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Grieving mom delivers powerful drug message at middle school

By Amanda McGregor , Staff writer

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DANVERS - Ginger Katz's son Ian was a lacrosse star and an honors student with a wonderful family and a girlfriend - but he also had a heroin addiction, which took his life at age 20.

Ginger Katz delivered a riveting lecture at Holten Richmond Middle School yesterday morning, where eighth-graders sat in rapt silence listening to the way Ian's addiction quietly sucked away his life, until the morning his mother found him in his bedroom, dead from a heroin overdose.

"Kids, some of you will never do drugs; some of you may," said Katz, whose voice cracked with emotion throughout the hourlong presentation. "If you get addicted, this is one place ... your parents can't get you out of."

Ian's mother told his story - of adolescence, experimentation, enabling and the sheer power of drug addiction. She called her presentation "Courage to Speak."

"Have the courage to speak if you see a friend in trouble," she told the Danvers students. "I often say, 'Silence kills.'"

Ian's pathway to addiction began in the eighth grade - the same age as the students at yesterday's assembly - when he tried tobacco and "sipped some beer," according to his mother. He moved on to try marijuana, then PCP. By freshman year of college, he was snorting heroin that he got from another boy in his dormitory.

"You're all good kids - you've got to make good decisions," she said. "The decisions you make now will affect the rest of your life."

A slide show of Ian flashed on a screen while his mother spoke: family photos of Ian as a baby in his mother's arms, as a little kid eating an ice cream cone, riding in the limousine with his beautiful prom date, and lounging in a gray T-shirt and his Hoyas baseball cap a few days before he died.

His mother read excerpts from her journal in the months following Ian's death.

"My heart is broken," she read. "How long will my heart bleed like this? The pain is excruciating."

During yesterday's presentation, Ian's parents stressed the need to make good decisions and to find adults to confide in - and their words did not fall on deaf ears.

"You hear all the drug assemblies, but this one was real," Leigh Famiglette, 13, said after the presentation. "I feel bad for his mom."

"When you think about it," said Julia Crawford, 13, "we're only in eighth grade, and we have a lot of time ahead of us."

Ian's death inspired Ginger and Larry Katz to speak out to hundreds of groups in hopes of saving other children's lives. She and her husband, who live in Connecticut, founded the Courage to Speak Foundation after Ian's death in 1996.

"At the end of my life, I hope I accomplish what I was meant to do," Ian's mother said.

Ginger Katz told the students that Ian's older sister Candace, who has Down syndrome, still comes home every week and sleeps in Ian's old bedroom. She always sets up a bed on the couch for her brother.

"She says, 'He comes down from the clouds and sleeps there.'"

At the close of the presentation, Danvers community activist Connie Moulton announced she would purchase 10 copies of Katz's new book for the middle school's Betty G. Allen Library. It's called "Sunny's Story," about Ian's drug addiction and death through the eyes of the family dog, Sunny.

"We've been trying to get a presentation like this for a while," said Joanne Lennon, the middle school attendance officer.

The Courage to Speak program was funded by a grant through the Danvers Police Department and Connie Moulton. Visit www.couragetospeak.org