

Teen Drug Use: A Deadly Conspiracy Of Silence

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A dozen years go by and Ginger Katz keeps repeating her unbearable story.

All over Connecticut, she tells parents, students and anyone else who will listen about finding her 20-year-old son dead in his bed one morning in 1996.

The boy with a bright smile and a dog named Sunny overdosed early on a September day. Ian was an addict, a young man who discovered heroin at the [University of Hartford](#).

We sit in a [Panera Bread](#) on a rainy afternoon as Katz grabs my arm and looks me in the eye. I have heard this tale of kids-and-drugs and kids-and-booze a million times.



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Wake up, Katz says. Pay attention to your kids. Get in their business. Lock the liquor cabinet. Don't keep secrets.

You might not get a second chance, she says.

Still, I'm not sure I buy this urgent message yet. Lock up the booze? Snoop around in their dresser drawers? Marijuana will lead to addiction?

It's all different now, she tells me. We know about the damage to adolescent brains. We know how teenagers turn into addicts. The pot, she promises, "is not your grandpa's marijuana."

"It is epidemic, drug use among children. Every child is going to be exposed to this. Try this. Smoke this."

I wonder whether these warnings have become just as much a part of our pop culture as her son's high school ritual of "a few cigarettes, a little weed and a few sips of beer." We view the images from her moving story abstractly, like an episode of "That 70s Show" — or even the wrenching high school overdose scene from the movie "Traffic" a few years ago.

"There has been a tremendous code of silence," Katz responds when I ask if it seems like she has been delivering the same talk for years and things don't change. "But I see some hope. More people are talking about it."

The message is reaching some people. In [West Hartford](#), they asked Katz, who is from Norwalk, to bring her presentation to the high schools this week. I asked Sherry Stohler, a West Hartford parent and one of the leaders of Community of Concern, a group trying to stoke public discussion about teenage substance abuse, why it is difficult to get the attention of over-committed suburban parents.

"Most parents want to believe that their children are beyond reproach," she tells me. "There is too much pride tied up in raising their children ... that they could be drinking or taking drugs."

At Conard High School Thursday morning, where I went to hear Katz speak, pictures of a little boy, an adolescent and then a young man flash on a screen in the front of the auditorium.

It is Ian. Dead Ian.

Katz, in brilliant pink and clutching a microphone, talks about "the choices he made. The decisions he regretted."

"I never thought this would happen in our family, but it did," she says, pacing quickly in front of an audience of hundreds of students.

What I'm struck by is all these people who knew, for years, that Ian was spiraling into addiction. A boy who held him during a bad trip in high school. A girlfriend who dumped him because he reeked of marijuana all the time. Another who watched Ian put a gun to his head and threaten to kill himself.

There were even adults who "kept Ian's secret."

Katz moves to the ugly finale.

"Mom, I'm sorry," Ian told her late that last night, revealing he had relapsed, but promising to seek help. "I'll see you in the morning."

Minutes later he went to his bedroom and took a final overdose.

"Get your secrets out. We all have them," Katz concludes. "If you see someone in trouble, have the courage to speak."

[Rick Green](#)'s column appears on Tuesdays and Fridays. Read his blog at courant.com/rick.

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