

MARTINSVILLE BULLETIN

After losing son to overdose, Katz warns of drug dangers



From left, Katie Connelly of Piedmont Community Services introduces Ginger and Larry Katz of Connecticut to Ava, a beagle owned by Carol Berlaug, at Martinsville High School on Monday night. Ginger Katz, who discussed her son's death due to drug use, wrote a book that focuses on her son's drug addiction as seen through the eyes of her family's beagle. (Bulletin photo by Mickey Powell)

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By MICKEY POWELL - Bulletin Staff Writer

Think your child is not abusing a dangerous substance? Don't be so sure, and don't always take his word that he is not, says Ginger Katz.

She never imagined her son, Ian, was a drug user. After all, "he was bright, very sensitive," charismatic and a popular student who played sports, Katz said Monday night during a speech at Martinsville High School.

After Ian's friends made Katz aware of his drug use, he denied it and tried to hide his addiction. Eventually, he entered rehabilitation, but it did not work.

Ian died in his sleep of a heroin overdose in September 1996. He was 20 years old and a junior in college. His death occurred the night before he

planned to seek further rehab, having admitted that he needed it.

After her son's death, Katz became founder and chief executive officer of the nonprofit The Courage To Speak Foundation, which has a mission of empowering youth to be drug-free and encouraging parents to talk with their children about drugs.

She now speaks nationwide about her experiences in trying to help her son battle his addiction, which she described as a disease.

It helps her in the grieving process, she said.

"There's no word in the dictionary to describe what it's like to lose a child," Katz told parents and students who attended her speech. At least 100 people were there.

"I can't answer why he did drugs," she admitted. Based on things he told her, however, she indicated it may have been due to personal turmoil.

Young people use drugs for different reasons, including issues in their lives that they are having trouble dealing with, as well as peer pressure and/or thinking they need to do drugs to fit in with the crowd, based on comments by Katz and the audience.

Teenagers are more susceptible to drug and alcohol abuse than adults because their bodies and minds still are growing, according to Katz and her husband, Larry, who spoke along with her.

If they suspect their children are using drugs or alcohol, parents should try to find evidence, Katz said. For instance, do not be afraid to search children's bedrooms, she and her husband told the audience.

"There shouldn't be any locked doors in your house," Larry Katz noted. If a child locks a bedroom door, "What are they hiding?"

Signs that teens may be hiding a problem such as substance abuse include sudden poor school performance, aggressiveness, withdrawing from contact with other people and a sudden loss of interest in things they enjoy, according to the Katzes.

Parents can be their child's friends, but only to a point — their main purpose is to raise the child and help him or her learn right from wrong and evolve into a responsible adult, Larry Katz indicated.

The running of a household should not be a democracy from a child's view, he said. Yet that does not mean parents must necessarily be tyrannical.

For example, he said that parents should talk with children about what rules the household should have and get their ideas for reasonable punishments. If rules are broken, parents should enforce the punishments that were decided upon, he said.

Ginger Katz encouraged the children in the audience to trust and open up to their parents and to own up to mistakes they make. Even if their parents are riled, "they'll always love you" and want to help their kids, she said.

She also encouraged young people to identify about five responsible adults in their lives in whom they can confide their concerns and seek advice — especially if they think they cannot confide in their parents.

Parents should get to know their children's friends, as well as their friends' parents, Ginger Katz said.

She discouraged kids from getting involved with the wrong crowd.

"It's important to choose your friends wisely," she said. "They'll bring you up or bring you down."

Larry Katz said "the No. 1 deterrent (to substance abuse among youth) is parents talking to their kids on a regular basis" about the dangers.

But only about one in three parents does, he noted.

The Katzes' presentation was sponsored by CHILL, HEY!, the Drug Task Force, Piedmont Community Services, Piedmont Arts Association, Project Success and the Martinsville-Henry County SPCA.

Ginger Katz also is the author of "Sunny's Story," a book about how the family dog coped with the death of Ian.

SPCA members brought their dogs to greet people who attended Katz's speech. Area fifth-graders' art pertaining to the book was displayed.