

The ADVOCATE

Students speak out against drug use

The Advocate Staff

By David Hennessey

Staff Writer

NORWALK -- Nathan Hale Middle School seventh-grader Jack Patterson took the microphone and told an audience of hundreds how a family tragedy convinced him never to abuse drugs.

Jack read a letter telling the story of a cousin who committed suicide and his cousin's younger brother, who subsequently struggled with substance abuse.

"His parents sent him to rehab for two whole years. As much as it hurt his parents, they had to do it . . . We only saw him on holidays. It was never the same. . . . But when he came out, he was better than ever . . . He is working and going to start college soon. . . . I am sorry about your son, but he has inspired me to never use drugs," Jack wrote.

He presented a letter to Ginger Katz, who with her husband, Larry, started the Courage to Speak Foundation after the death of her son, Ian, from a drug overdose. Ginger told Ian's story Monday as part of the fifth annual Courage to Speak Foundation's Family Night, an event designed to spread the foundation's mission of empowering youth to be drug-free and to recognize children who have completed its drug prevention curriculum.

Jack and several other middle schoolers and elementary school students also designed posters with drug-free messages, which were on display in the West Rocks Middle School cafeteria during Monday's event.

Norwalk School Superintendent Salvatore Corda praised the Katzes and the foundation for their efforts.

He said the decision to allow its prevention programs into Norwalk schools was, "one of the easiest decisions I ever had to make."

"If you look at the posters here tonight and listen to the kids, it becomes very clear that they get it. They speak from the heart," Corda said.

In addition to Corda, guests and speakers included Norwalk Mayor Richard Moccia, Norwalk Chief of Police Harry Rilling, and House Minority Leader and Lawrence Cafero, R-Norwalk, who emcee the event.

"It never ceases to amaze me how Ginger and Larry took such a tragic event and turned it into a positive," Rilling said. "Speak to your children," he urged the audience.

"It may not seem like it, but they are listening."

Ginger Katz has not only pushed for the implementation of drug-prevention programs like the ones recognized Monday night, but has developed Courageous Parenting 101, a five-session parenting program.

Echoing the message of the foundation, Cafero said, "The number one key to prevention is parents talking to their kids about the dangers of drugs."

"We used to have adults and their kids talking with each other at the dinner table," Moccia said. "We don't do that enough anymore. We don't sit down over dinner. Do that more often. Talk about everything."

-- David Hennessey is a staff writer for Norwalk Citizen-News.

POE: Courage to Speak Award Winners Recipients of the 2009 Courage to Speak Awards included: Dr. Thomas Kirk, Commissioner of state Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services, who received the Courage To Speak Community Leadership Award. Courage to Speak Community Recognition Awards were bestowed upon Herb Jay and teachers Timothy Downing, Jeremy Dane, Lois Snelson, Pat Vigilio, York Mario, Andrew Lavaway, Dawn Schirizzo and Nicole Vetter. The Courage to Speak Volunteer of the Year Award went to Jim Sibley and Marvin Simmons