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Web site shares story of heroin victim

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Fifteen-year-old Josephine Natoli cried for an hour after she read about Norwalk resident Pete Rinner -- an intelligent, compassionate and outgoing 24-year-old who died March 1, 1999, after a heroin overdose.

Josephine, who lives in Staten Island, N.Y., and others throughout the world can now share the grief -- and learn an important lesson about drugs -- because Pete's sister, Marci Davies, has established a Web site in memory of him.

Davies said the Web site is something she wanted to launch in Rinner's memory -- and if it results in more speaking engagements, all the better. Since 2001, Davies has been sharing Pete's story with school children and others. She hopes her speeches will prevent tragedies similar to the one she and her family suffered.

"I'm not going to save every kid that I talk to, but if I can save one person then I've done something positive," Davies said.

Davies has done something positive by launching the Web site -- just ask visitors who've been touched by Pete's story. One of them was Josephine, a teen-ager who didn't know Pete or his family.

"I never even knew him and I was stuck crying for about an hour," Josephine wrote on the Web site's guestbook section. "I know if Peter was alive, he would have gone so far. He seemed so amazing and he was so handsome. I'm sorry for the pain you have suffered and God bless you for making it through."

Josephine is one of 36 people who wrote a message in the guestbook. They hail from places such as Shropshire in the United Kingdom, Toms River, N.J., Snow Hill, N.C., Houston, Texas and Oak Ridge, Tenn.

Oak Ridge resident Donna Forstrom said her 17-year-old son died of a drug overdose. Therefore, she knows what Davies and her family is going through.

"My heart aches for you and your family because I know so well your pain," she wrote.

Norwalk resident Heather Book was also touched by Pete's story.

"What a wonderful thing you are doing in your brother's name," she wrote. "We all

couldn't be prouder of you! I feel privileged to be your cousin and to know you. Keep up the good work and never stop telling Pete's story; it may save someone else's life one day. No doubt, Pete is smiling down on all of your family."

In real life, Rinner had every reason to smile, according to Davies: He was a straight A student throughout middle and high school; he was awarded a partial academic scholarship; he had a loving family and many friends. But Rinner also had what Davies calls "Superman Syndrome," in that he felt he could handle anything -- including heroin.

Family members had other reasons to believe something was wrong, but news that Pete overdosed on the drug still came as a shock, Davies said.

Davies hearkened back to Christmas morning in 1998 when all seemed well. Rinner was home from college to spend the holiday with family. He was excited about graduating the following year and moving out West to begin his career. Pete sat on the couch that morning and played a few songs on a guitar.

"I was three months pregnant with our first child and that morning was one of the happiest memories I have," Davies wrote on the Web site. "I was thinking about how blessed my husband and I were and also how blessed this child would be to have such a great extended family."

In the ensuing weeks, however, family members noticed drastic changes in Rinner. He lost weight, black circles appeared under his eyes and he was more withdrawn. When pressed, he insisted the root of the changes in him was nothing he couldn't handle. Davies and her family learned otherwise on the morning of March 1, 1999. An officer from the Columbus Police Department called to say he was found on the floor, dead from an apparent overdose.

"He was too good of a person to die alone on a cold floor in the middle of the night," Davies wrote. "That vision will always haunt me. How could this possibly happen?"

Davies said even today, five years after Rinner overdosed, many questions swirl in her head and the grief hasn't gone away. Her message to other?

"This does not go away and it definitely does not get any easier. If you are dealing with heroin in any way -- please do everything in your power to get help."

The Web site Davies launched is www.forpetessake.org.