him.

Even when Ian was caught using illegal drugs, he got counseling, went into rehab and convinced his parents he would stop.

Instead, he got better at hiding his drug use. "You know the story," Katz told students who nodded.

Ian was entering his third year in college when he died of a heroin overdose in his sleep.

The night he died, he told his mother he had messed up and promised to go see the doctor in the morning. Katz told the students that she coped with her son's death by writing in her journal. She encouraged them to use journal writing to address painful issues in their own lives.

She also established the Courage to Speak Foundation, a nonprofit group that works to keep youth drug-free.

Katz asked her Garfield audience what they will say the day someone asks them to smoke this or try this.

"Say, 'No, thank you,' " one student said.

"Say I don't want to hurt my mother. I don't want to get arrested," said another.

Katz told them all to find at least three adults in their lives they can go to to talk about anything. She also urged them to find things they are passionate about and to choose their friends wisely.

Shilet Blackwell, 12, said she won't use illegal drugs because her mother raised her to be a young lady.

Simone Davenport said the reality of the toll that drugs can take didn't sink in until she read "Sunny's Story."

"It made me feel really sad. I almost cried," she said.

Katz' husband, Larry, Ian's stepfather, handed out pins and key chains to every student who promised not to use drugs. Visit [www.couragetospeak.org](http://www.couragetospeak.org)