

Foundation wages fight against drugs

By JILL BODACH

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NORWALK — Every cause needs a face attached to it.

Sometimes it is an athlete. Sometimes it is an actor or a musician. And, sometimes, it is someone without celebrity status but with a message she needs to deliver.

In the case of the Courage to Speak Foundation, Inc., an organization dedicated to saving lives by empowering youths to be drug free, it is a mother.

Ginger Katz has spent the last several years telling children and their parents the story of her son Ian who died of a heroin overdose in 1996. In memory of her son, Ginger and her husband, Larry, have dedicated their lives to keeping other children from trying drugs.

According to statistics, more children are being asked to try drugs and more are saying yes, making the Katz mission especially important now and in the coming years.

On Wednesday morning, the foundation held a breakfast with legislators and other local leaders to highlight the past years and explain their goals for the future.

Robert Charles, former assistant secretary of state for international narcotics and law enforcement, was the guest speaker at the event. Charles said that the spread of drug use among American youth is at epidemic levels.

"The threat in our midst is real, palpable and compelling," Charles said. "There is no threat greater to the American youth than this. It is paramount. It is an epidemic."

Last year, according to Charles, the Centers for Disease Control said that 21,000 young Americans died from substance abuse.

"This is three-and-a-half times the number of lives lost in Normandy in 1944, seven times the number lost on Sept. 11 and 10 times the number lost in Iraq since we've been there," Charles said. "That is an enormous amount of young humanity."

Charles pointed to the increased purity and the increased recruitment of drug traffickers to reasons why drug usage has increased.

Heroin, which used to have a purity rate of only 7 to 10 percent 10 years ago, is now 60 to 90 percent pure and can be popped as a pill, snorted or smoked.

The age of children approached with heroin and other drugs has decreased to as young as 8.

All of this means that parents need to be more aware of the world their children are living in to combat these circumstances.

"That means that as parents we have less time to intervene with our children," Charles said. "Only 25 percent of parents talk seriously to their kids about drugs. That has to change."

Katz understands that all too well. She started Courage to Speak to help children become empowered to choose drug-free lives. Courage to Speak curriculums are now being offered in the middle and high schools, and a pilot program for elementary schools will be launched in the winter of 2006.

Katz said she has known since she lost Ian that it was her mission in life to speak out against drug addiction, and she hopes to expand the program to other communities in the state as well as the nation.

"I've never lied about who Ian was," Katz said. "My son was a good kid who made a bad decision and now I've made my decision to speak out."

For more information about Courage to Speak, visit www.CourageToSpeak.org