

Story of family's loss to drugs captivates community



Ginger Katz urges families here to address drug use among children early and directly

EDITOR'S NOTE: *The following report, by Kate Bassett, is long. The length reflects this story's dramatic importance for all readers. Parents will not read this account, a story of terrible loss told last week to some 200 community members by parent Ginger Katz, without feeling a deep sense of fear, concern and simple sadness. Please read Kate's report, in it's entirety, and reflect on how we can help all of our young people survive, thrive and live long, happy lives in this most special community. We are in this together.*

-Charles O'Neill

By Kate Bassett
HARBOR LIGHT NEWSPAPER

A mother stood before a crowded auditorium. She was wearing a pink blazer. She looked like a neighbor. She had a warm smile and a story to tell. When parents and community members filed into the performing arts center at Harbor Springs High School Tuesday night, November 28, they were expecting to hear a program on keeping

their children drug free. They got much more.

They got Ginger Katz and her husband, Larry-- parents, people with nothing but their courage and their devastating loss bringing them to the stage-- standing in front of almost 200 people while a lifetime of photos of their son, Ian, flashed on a screen above.

“I am here to discuss with you, to maybe cry with you, and to talk with you about my feelings about the horrible disease of addiction. I am here to tell you my story. I am here because on September 10, 1996, my son Ian died in his sleep of a heroin overdose. He was 20 years old,” Katz said in her soft-spoken, east coast accent.

As the founders of Courage to Speak, a non-profit organization dedicated to saving lives by empowering youth to be drug free and encouraging parents to communicate effectively with their children about the dangers of drugs, the Katz's travel the country, bringing with them a message of love, loss, hope, and blunt reality.

The Harbor Springs group, CASA (Community Against Substance Abuse) and Nancy and Larry Beck brought Katz here so people could hear, first hand, what can happen to children when drugs enter their lives.

A large screen depicted the Katz's story as Ginger spoke of the “bright and sensitive, cuddling and caring” child Ian was. It began “a presentation by Ginger Katz, mother of Ian.” A series of slides followed: a baby, cradled in his mothers arms; a young face full of ice cream; a soccer player; a grinning teen standing with his parents and sister Candice before the prom. The slide show continued with family outings, beach shots, all centered around a handsome young man with an infectious smile. Even the last shot, taken three days before his death, could have been found in any family's album. His “UCONN” hat, his laid back collegiate air.

The pictures said so much, because they said nothing unusual at all.

Ian Katz was typical in every way but one: his addiction.

“Ian earned honors at the university the semester before he died. He was the third highest scorer on his Lacrosse team. He had a black belt and ran road races with me. He played soccer. He was voted the most popular boy in middle school. In fifth grade, his teacher told me Ian was so deeply loved-- especially by the girls-- and he always maintained that charisma. He won the hearts of so many,” Katz said.

After the funeral-- an event where “there were so many young women in long black dresses and young men who cried like little boys”-- Katz said some of Ian's friends began coming back to talk to her.

“We were all grieving, but when they would come over, they did the talking. I just listened. I listened while they told me things that would make the hair on the back of your neck stand up. I'm talking about good kids from great homes, who wanted, needed

to tell me. I would look in their eyes and see guilt and I always assured them, it was not their fault.”

Katz said she wanted to extend that sentiment to anyone in the audience whose children might be trying or even addicted to drugs.

“Anyone who is sitting here tonight feeling guilty, I want you to give it only one more minute, and then I want you to let it go. It is not our fault. You must understand, this is a billion dollar industry and dealers are targeting our children. Many parents simply aren’t equipped for this. Even if you think your child won’t use, they will be exposed. They are going to be part of this drug culture.”

Make no mistake, while Ginger Katz may have been un-prepared for the phone call she got when Ian was a freshman in high school saying he and two other boys were found in a park with Marijuana in the car, she got educated about drug use and addiction, and she did it quickly.

“We were called to the police station, and when we arrived, the officer took one look at us– we are business people in our community– and went back and told Ian he was going to let him go, and to stay out of trouble. This is what I call enabling.

“Ian told me it was the driver’s Marijuana. I believed him. That was denial on my part, and denial on Ian’s part (Katz said after Ian’s death she learned he first used drugs at the age of 13).”

Soon after, Katz was taking part in substance abuse training as the manager of a nonprofit organization. She was learning to recognize the signs of drug use.

“All of a sudden, a light went off,” she said. “His grades were slipping, he was full of anger, and while he still had his old friends he had some new, different friends too. I thought it was just adolescent behavior. I had a gut feeling though, and I am telling you now, if you have a gut feeling, go with it. Don’t underestimate these gateway drugs. Tobacco, a sip of beer, and a little weed. That’s why I am here.”

Armed with only intuition, Katz said she searched her son’s drawers, and found nothing. Still, she was not convinced.

“I was taking Ian to get a physical and I had planned to ask the doctor to test his urine for drugs. I forgot to ask. I called the doctor and asked him if he would run a test. I explained the change in him, and while he told me he thought Ian was not using, he told me to tell Ian he needed a urine sample as a follow up.”

