

The Hour

Hundreds gather to empower youth to be drug free at Courage to Speak family night

By LEE HIGGINS
Hour Staff Writer

March 8, 2006

NORWALK — More than 250 people gathered Tuesday night at the West Rocks Middle School auditorium for the second-annual The Courage to Speak Foundation, Inc., "Empowering Youth to Be Drug Free Family Night."

Ginger Katz of Norwalk, who founded the non-profit organization in 1996 after her son, Ian, died of a heroin overdose, shared his story, urging parents to talk with their children about drugs.

"Do everything you can and be as tough as you can because they want it, they need it from you and they're looking for guidance," said Katz.

Ian's drug use started in eighth grade with a sip of alcohol and a little tobacco, Katz explained. And it ended at age 20, when he used heroin one more time. Following Ian's death, his friends came to Katz's house and told her about his drug use.

"What rang in my ear is that all these secrets were coming out after Ian's death," said Katz. "And I realized that silence really killed Ian."

Katz urged parents to put denial aside and get their children help if they are using drugs. And she urged children to find three to five adult figures they can tell anything.

Prior to Katz's talk, students at four city middle schools, Side By Side Community School and the Norwalk YMCA, who have been exposed to an 18-hour curriculum designed by the Courage to Speak Foundation, Inc., read letters they wrote to Katz.

Ashley Baptiste, 12, a seventh-grader at Side By Side Community School, a preK-8 school, questioned in her letter why people use drugs.

"Why do people do it?" she read. "Why can't they just say no? They can say no to things like I don't want to clean my room. It's easy to say no to these certain things, yet you can't say no to drugs?"

Baptiste suggested that people may feel unpopular if they don't do drugs, but drugs can kill them. She added, "Life would be easier if more people just said no. Things can change if more people just said no."

State Rep. Larry Cafero, R-142, who represents Norwalk and was the master of ceremonies, told the audience that after attending the event last year he found the courage to speak. Cafero was concerned about the direction one of his friend's daughters may be heading so he gave his friend a call, despite being nervous of his reaction. "The voice on the other end of the phone in a choked-up voice thanked me for what I had done," said Cafero. Dr. Sal Corda, the superintendent of Norwalk Public Schools, warned children about the dangers of drugs and alcohol.

"There is nothing that I know of that is good about smoking marijuana, taking heroin, ingesting alcohol to the point where you become unconscious," said Corda. "Can I drink reasonably? Yes. But you can abuse that very easily if you don't know what you're doing." Corda urged children to make the right choices. "Make the choice that you know is the right choice because those of us who are older have learned the hard way," he said.

Deputy Police Chief Mark Palmer warned children that if they make the wrong choice, there may be consequences.

"If you don't listen to the message of prevention and education, then you may be forced to listen to the message of enforcement," he said.

June Stansbury, Special Agent-in-Charge of the New England Division of the Drug Enforcement Administration, pointed to the success in the government's war on drugs. Stansbury noted that last year, the DEA and its law enforcement partners seized \$1.9 billion in illicit drug assets. But she noted that every time the DEA dismantles a drug trafficking organization, one is ready to spring up to feed the demand.

"Wouldn't it be great if there was no market demand?" she asked. "Wouldn't that be great?...I challenge each and every one of you to make the patriotic decision to not use. Do it for yourself, your family and this nation."

Several people were honored at Tuesday's event, including Jim and Karen Condron of Concord Industries, who were presented with The Courage to Speak Community Leadership Award. Also, Max Barrand, 17, and Eric Genuario, 18, both seniors at Norwalk High School, who have served on the organization's board of directors since 2002, were each given the Youth Volunteer Service Award.

In addition, the following people were given The Courage to Speak Community Recognition Award: Linda Sumpter (principal of Ponus Ridge Middle School), Joseph Velluci (principal of Roton Middle School), Robert McCain (principal of Nathan Hale Middle School), Dr. Lynn Moore (principal of West Rocks Middle School), Matthew E. Nittoly (director of Side By Side Community School) and Debbie Greenwood (executive director of the Norwalk YMCA). Visit www.courgetospeak.org

Reporter Lee Higgins can be reached by phone at (203) 354-1045 and email at police@thehour.com