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This is the last photo of Ian, the son of author Ginger Katz, before he died of a heroin overdose.

Middle schoolers cautioned about drugs

By Cathryn Keefe O'Hare/Danvers Herald

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DANVERS - A mother who found her son dead of a heroin overdose 11 years ago came to the Holten-Richmond Middle School Monday to teach the children how sad it is.

“Ian was very good at hiding things,” said Ginger Katz about her son during her presentation to eighth-graders in multi-purpose room.

Deception, hiding, secrets — all are enemies in the fight against drug addiction, Katz said. The students listened intently to the tale of her son’s journey to death at the age of 20 on Sept. 10, 1996, in his own bedroom just hours from finally getting the help he needed.

“I see my handsome, young son,” she said, reading from the journal she kept after his death, with obvious emotion, while telling students to “have the courage to speak up,” for help themselves or for a friend.

She advised them to have five adults in their lives to whom they could tell anything.

Her husband, Larry, Ian’s stepfather since the child was 7, was by his wife’s side, as he has been since the boy’s death. They are from Norwalk, Conn., and have spent the last 11 years on a mission to save others from Ian’s fate.

“It’s different to hear it from someone first-hand,” said student Rebecca Currie-Mugford after the presentation. “It becomes real.”

“We are wounded healers,” said Larry Katz after the meeting. “We don’t want this to happen to other families.”

The night before Ian’s funeral, Ginger Katz didn’t feel capable of going, and then she found the strength by deciding to tell his story, over and over again, to reach out to other young people, to show the dangers of drug abuse.

No more lies.

She is founder and president of “The Courage to Speak Foundation, Inc.,” which has as its motto, “Saving Lives by Empowering Youth to be Drug Free.”

“This is a \$65 billion industry,” she said about the drug trade, and its representatives are very willing to prey on weakness and to use deception to get more addicts.

She believes Ian started to change from the sweet young boy he had been in eighth grade, when he started sneaking cigarettes in his room and lied about it.

“Mom, I just tried it,” he told her.

When Ian was in ninth grade, police called because they found marijuana in the car in which he was a passenger.

“Mom, I don’t even like marijuana; it was the driver,” he told her.

The police officer, who had known Ian for years, let him go home.

“That’s called enabling,” she said, which police now realize they shouldn’t do.

In 10th grade, Ian’s grades started slipping, he lost interest in the sports he had always loved, and he seemed angry a lot, she said. Eventually, she took him for a physical and asked the doctor to test him for drugs.

Ian convinced the doctor he had known all his life that he would bring a urine specimen in the next day. It was found clear of drugs. This time, however, Katz didn’t just take him at his word. She asked Ian’s biological father to pick him up from school and take him for another test.

This proved positive for marijuana.

Years later, they learned from one of his friends that it was her younger brother’s urine in the first test tube.

Ian agreed to counseling, and everything seemed on track again. But, the roller coaster of lies and drug abuse continued, as Ian escalated his drug use to cocaine and heroin.

Ginger and Larry Katz and Ian's biological father all were tricked into believing Ian was fine, over and over again.

"Parents want to believe their children," Ginger Katz said.

Ian was suspended from the University of Hartford within a month of the start of school for fighting. He told his parents he had kissed another fellow's girl friend. But, Ian's father urged a punishment of community service, which was agreed to. Then, the supervisor of the community service let him stop early.

"And what is that called?" Katz asked the assembled students. By this time they knew: "Enabling."

Before his senior year in college, Katz kicked him out of the home. Finally, Ian agreed to her terms — no drugs and lots of counseling.

"That was the summer he came back to me," she said. And, he almost did.

They both loved tennis, and they played until it got dark, she said. They enjoyed the family, which includes older sister Candace, who has Down syndrome.

Then, he went to school again; he started on heroin again. Ian came home after only 10 days at school, asking for help.

"I want to see the doctor in the morning," he said. He admitted he had taken heroin. "I'm sorry, Mom."

She went to bed and slept soundly for the first time in years, thinking her son was finally taking responsibility himself for his addiction and getting the help he would need.

"Never did I think Ian would take heroin one more time," she said.

She has written a book, with Marci Alborghetti, about Ian's life and death through the eyes of the family dog, Sunny, who always slept in Ian's room.

Now, when Candace comes home from her group home, she sleeps there, too. But, she won't sleep on Ian's bed.

"That's Ian's bed; he comes down from the clouds and sleeps there," Candace told her mother.

Of Ian's friends, one died of drug-related issues at 29 and another at 30, some others are addicted to drugs and/or alcohol, one is out on the streets, said Katz.

Some are just fine, with children about whom they worry.

“My sports saved me,” Katz said about her ability to deal with the loss of her son. “Your sports and things you love to do could save you.”

Danvers resident Connie Moulton, wife of Otto Moulton who spent years trying to help kids stay off drugs, helped to fund the presentation, along with the Danvers Police Department. Moulton also purchased copies of the book, “Sunny’s Story,” for the Holten-Richmond Middle School library. School attendance officer Joanne Lennon was instrumental in organizing the assembly.