

Courage to Speak holds 'Family Night'

NORWALK

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By Carol King, Hour Correspondent

The horror of drug use was the focus of the seventh annual Courage To Speak "Empowering Youth to Be Drug Free Family Night."

The event, which took place Tuesday night at West Rocks Middle School, welcomed an audience of about 300 people who were on hand to dissuade youngsters from using drugs. The attendees included parents, educators, government officials and business leaders.

The evening featured readings of essays by fourth- and seventh-grade students, who described how the program has convinced them to make their lives drug-free.

"It's unfair that teens can be felled by a decision that takes less than one minute to make," noted Kyle Brenn, of Nathan Hale Middle School. "This program has showed me the true danger of drugs."

The Courage To Speak Foundation -- created by Norwalk residents Ginger and Larry Katz -- provides drug-prevention curriculum for elementary, middle and high school students as well as for parents. "We try to educate the students at an early age," explained Larry Katz.

The Katzes founded the nonprofit organization following the 1996 death of their 20-year-old son Ian, who died of an accidental drug overdose.

"I cannot imagine the horror of finding a loved one dead in my own home," stated Jessica Magroli of Ponus Ridge Middle School, as she read her essay. "The program has changed the way I think about drugs and helped me to understand the effects of drugs and alcohol."

Maeve Bustell conveyed her sympathy to the Katzes on Ian's passing, "I applaud you for your perseverance and determination in funding this program," said the Nathan Hale student. "I've read reports that 54 percent of high school kids on the East Coast have drugs in their schools. We have to get that number down."

Additional essayists included Bryan Vigo, Miranda Wilson and Lindsay Walsh of Roton Middle School; Kenya Dubose and Fatimah Kahn of Side by Side Community School; Syndie Lauture, Mario Rojas and Erin Vallerie of West Rocks; Dre'ana Grant of Ponus Ridge; and Zane Brown, Alexandra

Mallios, Yanira Matute, Anastacia Negron, Roger Santana and Lilah Smith of Brookside Elementary School.

The students were introduced by Mayor Richard Moccia, Chief of Police Harry Rilling and Superintendent of Schools Dr. Susan Marks. State Representative Lawrence F. Cafero Jr. was master of ceremonies.

The program began with a special video presentation from the White House. David K. Mineta, of the National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP), congratulated the Katzes on the role they play in educating students.

Anti-drug messages, too, were prevalent in the West Rocks' cafeteria. A display of artwork created by students during their drug-prevention classes included such warnings as "When you say yes to drugs, you say yes to death," "Cocaine makes you insane," "Get high then die" and "If you drink, your grades will sink."

At the close of the program, The Courage to Speak Community Leadership Awards and Recognition Awards were presented. Visit www.couragetospeak.org.