

KNOWLEDGE IS POWER

Ginger Katz is on a mission to educate parents about drugs

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If Ginger Katz had known what she knows today about substance abuse, she would have been better equipped to help her son, Ian, who died from an accidental heroin overdose 11 years ago.

"It's not a question of what-if," says the founder of Norwalk's The Courage to Speak, a foundation she created soon after her son died to empower teens to remain drug-free and help parents communicate with their children about the dangers of drug and alcohol use.

"I will tell you I didn't have the knowledge of what my son was exposed to."

Today, she knows what teens face, and to help other families avoid a similar tragedy, she will introduce Courageous Parenting 101, a free four-course substance abuse education and prevention seminar for parents wishing to arm themselves with the knowledge Katz can now share.

The course, starting with a Jan. 8 introduction, continues every subsequent Tuesday until Feb. 5, covering teen drug use trends and party culture; drug and alcohol abuse, addiction and its physiological consequences; protective, psychological and developmental guidance to help reduce the risk of substance use; dangers of enabling and hands-off parenting; communication and listening strategies; warning signs; the power of denial; practical steps if use or abuse is suspected; and sources of help.

Through such education, says Katz, the lines of communication open so parents can understand what their children face, set appropriate expectations, guide their emotional development and provide moral support.

"Parents need to understand and be educated about the dangers out there. They need to know that their kids will be offered a little beer or a little weed."

The seminar is modeled on what Katz has said for the past 10 years during more than 800 presentations to middle and high school students around the country, telling the story of Ian's life, how he started using drugs and how they ultimately took his life.

"Ian was a good kid," she says last week, to more than 150 seventh-graders at Ian's alma mater, Nathan Hale Middle School in Norwalk.

"He only made a bad decision."

Katz believes Ian started smoking marijuana in eighth grade, and refers to information from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration that links early use of drugs and alcohol with increased potential of drug-related problems and addiction later in life.

"Part of this disease is lies and deception," she says, describing how he became defensive and aggressive after police picked him and some friends up for possession of marijuana when he was in ninth grade. He was released with a warning, she says, calling the officer's well-meaning act a form of enabling.

"Ian told me the pot wasn't his and I believed him. That is denial on my part."

Katz recounts how Ian's grades dropped and how he lost interest in favorite activities, and during his sophomore year, he switched urine tests to hide drug use. A subsequent, on-the-spot test came back positive. He agreed to counseling and appeared to remain clean throughout his junior year.

Katz later learned he had been using PCP.

"His senior year, Ian got a new car, a Jeep. One night, at two a.m., a horn sounded, we looked outside and the Jeep was in flames. The blaze lit up the neighborhood."

She pauses.

"I thought I saw Ian in the car and called 911."

Because of fresh snow on the ground, investigators later found footprints leading to the side of the house, and a nearby bottle on the ground that smelled of gasoline. Another one was found in the trunk of the burned car.

"I asked Ian, 'Who could do this?' He said, 'Mom, I don't know. I kissed a girl last night and her boyfriend was kind of jealous.' The fireman said this looked like gangs or drugs.

"I said, 'Ian doesn't do either.' "

Katz later learned the car was firebombed as a threat to Ian.

"He was way in over his head."

Once Ian entered college, she reveals how Ian soon became addicted to heroin.

"One night he called his father, told him how every time he tried to quit heroin he got sick with a flu that was twenty times worse than the flu and he couldn't stop."

Repeated counseling and doctors' visits had little impact.

"I wasn't up to speed," she tells the crowd. "I did the best I could with the knowledge I had."

Most children's eyes remain glued on her while she takes a breath and describes the day she found Ian dead, called 911, took him to the hospital in an ambulance and heard a friend tell her she wouldn't be needing his health insurance information.

"It was September 10, 1996, and he was 20 years old. I never thought this would happen to our family but it did."

It can happen to anyone, she insists. Parents and kids need to learn that, take it seriously and

take steps to avoid it.

Later, some children ask her where Ian's friends are today, how old he would be, what kind of drugs he used, where he went to school, what sports he played, if she is mad at him, and much more.

Some share personal tragedies of family addiction and suicide. One cries to Katz about her father's death from an overdose. Katz thanks each one for sharing his or her story.

"This is the most important part of my program. Get three to five adults you can talk to. Have the courage to speak because it is OK to ask for help. Have the courage to speak if a friend is in trouble."

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Courageous Parenting is free, begins with an introductory presentation by Ginger Katz Jan. 8 and continues every subsequent Tuesday through Feb. 5. Classes last 90 minutes and will be led by trained facilitators at West Rocks Middle School, 81 W. Rocks Road, Norwalk. Call 877-431-3295, e-mail gkcourage@aol.com or visit www.couragetospeak.org.

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Katz's son, Ian, died of an accidental heroin overdose 11 years ago. He was 20.
(Contributed photo)

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Ginger Katz, head of The Courage to Speak, has started a new course to teach parents how to prevent their kids from abusing drugs. "Parents need to understand and be educated about the dangers out there," she says.

(Andrew Sullivan/Staff photo)

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