

Wanted: Courageous Parents

Earlier this summer we reported that the North Haven Substance Abuse Prevention Council sent three of its members for intensive training in the latest methods recommended for parents who want to be proactive in dealing with their children and the mounting issues facing youth in today's society. Of major concern in this community is the expansion of substance abuse by children, even as young as middle school age, possibly earlier. It's time to sign up.

At 7 p.m. on Thursday, Sept. 23, in the high school auditorium, a speaker of national renown will bring her personal story to interested citizens regarding the loss of her own son to an accidental drug overdose on Sept. 10, 1996. Somewhat ironic, but deeply saddening, is the fact that this New Year's Eve would have been his 35th birthday. In the years following this personal tragedy, Ginger Katz of Norwalk, along with her husband, Larry, formed a non-profit group known as The Courage to Speak Foundation. Through this organization parents have found their voices, and unknown numbers of lives have been saved.

It is through her expanding organization that local parents and SAPC members Joanne Hoffman and Jay McGuinness, as well as member Marc Fasano, a local police officer, received their training this summer. These three certified facilitators will offer an extremely informative course for parents entitled "Courage to Speak – Courageous Parenting 101" to participants free of charge on four consecutive Tuesdays in October beginning on Oct. 5. The First Selectman and Executive Director of SAPC, Mike Freda, has arranged for the parental classes to be held in a large room on the top floor of the Town Hall from 7 to 9 p.m.

Carol Troy, program director for The Courage to Speak Foundation, Inc., recently shared that the group is "dedicated to saving lives by empowering youth and encouraging parents to communicate effectively with their children about the dangers of drugs." In a press release from the Norwalk Citizen News forwarded to McGuinness by Troy, one parent is quoted saying he believes that the use of what he labels "much more powerful marijuana" is "a pretty rampant problem." Of the parent training, he notes, "To listen to someone who really knows it from a first-hand point of view and the worst of the worst scenarios...it's just incredibly beneficial!"

Jay McGuinness, chair of the SAPC's subcommittee for parents, and Joanne Hoffman, have both publicly described the extreme personal trials that their families have encountered due to a child's abuse of prescription drugs. Their committee hopes to soon develop policy templates for programs such as providing a "Safe House" and a "Substance Abuse Family Policy." The group also plans to have an information table at the Italian Festival, as well as the North Haven Fair. Both the middle school and high school principals, themselves members of the SAPC, have invited the trained facilitators to address their upcoming orientation sessions for students. Even a SAPC page on Facebook has been designed and opened by the chairman McGuinness's daughter.

An ongoing concern expressed by the parents involved in this endeavor is the misperception that getting involved automatically means that parents have children who are involved with drugs. Nothing could be further from the truth. Perhaps the draft of a promotional flyer from the foundation says it best, stating, "Knowledge is power." In reference to the course for parents it states, "The lesson that could save your child's life." Ginger Katz adds, "Through such education, the lines of communication open so parents can understand what their children face, set appropriate expectations, guide their emotional development, and provide moral support."

Another source of information on the upcoming training for parents will be cable's NHTV. Walter Mann, executive director for North Haven Community Television, has agreed to regularly air a 30-minute DVD produced by Katz that will provide general information about the foundation and its offerings. The station will also assist the SAPC with the advertising of the scheduled public events. An interview between the facilitators and Katz is being planned.

The flyer being prepared for distribution indicates that the course covers the following:

- Teen drug use trends and party culture;
- Drug and alcohol abuse, addiction and its physiological consequences;
- Protective, psychological and developmental guidance to help reduce the risk of substance abuse;
- Dangers of enabling and hands-off parenting;
- Communication and listening strategies;
- How to help your child handle stress;
- Warning signs;
- The power of denial;
- Practical steps if use or abuse is suspected;
- Parenting styles;
- Sources of help; and more.