

Talking to parents about talking to teens

Brittany Lyte

Published 8:37 pm, Saturday, January 25, 2014



*Antonella Saldarriaga, 18, of Greenwich, a member of Peer Players, a Liberation programs youth theater group, during an educational performance exploring ways for teens and parents to better communicate, at the YMCA of Greenwich, Thursday night, Jan. 23, 2014.
Photo: Bob Lucke*

George Ramirez smoked his first joint when he was an eighth-grader at Western Middle School. He was walking to his grandmother's house one afternoon after classes let out when he spied a couple of high school guys smoking the funny-looking cigarette.

"What is that?" he asked. They told him to scram, but Ramirez was curious. He hung around and asked a few more questions. Then he took a hit.

Just one hit. But it was enough for Ramirez to determine that he liked getting high. So smoking weed became part of his routine. After football practice. On weekends. At his buddy's house after school.

By the time he reached his sophomore year at Greenwich High School, Ramirez was smoking pot, drinking, popping pills and snorting cocaine. Later, he started shooting heroin into his veins.

"It started escalating and I didn't even notice it," said Ramirez, now a 22-year-old recovering drug addict. "I couldn't stop it and I didn't even know if I wanted to stop it. I thought hanging out with my friends with a bag of weed and some pills and some drinks was the best thing."

The last time Ramirez did drugs was Feb. 10, 2010 -- the day he went to jail to serve a 20-month sentence on drug-related charges.

Now a resident at Liberation House, a Norwalk-based residential drug rehab program for men, Ramirez is working to get his derailed life back on track. One of the ways he's coping with his past is by speaking publicly about his experiences as a drug-addicted teen in hopes of preventing other young people from making the same mistakes.

"I wish I could go back and never do any of that," he told a room filled with parents at the YMCA of Greenwich Thursday night. "To be honest, if I didn't go to jail, I'd probably still be doing the stuff I was doing. I'd probably be dead of an overdose."

His advice to parents is to communicate effectively with your children. Work to eliminate any sense of fear your child might have in approaching you to discuss his or her missteps.

"Don't get mad at them or yell at them, just talk to him," Ramirez said. "Try to get on their level. Let them talk. You have to let them speak."

Liberation Programs, the agency that operates the rehabilitation house where Ramirez lives, hosted the seminar for parents at the YMCA. The evening brought together Liberation Programs' Prevention Specialist Barry Halpin, Youth Options Counselor Cerissa Orbegoso, local teens and recovering drug addicts like Ramirez for a dialogue about better parenting with open lines of communication.

Michael Rechtman, a 23-year-old recovering addict from Weston, said he longed for open lines of communication with his parents when he was a teen just starting to dabble in drugs.

"They never really tried to figure out how I was feeling," he said. "They gave me everything I needed and everything I wanted, but they weren't easy to talk to. I wanted to tell them things, but I didn't know how to talk to them and say, 'Hey -- I'm doing dope. I'm selling drugs.' I didn't have the heart to do that."

Orbegoso told parents to start discussing things like alcohol and drugs with their children in an age-appropriate manner when they begin middle school. She said it's wrong to think today's youth in Greenwich don't encounter things like beer and pills as teens and preteens.

"What I hear most often is, 'I tried to tell my mom about something and she started telling me about how it was when she was in school and her experience and by the time she was done, our seat belts were off and we were out of the car and that was that,'" Orbegoso said.

"These kids feel like they have no one to speak to and they use hard drugs to cope," she said. "You have to work on effective communication. Talking about the way things were when you were their age is not effective communication. You need to ask questions like, 'How are you feeling?' 'What do you think about this?'"



From left, Clare Livingston, 18, of Norwalk, and Antonella Saldarriaga, also 18, of Greenwich, both members of Peer Players, a Liberation programs youth theater group, during an educational performance exploring ways for teens and parents to better communicate, at the YMCA of Greenwich, Thursday night, Jan. 23, 2014

Henry D. Recinos, 17, of Greenwich, a member of Peer Players.

Cary Ostrow of Stamford asks a question about communicating better and Liberation Programs' Prevention Specialist, Barry Halpin, plays the role of a father speaking with his teenage daughter during a performance of Peer Players.