

Katz still has the Courage to Speak against drugs

Editor's note: Activism is defined by Webster's New World Dictionary as "a doctrine or practice that emphasizes direct vigorous action... in support of or opposition to one side of a controversial issue." This is the third in a series of articles exploring the stories of Lower Fairfield County's activists. They are the representatives of their respective issues — often their voices and faces are they only reason the public is aware of an issue; be it child advocacy, environmentalism, immigration or animal rights. This series will explore our activists, our issues and the connections between the two.

By **A.J. O'CONNELL**

aoconnell@thestamfordtimes.com

NORWALK — It's been 11 years since Ginger Katz began telling the story of her son Ian Eaccarino's death. In the decade since her 20-year-old son died of a heroin overdose in her home, Katz, 59, has been a tireless advocate for drug prevention. She travels the nation, delivering 100 presentations every year to thousands of students, parents and communities. She developed a drug prevention curriculum for elementary, middle and high school students. She and her husband Larry Katz this year published "Sunny's Story," which details Ian's descent into drug use from the family dog's perspective. This fall, she will unveil "Courageous Parenting 101," a curriculum for parents which will help them prevent and identify drug use.

The Katzes' Courage to Speak Foundation has expanded significantly since Ginger Katz decided she would tell people the truth about her son's overdose on the night before his funeral, and she's garnered countless awards and accolades for her activism. Despite her success, Katz says her foundation started humbly; her first presentation was to a class of 22 sixth graders in a Greenwich classroom.

"I was afraid of public speaking, and I was gripping the podium," said Katz. "And I looked up into their eyes and I saw Ian's eyes. And I thought, '22 kids are listening to Ian's story. Ian had a hard time listening to me and 22 kids are listening to Ian's story.'"

Katz's activism did not begin in 1996. She advocated fiercely for children with special needs after her daughter, Candace Eaccarino, was born with Down syndrome in 1969. As a 20-year-old mother, she fought with doctors and educators who told her that her daughter would never read. Later, Katz founded the first Parent-Teacher Association for families with children who have special needs and lobbied to have the special education students graduate with the rest of their class. Eaccarino, 38, who now lives in a group home and works in Norwalk, is a veteran athlete with the Special Olympics. Her latest hobby, said Katz, is power lifting.

"Oh, I was a renegade," she laughed, remembering her advocacy for her daughter.

When her son became the reason for her advocacy, Katz was no less fierce.

Ian Eaccarino died on Sept. 10, 1996, relapsing into heroin use after a summer of being clean, going to rehabilitation, counseling, and reconnecting with his family.

Eaccarino admitted his relapse to his mother that night and said he wanted to seek treatment the next day. In the morning, Katz found him dead in his bedroom.

She and her husband knew they would face difficult questions about her son's death from the mourners at his wake and funeral. The doctors advice: tell people he died of an aneurysm.

"At the wake, we were telling people 'We're going to wait for the toxicology report, we're going to wait for the toxicology report,'" said Katz. But at the funeral the next day, Katz faced the other mourners and told them the truth: her son overdosed on heroin.

Her change of heart came to her in a vision the night before the funeral.

"I visualized speaking out on an international level," she said. She woke her husband and told him that she wanted to speak out. Larry said yes immediately, and the next day Katz — who had thought she would not be able to attend the funeral — got up, went to the church and told anyone who asked how her son really died. She's never stopped.

"I want people to start talking about the problem," said Katz. She believes that it was the silence of her son and his peers that got him hooked on drugs, and ultimately, killed him. Nobody seemed to be talking about addicted teens, 11 years ago, she said.

"I thought I was the only one," she said. But after she lost her son, Katz began to hear about other parents who lost their kids to drugs. Today she runs a long-standing support group for bereaved parents.

Katz put together her four-course "Courageous Parenting 101" course to keep other families from going through what those parents have experienced. The course, which was written but will not be facilitated by Katz, explores addiction, what drugs can do to an adolescent brain, why kids use drugs, ways to talk to a child about drugs and what to do if your child is using.

"Parents are the number one key to preventing drug use," said Katz. "One in three parents talks to their children about drugs, and they have a 57 percents better chance of their kids not using drugs."

The program will debut in Brookfield this fall, but locally, will be rolled out at West Rocks Middle School's Family Night in January.

West Rocks School is a kind of home base for The Courage to Speak. A few years ago, she worked with principal West Rocks' principal, Lynne Moore and health teacher York Mario to develop and debut her drug prevention health curriculum.

"She's quite a taskmaster" said Moore. "I think I've had more meetings with her than I have with anyone."

Moore said the relationship between the Courage to Speak and West Rocks grew from a 2001 presentation Katz gave for the school's parent-teacher organization. She's looking forward to hosting the parents' class.

"It's been a really wonderful partnership," said Moore.

Father Richard Murphy was the Katzes' parish priest at St. Thomas Church when Eaccarino passed away. He remembered first seeing Katz's determination to make some good come out of her tragedy at a bereavement meeting in 1996.

She gave her second Courage to Speak presentation at St. Thomas, before an audience of 300. It was a fervent discussion, said Murphy, and it wasn't much different from the talks Katz gives now.

"She does them as passionately now as she did back then, which is impressive," said Murphy.

Those presentations, says Katz, are at the heart of the Courage to Speak. Yes, she is the face of her organization, but her son's story is the most important part of her mission.

"It's not the messenger, it's the message," she says. "I want to let people know."