

## Katz recognized as friend of education at Family Night



Christian Abraham/Staff Photographer

Thursday, March 25, 2010

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Editor

Last Thursday evening at the sixth annual Courage To Speak Empowering Youth to Be Drug-Free Family Night, Ginger Katz was speechless.

Those who know Katz, founder and CEO of the Courage to Speak Foundation in Norwalk, know that's a rare thing.

Katz was moved to silence when she got up to accept the 2010 Distinguished Friend of Education Award from the Connecticut Association of Schools, the highest award given by the association

to persons not directly involved in public education. She was nominated by David Hay and Lynne Moore, principals of Brookside Elementary School and West Rocks Middle School.

For more than 10 years Katz, who calls Norwalk home, has made a personal investment in preventing adolescent alcohol and drug abuse through the Courage to Speak Foundation, sharing the story of her son Ian, who died of a drug overdose when he was 20, with more than a million young people.

"Last night I was once again encouraged and knew deep in my heart that I must continue my work," Katz said last Friday morning. "I was very touched and I gratefully accepted the award from the Connecticut Association of Schools. This was quite an honor."

Katz may have been at a loss for words, but the Family Night event was not about silence--it was about celebrating having the courage to speak out against drug use. It was about kids, local families, educators and community leaders getting together to affirm their commitment to keeping kids drug-free. Proceeds from the event benefitted The Courage to Speak Foundation programs to educate children and their parents about the dangers of drug and alcohol use.

A highlight of the evening featured local middle school students reading their essays about drug prevention to Katz, as well as a display of drug prevention posters and collages created by Norwalk students during classes they've taken as part of the Courage To Speak Drug Prevention Curriculum.

Ponus Ridge Middle School student Kira Jordan was one of the first to come up to the podium and thank Katz for bringing the curriculum to students.

"I don't know what the loss of a child feels like, but I do know what the loss of someone feels like. I lost my grandfather in April of 2009 and my uncle in October of 2009. The pain when my grandpa died blew me away, but when my uncle died it felt like something was happening to me. It felt like a nightmare," Jordan said. "I am only 13 years old and I have already faced the peer pressure Ian faced to try marijuana or do other things, but I've chosen to say no. Your story makes me choose my friends wisely because I believe if Ian had chosen the right friends he would have had a chance to say no to drugs....If there were more people like you I think the world would be a better place because you never know how just one story can change someone's life forever."

West Rocks Middle School student Dillon DiGuglielmo said, "Your story was very emotional for me. My reaction to it was how young your son was when he died. 21. Only 21. I have an older brother who is 18 and all I can do is hope. Hope he is not hiding anything from my mother, father and I. He is my best friend as well as my older brother and I love him for that. He swims on the Wilton YMCA Wahoos swim team and swims for Norwalk High. Drugs could destroy all of that....Drugs destroy family and friends and almost everyone who knows you. That happened to you

and your husband and all of Ian's friends. You did all you could to stop the disease but it was too powerful. This will definitely impact my thoughts on drugs and life."

Norwalk Mayor Richard Moccia encouraged kids to be honest with their parents and teachers on a daily basis.

"If someone you know may be involved in abusing drugs, it's not always easy to be honest because of peer pressure....But we've seen in the last several months celebrities who have died of drug overdoses or who are back in rehab....You wonder [what would have happened] if someone had the courage to speak when they first started abusing drugs, to tell their parents or loved ones, 'This person has a problem.'

He continued, "There are so many temptations, but believe in yourselves, believe in your teachers, but most of all believe in your parents. They love you and they want to keep you safe."

He cautioned the parents in attendance about the drugs in their own medicine cabinet.

"Be careful of what's in your medicine cabinet because more and more people are starting to use the leftover painkillers," Moccia said.

This year Family Night also featured Operation Medicine Drop, a new drug disposal program partnership between the Courage to Speak Foundation and the Norwalk Police Department designed to help keep unused medications out of the wrong hands. Attendees were encouraged to bring any old, unused or out-of-date prescriptions or over-the-counter medications they find in their medicine cabinets to the event. The controlled substances that are collected were later disposed of in a safe and non-hazardous manner. Operation Medicine Drop will continue at next year's Family Night.

"Many young persons' first experience with drugs comes from drugs found in the family medicine cabinet," explained Norwalk Chief of Police Harry Rilling in a statement prior to the event. "We sometimes lose sight of that fact and do not take recommended precautions to ensure these drugs are not accessible to the other members of our family and friends. Not only can these drugs lead to abuse of and addiction to other drugs, their consumption can be deadly."

Last Thursday night Rilling expressed how grateful he was to Katz and her husband for taking personal tragedy and turning it into a powerful message for the young people of Norwalk.

"I always say that if you want to touch the past, pick up a rock. If you want to feel the present, hold a flower, and if you wish to know about the future, pick up a child. If you have made a difference in one child's life, you have accomplished a great deal....By saving one life you never know the impact, because that life can grow up to be a doctor, scientist who invents the cure for cancer, a senator who makes major social changes, president of the United States....The Norwalk Police Department loves partnering with you."

For information about the Courage to Speak Foundation, visit [www.couragetospeak.org](http://www.couragetospeak.org)