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Grieving Mother Shares Her Heartache With Cheshire Parents

John Rook; Herald Staff

On the morning of September 10, 1996, **Ginger Katz** woke to begin her day. It was a bright, sunny Tuesday morning in Norwalk, and **Katz**, a runner for the majority of her life, went downstairs to get ready.

On the couch, she found her son, Ian Eaccarino, a 20-year old student who had just enrolled at the University of Connecticut. Believing he was in a deep sleep, she went to wake him and immediately noticed blood on the side of Eaccarino's mouth. **Katz** called the paramedics but it proved to be too late. Her son was dead.

"I was screaming at him to wake up, but he didn't," said **Katz**, still emotional nearly 12 years after her son's death. "I still do the things I love best, but the thing I loved best was Ian, and he is gone." Eaccarino died of a massive overdose of heroin mixed with Valium, a fatal combination that ended his life. to help deal with their grief, **Ginger** and her husband Larry **Katz**, Eaccarino's step father, decided they could not stay silent.

eventually, they began to speak of the epidemic of drug use among students of all ages. Their presentation took shape, and now, more than a decade later, **Ginger Katz** is still appealing to younger generations-asking them to stay away from drugs and alcohol.

On April 24, **Katz** brought her story to Dodd Middle school, where parents and children joined to listen and to learn.

"Children come to me and confide in me because of my son's death," **Katz** stated. "I understand them and i understand what they are going through."

"I vow I will never stop speaking out," she said. **Katz's** presentation is entitled "Courage to Speak," a reference to the all too common desire of parents and friends to keep their loved one's drug addiction a secret, many times until it is too late. during the presentation-a slide show featuring pictures of Eaccarino played in the background-**Katz** told the audience of all the people who had known of her son's drug use, and how few people actually said anything.

"I knew Ian began to smoke cigarettes when he was in the eighth grade," **Katz** admitted. "At his funeral, I told a friend I knew, and he said, 'Oh, Mrs. **Katz**, that was the first year Ian smoked, took a sip of beer, and did a little marijuana."

"One cigarette, a sip of beer and a little marijuana," **Katz** reiterated. "I don't take any of these drugs lightly." Larry **Katz** joins his wife for virtually every presentation, and to this day, he marvels at how dedicated she is to this endeavor. "**Ginger** was afraid of public speaking, and she had never done it," Larry confided. "It was probably about six months after Ian's death when she decided she wanted to do this. her priest gave her a chance to speak one day and then she received an invitation to speak at a middle school, and we have been going ever since." The presentation, which **Katz** gives to school age and adult audiences, follows her struggles to keep her son clean from his freshman year in Norwalk high school all the way through college. the words came with great difficulty for **Katz** as she read several passages from her own journal, passages she wrote soon after Eaccarino's death.

"The drugs robbed you and me of a relationship," **Katz** read, choking back tears. "I lost you long before you died." the drugs, according to **Katz**, began to take hold of Eaccarino his freshman year of high school, when police found him with a small amount of marijuana in the back seat of a friend's car. After the incident, **Katz** took him to the doctor to get checked out and demanded that her son's urine be checked for any trace of drugs.

"The sample they took in the morning was negative, but the sample they took in the afternoon was positive for marijuana," **Katz** revealed. after her son's funeral, she would find out that the urine her son had submitted that morning was actually urine of his friend's younger brother. "They used it because none of the people he hung around with were clean," **Katz** stated.

From there, **Katz** gave a detailed and heartbreaking account of Eaccarino's slow immersion into the realm of substance abuse. there were mood swings, a change in his friends, a lack of focus at school, an aggressive, almost violent temper and noticeable weight loss. after high school, Eaccarino received a Geo tracker as a birthday gift, and one night the family woke to find the vehicle engulfed in flames. Later, the family found evidence that the car had been fire bombed with homemade explosive devices.

"The police said to me, 'Mrs. **Katz**, this might be gang related,' and I said 'No, Ian isn't in a gang'," **Katz** remembered. "then they said, 'Mrs. **Katz**, this might be drug related' and I said 'No, Ian isn't into drugs anymore.' It turns out it was probably about the drugs, and Ian had gotten in over his head." During her story, **Katz** routinely spoke of the friends and neighbors who had watched as Eaccarino sank slowly into his addiction. One such friend informed **Katz** that she had seen her son that summer at a beach near their home and had noticed some disturbing signs.

"She said she saw that he had a bloody nose and when she mentioned it, he leaned in and showed her the cocaine," **Katz** recounted. "I asked her, after the funeral, why she didn't say anything to me and she said, 'Well, I just didn't think to. I stood there and just stared at her.'" Devlin Mannle, 21, has been involved with the Cheshire Youth services and attended **Katz's** presentation. Mannle may now be of legal age, but he has seen, over the years, how many of his peers are not capable of handling any kind of addictive substance, even alcohol.

"I think it is important for a lot of kids to hear what can happen to them," said Mannle. "A lot of kids experiment with under-age drinking, but some kids just aren't responsible and are more prone to allow that to become a problem for them, and it could lead to drugs." Among the audience members was Joann Kubick, of East Windsor. She is a member of her town's youth services organization, and she made the trip to Cheshire to ask **Katz** to visit her own town.

"I think education is really key because so many people don't want to talk about what is happening in their own homes," said Kubick. "They are afraid to hear that someone is addicted or they might feel ashamed, but they have to say it. they have to do what is right for their children." After **Katz's** presentation, a talk in which she described in great detail how she found her son that last morning and all of her emotions, **Katz** urged everyone in attendance to stay vigilant and look for signs that their children might be using drugs or alcohol.

"You have to do it," said **Katz**. "You have to do it for your children."

"Ian thought he could use (heroin) one more time," she said, the tears welling up.

"My boy just didn't have a second chance." Visit www.couragetospeak.org

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