

The ADVOCATE

Mother's anti-drug crusade looks back on successful decade

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NORWALK - Ginger Katz has transformed a family tragedy into a decade-long national crusade to educate students and parents about the life-threatening dangers of drug abuse.

Katz, president of the Norwalk-based Courage to Speak Foundation and author of "*Sunny's Story*," a children's book about her son Ian's battle with addiction, remembers him as a bright, handsome, athletic and popular 20-year-old when he died of a drug overdose on Sept. 10, 1996.

"Addiction does not discriminate. It doesn't matter who you are, it doesn't matter what race you are, how financially sound you are or if you have a family who loves you dearly," she said. "Sadly, it can happen to any of us."

The Lightfoot Running Club will hold the ninth annual Ian James Eaccarino Memorial 9-Mile Race at 8 a.m. tomorrow at Calf Pasture Beach.

Katz and her husband, Larry Katz, have been members of the Norwalk club for more than 25 years, and the organization suggested dedicating the race to their son because he worked at the beach the summer before he died planting many of the trees that currently line the park.

Courage to Speak also will participate in the Kayak For a Cause VII at 7:30 a.m. tomorrow at the park.

Since Ian's death, Ginger and Larry Katz have presented their story to nearly half a million people across the country and developed curriculums for elementary, middle and high school students and their parents.

"The No. 1 key to prevention is a parent talking to his or her child about the dangers of drug use," Ginger Katz said. "Only one in three parents do so today. A child who talks with his or her parents about the dangers of drug use has a 57 percent better chance of never becoming involved in drugs."

Lynne Moore, principal of West Rocks Middle School in Norwalk, said her students enjoy the curriculum Ginger Katz developed five years ago.

Moore said Katz's method of stressing the dangers of drugs and alcohol comes through strongly in the 10-week seventh-grade curriculum. It had a pilot program at West Rocks in 2002 and has expanded throughout the district.

"I think she comes off as an everyday person in the world who experienced something harrowing," Moore said. "She lost her son to drugs and she's there standing before them in her

business suit. She got out there to make a difference in the lives of the kids. That comes through very beautifully."

Cece Donoghue, a Darien mother of five children between the ages of 7 and 16, said Ginger Katz does something few others could do as effectively.

"Her story is moving and compelling, it just speaks to you," Donoghue said. "It's because she's a mother. She's not a mother like me. She's a mother who lost her child and that's a whole new realm of where she's coming from. If I were to tell my children what she's telling them, they'd hear half of it, maybe. She's a mother speaking from a huge loss in her life."

The Courage to Speak Foundation has been growing in visibility and credibility.

"We've accomplished a lot in 10 years, but I think in the last year the momentum really has picked up because that's when we launched '*Sunny Story*,'" Ginger Katz said. "Ten years ago when Ian was in school, I don't know if he had that thorough education that is now in the seventh grade."

Ginger Katz said though she would like to expand the curriculum she has helped usher into other districts like Bridgeport, she does not want to expand too quickly at the risk of spreading her efforts too thin or without enough funding.

"I am happy where I am right now," she said. "If this is all it is, I am happy. If it's anything else, that's great. Visit www.couragetospeak.org