

Mother's loss motivates her to campaign against drug use by young people

By Nina Sen

Ten years after the death of her son due to a drug overdose, Virginia "Ginger" Katz is still spreading the message against drugs. And she's seeing the results in student's attitude towards drugs.

The community thanked Katz for her efforts to educate students on the negative uses of drugs at the fourth annual Courage to Speak "Empowering Youth to be Drug Free" family night on Monday.

Katz, founder and president of the Courage to Speak Foundation, has led a 10-year campaign against drug abuse by young people following the death of her 20-year-old son, Ian James Eaccarino, of a heroin overdose in 1996.

The night started with dinner and a display of student letters which pledged to not abuse drugs. The evening was organized by the foundation and featured Mayor Richard A. Moccia, School Superintendent Salvatore J. Corda, state Rep. Lawrence Cafero, R-142, House minority leader, and state Sen. Robert Duff, D-25, majority whip.

"There had to be something to save Ian's life," said West Rocks Middle School student Rachel Falbo in her letter. "I love this program. It really helps you better understand drugs and how there is no cure for it."

The mood became increasingly somber when community members remembered the recent shooting death of officer Matthew Morelli.

"We'd like to thank the community for their support during this time," said Chief of Police Harry Rilling, who serves on the advisory board for the Courage to Speak Foundation. "As a community you've said enough is enough, we're going to stand up against drugs."

Student Maria Taverner read a poem titled "Lost" about the downward spiral drugs may cause. The opening line said, "It all started with peer pressure...". Taverner and many other students said they'd lost someone they'd known to smoking-related cancer, drugs or other terminal illness. Many applauded Katz for her crusade against drugs.

"I think it's great for kids," said student Christian Guzman. "She's brave to speak about her son's death." Guzman is a seventh-grade student at Ponus Ridge Middle School where the courage to speak curriculum is taught in their Health class.

This curriculum consists of live presentations, video and information about drug abuse ranging from synthetic medications like Oxycontin or harder drugs such as heroin. The curriculum is being implemented in several schools throughout Norwalk and the state.

Students seemed to understand Katz's message at Courage to Speak and many said they realized how difficult it may have been for her son to acknowledge his drug problem. Student Chris Carbo may have said it best in his letter, "I think that the courage to speak means you have the courage to say you're addicted to drugs and need help."

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