

Monroe **Courier**: An anti-drug crusade that began in heartbreak

By [Robert Sample](#) on September 28, 2018 in [Lead News](#), [News](#), [Schools](#) ·

Were he alive today, Ian Eaccarino would be 41 — but his life was cut short by a drug overdose at the age of 20.

Eaccarino's death in 1997 gave his mom, Norwalk's Ginger Katz, a new mission that involves keeping his memory alive and ensuring Eaccarino did not die in vain. Katz created the Courage to Speak Foundation, which educates young people about the horrors of drug abuse. It also alerts parents to the signs of drug abuse and the parenting techniques they must employ to stop it.

"My son was a good kid ... a wonderful kid," said Katz in a presentation July 20 at Jockey Hollow Middle School. "He made an unhealthy decision to use drugs, and I'm not ashamed of him. Instead, I speak out."

Katz is the founder of the Courage to Speak Foundation. She and husband Larry, Ian's stepfather, have taken their anti-drug crusade nationwide with a simple, four-step message for parents. For starters, they urge them to teach their kids about the dangers of drug abuse at an early age, and to remain firm no matter what.

In an era when opioid abuse has reached epidemic levels, Katz's message resonates wherever she speaks. Eaccarino's abuse began at the age of 13, when he was an eighth grader.

"I gave him a hug and I could smell it [the odor of marijuana] on him," Katz recalled. "He said he 'just tried it.'"

Yet, at Eaccarino's funeral friends told him that he had regularly smoked pot at that young age, in addition to drinking alcoholic beverages. At the time, though, Katz wanted to believe her son — which only led to larger episodes of drug abuse in high school and college.

In fact, there was a later incident in which a Norwalk police officer stopped the driver of a car in which Eaccarino was a passenger. The officer found a bag of pot in the car, and Eaccarino immediately said it belonged to the vehicle's driver.

"The officer let him off the hook, which I later realized was the wrong thing to do," said Katz. "This was denial: on my part, on Ian's ... and on that officer's."

During high school, Eaccarino exhibited some of the classic signs of drug abuse — signs Katz regrets not heeding. They included poorer performance in school and truancy, aggressiveness and lack of cooperation in the household, deteriorating family relationships, a loss of interest in activities such as school sports and frequent bouts of fatigue.

During his sophomore year of high school, Katz brought Eaccarino to his doctor for a physical exam, during which he refused to provide a urine sample. The next day, he gave his mother a sample to bring to the doctor.

“I could see it in his eyes ... he was giving the doctor somebody else’s urine,” Katz said. “I made him go back to the doctor that afternoon to provide another urine sample, and sure enough, while the sample from the morning was negative, the afternoon sample was positive.”

Later that same year, Eaccarino called his biological father with a startling confession — he had been snorting heroin for five months. He landed in a rehab facility near Norwalk High School, and during his stay he underwent detox and “got clean.” He also made a resolution not to go back.

That worked — for a while. He relapsed when he attended the University of Hartford, and made the decision to transfer to UConn-Stamford in his sophomore year. He fashioned an apartment of sorts in the Katzes’ basement. He did so to be closer to his drug counselor, but also to avoid the drug-riddled dormitory at the Hartford campus — as well as friends who were users.

“Ian’s last relapse took place after he paid a visit to his old haunts,” Katz said. “Our dog, Sunny, woke me up at 4 a.m. the following day and I knew right away something was wrong. When I went down to the basement and found Ian, he was not breathing.”

Before the ambulance arrived, Katz summoned a friend who performed multiple rounds of CPR. The paramedics attempted to revive him as well, but it was in vain. From that day forward, Katz has spoken out about the drug epidemic to the point of losing her voice.

“I vow that I will never stop speaking out until I see changes in the world,” she said.

Katz’s experiences were mirrored by those of Monroe’s own Brooke Larsen, an officer with the Monroe Police Department. Inspired by experiences within her own family, Larsen formed the department’s Crisis Intervention Team, which trains other police officers in how to deal with issues related to drug abuse and mental health. Earlier this year, Larsen was selected for the 2017 Chief Jacob J. Tufano Memorial “Officer of the Year” Award.

“Addiction is a family disease,” Larsen said. “One person may have it, but the whole family suffers.”

In addition to seeing it within her own family, Larsen’s work has brought her in contact with people undergoing drug overdoses, including the overdose and subsequent death of a high-school friend.

“We as a community are a family, too, so we all suffer from this epidemic,” said Larsen.

In addition to its training role, the Crisis Intervention Team provides an ongoing system of follow-up for people dealing with addiction issues.

Monroe’s Carlos Reinoso, Jr., also addressed the gathering, noting that the town offers resources to which parents can turn for help. These include the Monroe Parents’ Council, the Monroe Youth Commission, and Alcohol and Drug Awareness of Monroe (ADAM), a volunteer awareness organization.

The goal for any parent is to be authoritative — as contrasted with the traditional “authoritarian” parenting style, Reinoso said.

“As a parent, you must talk often about the dangers of drugs, and talk about your expectation that there be no drug use by your child,” said Reinoso.

The role requires constant re-learning and new knowledge, because the drug scene changes, he added.

Reinoso also noted that technology has given parents some new tools to keep communication lines open. The parent and child can agree on a codeword or symbol to use if the child ever finds himself or herself in a situation involving drugs — and needs to make a fast exit.

“That can serve as a signal that your child is very uncomfortable,” said Reinoso, “and wants to be picked up right away.”