

Pledging to stay drug-free Students read letters to Courage to Speak program founder

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NORWALK

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Jenna Pelligrino, a student at Ponus Ridge Middle School, knows that sometimes it is not always best to keep a friend's secret. If that friend's secret is drug use, the worst thing you can do is remain silent.

Pelligrino relayed that message as she read from her letter in front of nearly 300 people at The Courage to Speak Foundation's Empowering Youth to be Drug Free Family Night held Monday evening at West Rocks Middle School. She was one of several students to read letters written to Ginger Katz, founder of The Courage to Speak.

Empowering Youth to the Drug Free is an in-school drug prevention curriculum for grades 4 through 7. For the first time this year, the program is also in Bridgeport, thanks to an anonymous donation. Bridgeport students also read letters to Katz.

Katz's son Ian died of a drug overdose at the age of 20 in 1996. Katz has since been a vocal proponent of keeping children off drugs. That work, she said on Monday, starts at an early age.

"If you see any signs of first use, address it. Nip it in the bud," she told the parents in the audience, adding that alcohol, marijuana and cigarettes can be the beginning of a path leading to more dangerous drugs. "I don't underestimate these drugs."

Katz also signed copies of her book "Sunny's Story," a book about Ian's life and addiction as told through the eyes of the family dog.

Several local officials were on hand for the event Monday. Indeed, emcee House Minority Leader Lawrence F. Cafero, Jr., took about five minutes to recognize the politicians and other dignitaries in the audience, highlighting the significance of the Empowering Youth to be Drug Free program.

Nearly every speaker stressed the importance of speaking up as one of the best ways to keep children off drugs.

"The number one key to prevention," Cafero said, "is parents talking to their children about the dangers of drugs."

Norwalk police Chief Harry Rilling added: "Speak to your children. The message will sink in."

Norwalk Mayor Richard A. Moccia closed his comments by saying: "Thank you all and keep talking."

Moccia was also inspired by seeing parents and children eating together and talking prior to the night's program.

"We should do that more often," he said. "Sit down and eat and talk. Talk about everything and then talk about the important things."

Katz told the children to get three to five adults in their lives that they can "say anything to."

Elijah Rose, a fourth-grader at Brookside Elementary, was one of the first letter readers to address the audience.

"Without you I could be in a lot of trouble," he read from his letter to Katz. "You made a book that can teach everyone and that was wonderful of you."

Jack Patterson, a student at Nathan Hale Middle School, captivated the crowd by relaying a story about suicide and drug use in his extended family.

"I'm sorry to hear about Ian," he read, "but he has inspired me to never do drugs."

Aubriana Mann read: "The story of Ian put tears in my eyes ... Life is too short than to do anything buy enjoy it."

Superintendent of Schools Sal Corda was touched by the letters read by students.

"The kids get it," he said. "They speak from the heart."

Corda also deflected credit aimed at him for bringing the Courage to Speak program into Norwalk schools.

"Credit is due to the principals and staffs who, at the very beginning, recognized the need for something like this," he said. "Then they ran with it."

Dr. Thomas Kirk, Connecticut Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services Commissioner, was presented with The Courage to Speak Community Leadership Award.

"Of the 169 towns in Connecticut, I haven't seen anything as impressive as this in terms of the whole community addressing the issue," Kirk said. "It takes the whole community."

The Courage to Speak Volunteer Awards went to Jim Sibley and Marvin Simmons. Community Recognition Awards went to: Herb Grant and teachers Timothy Downing of Brookside Elementary School; Jeremy Dane of Nathan Hale Middle School; Lois Snelson of Roton Middle School; Pat Vigilio of Ponus Ridge Middle School; York Mario of West Rocks Middle School; Andrew Lavaway of Side By Side Community School; Dawn Schrizzo of Beardsley School in Bridgeport; Nicole Vetter of Beardsley; and Adam Bell of Cesar Batalla School.

In addition to parents' involvement, Katz said that who students hang out with is another crucial component of remaining drug free.

"Your friends will bring you up or down. You have to choose them wisely," she said. "You are all good kids. You have to make good decisions." www.couragetospeak.org