

Students Show Courage Speaking Against Drug Abuse

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Local fourth and seventh graders spoke out adamantly against substance abuse Monday night at the fourth annual "Courage to Speak: Empowering Youth to be Drug-Free Family Night" at West Rocks Middle School.

With few dry eyes in the auditorium, Norwalk students expressed their heartfelt views about drug, alcohol and other substance abuse to the hundreds of families, parents, students, and government officials that attended the event.

The purpose of the popular evening was to educate local youth and celebrate those who have already denounced substance abuse. On display at the family night were a host of posters and collages designed by the students during drug prevention classes that are part of the Courage to Speak curriculum, an influential program aimed at helping the students to become anti-drug advocates and mentors for their friends and younger siblings.

After the tragic death of their son, Ian, from a drug overdose, Ginger and Larry Katz established The Courage to Speak Foundation, a non-profit organization dedicated to saving lives by stressing the crucial importance of parent-child communication as a means to keep kids drug free. CTS provides vital information to students, in addition to creating a safe environment that fosters discussion and healthy relationships that will, ultimately, deter destructive substance abuse behavior.

The goal of the family night is bringing students and parents together to speak openly and honestly about the dangers of drugs.

"Tonight is all about families communicating with each other about things that are so important," said Lawrence Cafero, House Republican Minority leader and emcee for the evening. "Substance abuse crosses all lines, all races and all creeds; it's a devastating problem."

"This is a scourge that can destroy our country unless programs [similar to CTS] move forward. This is a challenge for all of us," Norwalk Mayor Richard Moccia said.

"We care deeply about what happens to you," Superintendent of Schools Salvatore Corda told students present Monday night. "The community values you and wants to do everything it can to protect you."

Cafero, David Hay, principal of Brookside Elementary School, and Timothy Downey, health teacher at Brookside, also received awards from CTS for their respective contributions to the community in regard to substance abuse education.

"We reach kids on a deeply personal and emotional level by telling the tragic story of Ian's life and death," explained Ginger Katz. "Speaking honestly and simply about what happened to our son who had everything to live for, we deliver a powerful message about prevention. The students identify strongly with Ian and with us. They believe that we care about them so they trust the information we give them. The result: After seeing our presentation, hundreds of students have come to us promising not to take drugs," Ginger Katz said.

"Keeping young lives and families from being destroyed by drugs. This is the purpose of The Courage to Speak Foundation and the continuing fulfillment of my promise to my son Ian's memory: that I would never stop telling his story Let's work together to empower all of our children to be drug free and together we can make a difference."
For information, visit www.couragetospeak.org