

Rising above the influence

By Rachel Shapiro

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Brian Balzer was 22 years old in October 2009 when his grandfather found him dead in his home. A former varsity baseball player at William Floyd High School in Mastic Beach, Balzer died of a heroin overdose.

His parents, Cindy and Ed Balzer, will be speaking to what officials in the Middle Country School District hope will be a packed auditorium next week to prevent young people from meeting the same end as their son.

On Tuesday, March 22, the district will hold "Rise Above the Influence," a program aimed at keeping kids away from drugs, alcohol cyber-bullying and other destructive decisions.

The event, coordinated by Centereach High School Principal Tom Bell and Newfield High School Principal Ted Fulton, will be held at the Centereach HS library at 6:30 pm.

"We thought there was a need to bring it to the forefront of parents' and students' minds about drinking," Bell said of the program's original goal. But it soon spread to other topics.

Last year the parents of Natalie Ciappa — an 18-year-old honors student who died from a heroin overdose in June 2008 — came to talk about the dangers of drugs.

"We thought if we can bring some awareness to the problem in a larger setting," it might help, Bell said.

On Tuesday, students in grades 6 through 12 and their parents are invited to listen to Ginger Katz, founder of "The Courage to Speak" Foundation (www.couragetospeak.org); Sixth Precinct Detective Rory Forrester who will talk about cyber-bullying; Father Frank Pizzarelli of Hope House Ministries; Sgt. Sheehan of the Suffolk County Sheriff's Office and Armando Siciliani, a recovering addict at Phoenix House.

Free drug testing kits will be available for parents to take home.

Fulton said he and Bell started the event two years ago because they wanted to find a way to address drugs, bringing the two high schools together with various community groups and local law enforcement.

They wanted to "build bridges and fill in gaps for parents to provide help for the kids," Fulton said.

As a result of the program, Fulton said students asked questions, requested additional resources and talked about the information that was provided. The program increased awareness, Fulton said.

While reaching students before they start taking drugs or drinking alcohol is imperative, reaching parents is just as important.

"Keep in communication with your teenager and know what to look for," Bell said.

Last year students and parents signed a contract for life that reassured the children if they need a ride out of a difficult situation, they could call home and their parents would pick them up. The agreement would prevent driving while drunk or high and provide an out for kids who might find themselves around dangerous activity but with no easy way to get away.

As an incentive, every student who attends will get \$10 off of their choice of a junior/senior prom ticket or the yearbook. As is the case with non-mandatory events, the district is working overtime to get students to attend Rise Above the Influence. Ads have been placed in newspapers; flyers have been circulated around the schools, local libraries and houses of worship and the school board and PTAs have gotten on board to get the word out.

"It's hard to get kids to go," Celia St. John from Bell's office said. "That seems to be the problem."

And the people that do attend in large numbers are not necessarily the targeted audience.

"It's the kids that need to come and the families that need to come that don't," St. John said.

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