

Printed From Harbor Light Newspaper

2006-11-22

Presentation Tuesday, Nov. 28: She has the ‘Courage to Speak’ Do we have the courage to listen?



National speaker to bring personal, powerful message on dangers of drug use to Harbor Springs

By Kate Bassett

Harbor Light Newspaper

Hundreds of news articles, ranging from the New York Times and Boston Herald to advocacy journals, and even the federal Drug Enforcement Agency, all say the same thing: the room is silent when Ginger Katz, founder of the Courage to Speak Foundation, finishes a presentation.

Katz, whose mission is “saving lives by empowering youth to be drug free and encouraging parents to communicate effectively with their children about the dangers of drugs,” founded Courage to Speak shortly after losing her 20 year-old son, Ian, to a drug overdose in 1997.

Her nationally-known program is coming to Harbor Springs Tuesday, November 28, both during the day for students and at 7 p.m. for parents and community members, thanks to CASA (Community Against Substance Abuse) and Larry and Nancy Beck.

CASA member Trisha Graham said attending the presentation should be looked at as a non-negotiable for parents, especially in light of the recent drug and alcohol survey results.

“We know that the drugs are here. They are in our community, and they are touching all

of our kids, even if it is just because the child sitting next to them in class is doing drugs,” Graham said.

“We take this subject too lightly too often,” she said. “This program is such a wealth of information on so many topics related to substance abuse that there really is no excuse as a parent not to attend. It is our job to do our best to keep our children safe, and drug prevention, early detection, and if it comes to it, recovery, are huge components of that safety.” Graham said that what struck her most about Katz’s story was that her son was anything but a stereotypical user.

“All the way along this family seemed picture perfect, like so many other families in our own community. Ginger’s son was an honor student. He played lacrosse. He was captain of his soccer team. As parents, we can make the mistake of thinking that if we raise our children a certain way, if we keep them involved with extracurricular activities, we can keep drugs from touching their lives. The bottom line is that thinking is wrong. We need to be informed.”

“This presentation should be heard by more than just parents,” Graham added. Anyone—from grandparents to health care workers to general community members—will benefit from hearing this presentation.”

“This is not just about trying to prevent kids from doing drugs. It’s very valuable,” Katz said in a telephone interview. “I want the young people in the community to have the courage to advise their parents to come out and hear what I have to say. I want parents to know if their child comes home that Tuesday night (November 28) and says ‘you should go hear this,’ they should have the courage to listen, because it is empowering, both for parents to listen, and for their child to be heard.”

Katz also said the presentation is for parents of all ages, not just middle and high school students.

“The best time to start talking to your children about drugs? Three to five years of age,” Katz said. “Even if you think your child will never do drugs, you should learn everything your child will be exposed to, because all kids are at risk. The worst situation you can have is an unsuspecting child and a naïve parent who doesn’t think that drug addiction can happen to his or her child.”

Living near places like Hartford and Greenwich, Katz said she is familiar with low turnout numbers at drug awareness programs, something that often happens in Harbor Springs. She said this event, however, is not the stereotypical drug program. It is not something that can be understood in cliff notes from friends or from a student who has heard it. It is powerful, poignant, and simply put “an experience.”

An experience, she added, that may make the difference between life and the greatest loss a parent could ever experience.

“At first, I was ashamed of his problem,” Katz said of her son’s addiction. “I didn’t want to tell anyone about his problem when he came home from college. He was going to a day treatment program and we thought his problem was being fixed. He didn’t want to tell his friends in Norwalk who did not know. The ugly truth is, the problem wasn’t fixed. I found him in the morning, just before I was going to meet my friend at 6 a.m. for our morning run. Ian died in his sleep. Neighbors told me my cries for help to 911 that morning were heard two blocks away.

“Within several months after (Ian’s) funeral, I started the Courage to Speak Foundation,” Katz said. “I called it the Courage to Speak because I saw so much silence around the disease of addiction. I often say, the silence killed Ian.”

Despite the gravity of Katz’s message, she said the program is also filled with love and light.


“I don’t want people to think ‘this is just a sob story and I don’t want to have to hear it.’ There is heart-break, of course, because I lost my son. Ian was a good, kind person who suffered from a terrible disease and we miss him every day of our lives. However, this presentation is also about hope. It is about how to prevent this tragedy from happening to another family. The key is to be there, to have the courage to hear.”

Ginger Katz will give her presentation on November 28 at 7 p.m. in the Performing Arts Center at Harbor Springs High School (she will present to middle and high school students earlier that day). All community members are invited and encouraged to attend.

For more information on Courage to Speak, visit the foundation’s website, www.couragetospeak.org.

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 First Day Story