Recounting the next series of events was obviously still difficult for Katz. It was the time when Ian’s drug use came out into the open, and it did not happen without a fight.

“When I asked him for the sample, he said ‘no mom, not today. I’ll do it tomorrow.’ The

next day, he did give me a sample of his urine, and all I did was look him in the eye and I knew the sample he gave me wasn't really his. I called the doctor and said I thought he had switched his urine. I mentioned it to Larry (Ian's step-father since the age of five) and then called Ian's biological father, because I knew that all of Ian's parents had to be on the same page. There is strength in numbers on this subject, and you need all the strength you can get.

"Everyone told me I was being paranoid but they finally agreed to take Ian back to the doctor after school for another test. Both samples were tested, and the morning sample came back negative. The afternoon sample, however, tested positive for Marijuana.

"After the funeral, one of Ian's friends said it had been her baby brother's urine Ian used that day, because none of their friends were clean.

"I tell kids they have to choose their friends wisely, because they will either bring you up or they will bring you down."

When the test came back positive, Katz immediately stepped into action. Ian was in counseling once a week for three months.

"His grades came up and I got my son back," she recalled. "I thought the problems had all gone away."

Unfortunately, that wasn't the case. Looking back, Katz said, she could see the signs creeping back into their lives.

"There was a lack of affection. My son had always been a cuddler. It's a sign of drug use; it's hiding, distancing, isolation so that you can't get close enough to smell the aroma on them. That's why it's nice to wait up at the door, no matter how tired you are, and give your child a hug when they walk in the house. Get close.

"I would drive by the practice fields and see Ian playing sports, and I would think to myself, he's a good kid. He gets good grades, he's active, he's not using drugs. We all want to believe that about our children."

Upon his high school graduation, Ian was accepted into three colleges. It was around that time, Katz said, she noticed another change.

"He had this anger that he could not control. I sought counseling about it, and the counselor said we should give him a 'three strikes and out of the house' policy. We brought everyone in (to the counselor) separately and together to get to the bottom of what was going on. Ian got up to two strikes, and then, everything was fine. I asked if he was using, and the counselor said no. When he died, I was allowed to see his records. He used PCP (angel dust) that summer, and the counselor missed it too. That's how good kids are about covering it up."

Reading from an excerpt in the journal she kept after Ian died, Ginger read about the loss she felt even while he was alive.

“Drugs changed you. I lost you long before you died. This disease is very sneaky. It has many moods and many faces,” she said, adding that the next line she would read she took out of her presentation in the beginning, but has since included it, “and now, I rest easier my son.”

“Can you imagine a mom saying this?” She asked the audience. “Kids have no idea what they put their parents through when they are using drugs.”

Parents, too, have no idea what the drugs of today are like, Katz added.

“Marijuana today is 10-20- percent stronger than the marijuana that was used in the 1970s and 1980s,” she said. “There are more kids in rehab for marijuana alone than any other drugs put together. A lot of parents think because of their experiences that its okay for young people to ‘experiment.’ I dropped that word from my vocabulary a long time ago. It’s called use, and don’t ever underestimate it.”

When Ian went to college, he found himself in trouble by October, for a fight that resulted in him getting stitches from a beer bottle breaking against his head. Both Ian and the other boy involved were suspended, which meant they had to leave school. One boy never got to come back. Ian’s biological father, however, talked the dean into giving Ian community service. He was allowed to remain at school.

“Ian’s dad did the best he could with the knowledge he had at the time,” Katz said. However, by hour 36, Ian was told he did not have to complete the rest of his service. It was another string of events, Katz said, that were centered around a word that can equal a death: enabling.

“Kids know when you are enabling them. They got that today,” she said of her earlier presentations to middle and high school students. “You have to be firm. It is easier to give in sometimes, but in the long run, it is the worst thing you can do.”

In Ian’s case, staying at school meant meeting a boy in his dorm that was already hooked on heroin.

“Dealers make it easy. The average age for a heroin user used to be 27, now it is 17, because they can smoke it or snort it. That is what happened with Ian. Three kids were given a little packet of heroin in the dorms one night. One got scared, one got sick, and Ian got hooked,” Katz said.

Five months later, Ian called his biological father for help, because the use was out of control. Without telling Ginger or Larry, Ian was checked into a rehabilitation clinic. He was given clonidine to curb the withdrawal symptoms, and days later checked himself

out of the clinic. It was then that his father decided to break the silence.

“When I got off the phone, I was ghost white. Larry asked me what was wrong. I didn’t even know you could smoke heroin. I couldn’t think straight. All I could say was ‘my son is going to die,’” Katz said.

Yet after another frightening bout with drugs, Katz said Ian was back on track, and by May was on the front doorstep with honors...and the “flu.”

“He asked me for my chicken noodle soup. I asked him if he had gone back to heroin.”

It turned out Ian had slipped back into heroin use and when Katz took him to the doctor, he again was prescribed clonidine.

