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Parenting

For the Children, a Mother Revisits Her Sorrow

Susan Stava for The New York Times

Ginger Katz talks to middle schoolers in Little Falls, N.J., about her son, Ian, who died in 1996 of a heroin overdose at age 20.

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LITTLE FALLS, N.J.

In the Region

Long Island, Westchester, Connecticut and New Jersey

Ian Eaccarino

GINGER KATZ stood at the front of the auditorium at Little Falls School No. 1, waiting for the 200 seventh and eighth graders to settle down.

Behind her, projected on a big screen, were photos of her son, Ian, from their family album:

Ian as a newborn with his mom. Ian getting his black belt in karate. Ian playing his trumpet in the marching band. Ian beaming at the camera the year he was voted most popular fifth grader. Ian standing happily with his older sister, Candace, who has Down syndrome. Ian playing baseball. Ian, the third-highest scorer on his high school lacrosse team. Ian with his beautiful date at the senior prom. Ian being handed his high school diploma. Ian, the honors college student.

And then, after the middle schoolers had time to absorb all those inspiring photos, Ms. Katz began her hourlong presentation as she almost always does. “Ian died Sept. 10, 1996, in his sleep of a heroin overdose,” she said. “This is why I’m here.”

He was 20.

About 80 times a year over the last decade, Ms. Katz, 59, has told Ian’s story, to police and court officials, doctors, counselors, parents and students from elementary age to high school. It is an old story: Drugs kill. But in this version the addict and seller — Ms. Katz describes how Ian sold marijuana to pay for his drugs — isn’t a bad boy or loner; he’s motivated, well liked and loving. The family isn’t dysfunctional or oblivious; Ms. Katz and Ian’s stepfather, Larry, a real estate broker, confronted him repeatedly about his drug use and helped him get treatment several times.

The son isn’t estranged, nor does he run away to do drugs in far-off places. Ian died after snorting heroin in his bedroom at the family’s home in Norwalk, Conn., while his parents slept nearby. His mother tells of kissing him goodnight at 11 and finding him dead when she was getting ready to go out for a run at 6 a.m.

On the morning of his death, the Katzes had an appointment for Ian to enter rehab again.

In many ways, Ms. Katz’s humanizing of her drug-addicted son is scarier for parents than the traditional vilification of users. It sends the message that every family should worry. “We kept

trying to help Ian, but couldn't," Ms. Katz told the students. "And I miss you, my sweet, sweet young man."

Indeed, Ms. Katz was invited to this middle-class suburb by an eighth-grade English teacher, Joan MacMullen, who several years ago lost her own son Steven, then 18, to an overdose. "Until it happened in our family," says Ms. MacMullen, "I thought addicts were bad people, different from us."

When Ms. Katz talks to young children, she uses her children's book, "Sunny's Story," which she self-published. In it, Sunny, the family beagle, narrates Ian's growing addiction. (When Ian starts smoking pot in eighth grade, the beagle, who shares the boy's bedroom, describes feeling "fuzzy and sleepy.")

But whatever age the audience, Ms. Katz makes a relentless march from Ian at age 13, when he "smelled of cigarettes and pot and sipped beer"; to October of his sophomore year at the University of Hartford, when, she says, a boy in the dorm gave Ian his first snort of heroin; to February of that sophomore year, when, she says, Ian called, "crying hysterically, saying he'd been snorting heroin for five months and every time he tried to quit, it was like having the flu 20 times worse and he couldn't stop."

While Ms. Katz spent years battling Ian over drugs, she says she didn't learn many of the specifics until after his death. "I wanted to know all the details," she says. "When your child dies, you want to rip it apart." She sought out dozens of his friends and obtained Ian's records from the treatment programs.

"His junior year of high school, I figured, 'He can't be doing drugs, he's playing lacrosse,' " she says. And then, she says, one of his best friends told her that junior year was Ian's PCP year.

A former girlfriend of Ian's explained how her brother had provided a urine sample so Ian could pass a drug test. "A school nurse told me how Ian came to her office to sleep," Ms. Katz says. "He was sleeping it off." Another former girlfriend described giving Ian an ultimatum in his senior year: Stop smoking pot or she would leave him. "She says, 'Mrs. Katz, he chose drugs over me.' "

Ms. Katz told the middle schoolers that once Ian turned 18 and was legally an adult, she lost much of her power over him. When she learned he was doing heroin, she says, she went to Hartford and demanded that he come home to go into rehab. Instead, she says, he got a prescription for Clonidine — a drug that eases withdrawal symptoms — felt better in a few days, and insisted on finishing the semester. "What do I do, shackle him? How do I get him home?" she said. "The doctors say to me, 'Mrs. Katz, he's 20, we can't even talk to you.' "

At the start of the summer after his sophomore year, Mrs. Katz says, when Ian again relapsed, she put him out of the house until he agreed to treatment. And he did, she says, working at a nearby beach park, living at home and staying clean for three months. But at summer's end, she says, he returned to Hartford for a day, saw his drug friends, got 10 packets of heroin, snorted 4 in 12 hours and overdosed.

Kids don't ask, but adults want to know what Ms. Katz believes are the underlying causes. She says that when Ian was 4, she and her first husband, Ian's biological father, abruptly split up, then divorced. "We were a happy family one day and apart the next day, and Ian had a lot of anger about that," she says. "It's possible drugs were a way to cover up the pain and cope."

It may be partly genetic, she says; there is alcohol addiction in their extended family.

And, she says, Ian was a risk-taker, always looking to ski the most dangerous trails and nearly dying in his senior year when he saved a buddy who'd fallen through the ice at a local pond.

At the end of her visit, Ms. Katz asked students for questions. No one had any at first, and then they couldn't stop asking. Someone wanted to know how she copes. (She keeps a journal, does lots of sports to distract her mind, and makes these appearances to try to bring some good from the bad.) A boy asked if she noticed changes in Ian right before he died. (She did: He was more nervous.)

A girl asked what to do "if you know somebody who knows somebody" using drugs. Ms. Katz urged her to tell a parent, counselor or trusted adult. "If you can't do it in person," she said, "write an anonymous note."

There was time for one last question, and another girl asked, "Do you ever... like...you know...visit his grave?"

"Yes," Ms. Katz said. visit www.couragetospeak.org