

NORWALK CITIZEN NEWS

Students share lessons from curriculum

By David Hennessey

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In a crowded auditorium at West Rocks Middle School in Norwalk Monday evening, hundreds gathered to celebrate the fifth annual Courage to Speak Foundation's Family Night, an event designed to spread the foundation's mission of empowering youth to be drug-free and to recognize the kids who have completed its drug prevention curriculum.

Among those students was Nathan Hale Middle School seventh-grader Jack Patterson. He presented a letter he wrote to Ginger Katz, who with her husband Larry, started the foundation after the tragic death of her son, Ian, from a drug overdose, after hearing her tell Ian's story as part of the curriculum.

In his letter Patterson told the story of his cousin who had committed suicide and his cousin's younger brother who subsequently struggled with substance abuse.

"His parents sent him to rehab for two whole years. As much as it hurt his parents they had to do it .We only saw him on holidays. It was never the same....But when he came out he was better than ever .He is working and going to start college soon. He also empathized with Katz.

"I am sorry about your son, but he has inspired me to never use drugs," Patterson said.

Patterson, several other middle schoolers and elementary school

students also designed posters with drug-free messages, which were on display in the cafeteria for administrators, teachers, students, parents and local officials.

Norwalk School Superintendent Sal Corda praised the Katzs and the foundation for their efforts. He said the decision to allow its prevention programs into Norwalk schools was, " one of the easiest decisions I ever had to make."

"If you look at the posters here tonight and listen to the kids (that have spoken), it becomes very clear that they get it. They speak from the heart .They have the resolve to say, 'We're not going to do that. We are very fortunate in the city of Norwalk, because we have a community that understands. It's everyone's responsibility," Corda said.

In addition to Corda, guests and speakers included Norwalk Mayor Richard Moccia, Norwalk Chief of Police Harry Rilling and House Minority Leader and emcee for the evening Lawrence F. Cafero (R-Norwalk).

"It never ceases to amaze me how Ginger and Larry took such a tragic event and turned it into a positive," Rilling said. "Speak to your children," he urged the audience.

"It may not seem like it, but they are listening." Tragedy strikes

On Sept. 10, 1996, Ginger Katz awoke to every mother's nightmare.

"I found my 20-year-old son Ian dead in his bed of an accidental heroin overdose. Ian James Eaccarino was a promising college student with everything to live for. He was bright, athletic, popular and handsome. He was dearly loved by his family and by his many friends. Drugs destroyed his life," Katz said in a written recollection of Ian's descent into tobacco, marijuana and finally heroin use.

Katz described the cycle of lies, deception and violence including the firebombing of Ian's car in the driveway of their home that perpetuated his destructive and ultimately fatal habits. And though he agreed to counseling, it was not enough to prevent his death.

"The evening before he died, I realized that he had relapsed," Katz wrote. "He knew that I was scared and that it hurt me so. He said to me, 'Mom, I want to see the doctor in the morning and I don't want to move in with my friends.' That was the deal. Later he came upstairs and said, 'I'm sorry, mom.' It keeps ringing in my ears. Never did I think he would go downstairs and do it one more time. Even with all the remorse, the drugs were bigger than he was."

For Katz, Ian's death was marked by profound guilt, helplessness and sorrow. It served as an acute warning, a warning of the very real dangers of substance abuse, a warning, which Katz felt necessary to spread through The Courage to Speak Foundation. She has since written and published "Sunny's Story," a book telling Ian's story through the eyes and heart of their family dog. Students in the elementary school drug prevention curriculum write letters and design posters after reading "Sunny's Story."

Katz has made more than 1,000 presentations nationwide.

Katz has not only pushed for the implementation of drug-prevention programs like the ones recognized Monday night, but she has developed Courageous Parenting 101, a five-session parenting program that has also caught on in Fairfield County and beyond.

Echoing the message of the foundation, Cafero said Monday evening, "The number one key to prevention is parents talking to their kids about the dangers of drugs."

"We used to have adults and their kids talking with each other at the dinner table," Moccia said. "We don't do that enough anymore. We don't sit down over dinner. Do that more often. Talk about everything."

Courage to Speak Award Winners

During Family Night, Courage to Speak Awards for 2009 were also presented. Award recipients included:, Dr. Thomas A. Kirk, Commissioner of CT Dept. of Mental Health and Addiction Services, who received the Courage To Speak Community Leadership Award. Courage to Speak Community Recognition Awards were bestowed upon, Herb Jay, and teachers Timothy Downing, Jeremy Dane, Lois Snelson, Pat Vigilio, York Mario, Andrew Lavaway, Dawn Schirizzo and Nicole Vetter. The Courage to Speak Volunteer of the Year Award went to Jim Sibley and Marvin Simmons. visit www.couragetospeak.org