“I said, no, he needs to go get treatment. The doctor said ‘Ian is 20 years old. He’s an adult and I can’t talk to you about this,’” she said.

Recalling the trip to the deli they had later that day, just after filling the prescription for the drug that would alleviate Ian’s withdrawal, Katz said someone commented on how Ian’s good looks were not just about his features, but also his “innocent” nature.

“All our kids are innocent,” she said. “But they will all be asked to do drugs. They need the courage to answer that they would rather play ball or sing or dance or get good grades. They need to be able to say ‘no, because I care about my family. No, because I care about myself.’”

That summer, the Katz’s battled with Ian. They made him leave home for a few days. When he agreed to counseling again, they went with him.

“He was in counseling three times a week and had to attend AA (Alcoholics Anonymous). When he was told he could not even drink a beer, he looked at me and said ‘Mom, come on, I’m always going to have a beer with my friends.’ He was still in denial. And then, he looked up and saw the pain in my eyes.”

It marked the last stretch of time Ginger Katz said she would have her son back.

“He was working on his program. He had friends that were clean. It was a time when we talked about things, and we talked a lot. That is one of the most important parts of my presentation: kids need adults they can talk to. I tell them to get three to five adults in their life who they can talk to and get out their pain, because otherwise risky behaviors begin to come out.

“Some of you can talk to your teenagers. Others can’t, and that’s okay, so long as you make sure they have a mentor or someone they can talk to. Leave that door open, and have the courage to listen too.”

It was the conversations that Katz and Ian shared during that time that led her see immediately that after three-and-a-half months clean, Ian relapsed for the last time.

“We talked, and he agreed to get into treatment the next day. At 1:30 a.m., he sent his girlfriend home and we chatted. He went downstairs to go to bed. Never did I think he would do it one more time.”

He did.

“Ian rocked me to sleep that night with his words, ‘I want to take care of this.’ I slept more soundly than I had in a long, long time,” Katz said.

What she didn’t know, is that while she slept, Ian was dying. He used heroin one last time. It made his heart explode. When Katz woke early for a run the next morning, she heard Ian’s television blaring in the basement. She went to wake him. The next few hours seemed a blur of medics and CPR, crying and screaming, even as she described them 10 years later.

“When Ian was born healthy, I learned what it means to appreciate something so much,” Katz recalled. Ian’s sister Candice, 37, has Down Syndrome. “Now, I have a story I must tell. I have a journey I must complete. I have to have the courage to speak.”

As Katz left the stage— to a standing ovation— her husband Larry got up to say a few words.

“Obviously this is not an easy story for my wife to tell, and yet, she tells it over and over and over again. It’s too important. We don’t want another family to live this tragedy.”

Larry said 12-17 year-olds are 85-percent more likely to use drugs like cocaine if they try marijuana. He also said that while it takes a 30 year-old eight-10 years to get to the chronic stages of alcoholism, it takes an adolescent fewer than 15 months.

“Every individual has a different chemical make up. What works for some may not work for another, and kids don’t always understand that. Not knowing can be the most dangerous thing,” he said.

“What is the most successful deterrent to stop your children from doing drugs?” Larry asked the audience. “Talking to your children about drugs on a regular basis. Do an activity together. Take them on a car trip with their friends, because you find out a lot just by sitting quietly and listening. Wait at the door when they get home; check their breath for drinking or anything else, even if it is a challenge to do as your children get older.”

The bottom line, Larry said, is that the drugs of today are more dangerous than ever.

“The ages that children begin using seem to be getting younger and younger. In some

high schools we have visited, the drug of choice is heroin. There is not a lot of education out there for parents, and we have to understand that these are all good kids, but they will all be exposed to drugs.”

He thanked parents for having the courage to come to a presentation on a topic that “is never easy to talk about” and said the key for children to remember is that there is never an up-side to using drugs.

“A lot of adults are addicts, and they go to meetings, sometimes daily. They have to be part of support groups. They have to struggle each and every day. Young people have to understand that is not a path they want to go down. It is not a choice. It is a decision, and your children have to have the courage to say ‘I don’t want to do that.’”

When the presentation ended, parents and children in the auditorium opened up to the Katz’s. Some asked about drug testing (representatives from Harbor Hall were onhand and said testing there is free and confidential). A middle school student asked if sniffing Sharpies (permanent markers found in most homes and classrooms) was dangerous (answer: very much so). Other parents lined up to hug Katz, to tell their own children’s struggles, to simply say “thanks.”

One woman, toward the end of the line waiting to speak with Ginger and Larry, looked at Katz with obvious emotion.

“I want you to know what I heard changed me,” she said softly. “Looking at the pictures of that sweet baby, of that beautiful young man, and hearing your story; I will not forget it. I will remember your son and his spirit.”

For a long moment, the two women hugged, and as they parted, the tears were evident in Katz’s eyes. She wore a pink blazer. She could have been a neighbor. She was a mother, and her heartbreak hit home.

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First Day Story