



Ian's Story

Presented by his mother, *Ginger Katz*



On **September 10, 1996**, I awoke to every mother's nightmare. I found my 20-year-old son Ian dead in his bed of an accidental heroin and valium overdose.

Ian James Eaccarino was a promising college student with everything to live for. He was bright, athletic, popular, and handsome. He was dearly loved by his family and by his many friends. Drugs destroyed his life.

Ian started using tobacco and marijuana in the eighth grade. He was in denial about the problem, minimizing it as so many young people do. I was unaware that he was using drugs, thinking the changes were just adolescent behavior. Then I attended a drug awareness program, which opened my eyes to what was really happening in our home.

When *Ian* was drug-tested in high school, we learned that, with a friend's help, he had switched his urine sample with that of the friend's baby brother to cover up his drug use. Subsequently, *Ian* had a surprise visit from us at the school to get him re-tested and he tested positive for marijuana.

Ian agreed to go to counseling, but was not able to get in touch with the emotional problems that were at the root of his risky behaviors and continued drug use. I saw his ongoing pain and had great fears for him. But *Ian* became very good at disguising his drug habit. All through high school, he excelled on the baseball team and was the third highest scorer on the lacrosse team. He insisted he was okay, but he really wasn't.

In his senior year of high school, his car was firebombed in the driveway of our home. In retrospect, we realized it was drug related, but at the time, the explanation he gave us made sense. It was all a lie. Drug activity is typically associated with violence and deception.

Nine months before he died, *Ian* and two friends snorted heroin for the first time. He was a college sophomore at the time. One boy became scared, one became sick — and *Ian* liked it. When he finally went to drug rehabilitation, he told me: "Mom, there is a smorgasbord of drugs at college. If you don't have the money, they would give it to you for free and then you're hooked."

During his last summer, while he was in counseling and recovery, *Ian* renewed his close relationships with all of us. My son came back to me. We talked a lot and played tennis. He enjoyed playing golf with his step-dad Larry. To his doting big sister Candace, who has Downs Syndrome, he was a ray of sunshine.

He shared some things from his heart with me the summer before he died and I began to develop some insight into the private pain he had held onto for so long. He had so much regret over his drug use. “*Mom, I messed up. It is not Dad’s fault, or Larry (his stepfather), or your fault. I take responsibility. I messed up.*” My heart was broken. I knew that kids mess up; he was paying for it with his spirit, his intellect, and his life. That last summer, when he realized what he had done to his life and to all of us, his pain became excruciating. But he couldn’t stop.

The evening before he died, I realized that he had relapsed. He knew that I was scared and that it hurt me so. He said to me, “*Mom, I want to see the doctor in the morning and I don’t want to move in with my friends.*” That was the deal. Later, he came upstairs and said, “*I’m sorry Mom.*” It keeps ringing in my ears. Never did I think he would go downstairs and do it one more time. Even with all the remorse, the drugs were bigger than he was.

He died in his sleep and I found him before I went for my morning run. My baby did not have a second chance. Neighbors told me my cries for help to 911 that morning were heard two blocks away.

My life changed forever. I realized that *Ian’s dog Sunny* had climbed up a steep flight of stairs in the middle of the night wanting to wake me up. But I didn’t hear him. I had slept soundly that night for the first time in a long while, relieved by *Ian’s* promise to seek help in the morning.

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.

Since *Ian’s* death, many people have asked me to speak about his struggle with his addiction and its affect on our family and friends. **The Courage to Speak® Foundation, inc.** was born with the mission to save lives by *empowering youth to be drug free*. My husband Larry and I have educated ourselves about the dangers of drugs and alcohol to young people. We provide the latest information about substance abuse in our presentation and via our website, www.couragetospeak.org. The most important thing we have learned is that secrets and silence are our common enemies. This is why we travel throughout our community, our state and our nation, inspiring youth, parents and educators to have the courage to speak...so that no other family will suffer the terrible loss that ours did.

This was my promise to Ian.



When Ginger Katz lost her son, *Ian*, to a drug overdose in **1996**, she realized that being a parent doesn't end, even when your child is no longer with you. She made a vow to *Ian* that she would do everything in her power to prevent a similar tragedy from happening to other families by sharing his story and educating young people and parents about prevention. Ginger and her husband, Larry, founded The Courage to Speak[®] Foundation, inc. whose mission is *to save lives by empowering youth to be drug free*, and by giving children and their parents the tools needed to do so. Over the last 11 years, Ginger initiated the development of the **Courage to Speak health class drug prevention curriculum for elementary, middle, and high school students.**

Ginger Katz has made over 1000 riveting and thought-provoking Courage to Speak presentations reaching more than a half a million people across the country. She added a new twist this Spring with her recently published book, *Sunny's Story*, which tells *Ian's* story through the eyes and heart of their family dog and was featured in The New York Times, June 2007. Coming this Fall is a new Courage to Speak **Courageous Parenting 101[™] curriculum.** Ms. Katz's work has received national recognition and she is a recognized figure in the world of substance abuse prevention and treatment. She served as Honorary Chair of the 2006 National Parent Vigil in Washington, D.C. and was a recipient of a Prevention Works Award from the Federal Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) and the Federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) and named a Presidential Points of Light honoree in 2003. For more info, please visit www.couragetospeak.org.

To share your story with us, please contact Ginger [here](#).