



A Tribute to Tigger

One family's tragedy inspires an education-based battle against substance abuse

BY EMMA SYLVIA

The Tigger Stavola Foundation, located in Red Bank, was founded in 2013 in order to fight addiction. Inspired by the immense loss of Richard Stavola, Jr., lovingly nicknamed "Tigger," the foundation has the vision of educating future generations on the danger of substance abuse. Lisa Stavola, the Founding Director and mother of Tigger, explains, "The Tigger Stavola Foundation is dedicated to fighting addiction, spreading awareness, and saving lives by educating students about drug prevention. We work tirelessly to alleviate families of the heartbreak of losing a loved one to addiction."

Director of Communications, Jennifer Egan, explains more of the foundation and its conception.

After Tigger passed away at the age of 25 due to an accidental overdose, his family – parents Lisa and Rick Sr., as well as brother Alex – decided to spend their time tirelessly working to make the Tigger Stavola Foundation a worthy tribute to his memory. Among many other things, the nonprofit aims to change the stigma about overdose so that the average citizen does not have negative connotations with its victims, but understands that substance abuse disorder is, in fact, a disease. "They focus more on recovery," explains Jennifer Egan, Director of Communications. "It's so [patients] are treated with dignity when they need recovery." To this end, the foundation recently honored Bill Arnold at its gala, who was instrumental in opening recovery rooms for those suffering under substance abuse disorder at Monmouth Medical Center.

The foundation's work has evolved tremendously in the 11 years since its founding. Now, the Tigger Stavola Foundation focuses on education to reach the younger generation. There

is an epidemic of addiction among the country's youth, and Egan explains the direness of the situation: "It's not just addiction anymore, but death — especially with the fentanyl crisis." In order to combat this, the foundation has programs in place where they send educational materials, along with motivational speakers, to schools, primarily in Monmouth and Ocean Counties. Egan says, "Our free initiatives are designed to equip students with the knowledge and skills necessary to make informed decisions and lead healthy, productive lives."

Offering a selection of esteemed speakers for each school's audience to cover different topics, the foundation offers professional, vetted speakers free of cost to their Partner Schools. This program has also been a hit with educators. Brian Latwis, Ed.D, the Superintendent at Barnegat Township, says, "The dynamic and highly interactive presentation funded by the Tigger Stavola Foundation really kept our seventh and eighth grade students' attention and helped them recognize the dangers, risks and life altering consequences of using substances." Over 120 educational presentations have been delivered to more than 61,000 New Jersey students to date. Additionally, the foundation has awarded \$70,000 in scholarships to seniors at their partner high schools.

Stavola elaborates, "Without a nationally funded drug education program, we are filling the drug prevention gap for parents and educators at a critical time. Drug overdose is the leading cause of non-medical death in the U.S." The foundation's outreach currently reaches 80,000 students. "We're hoping to cover the map, particularly in NJ," Egan says.

Part of their educational awareness is a new app for students' phones that launched in November of 2023, made in col-

laboration with GoMo Health in Asbury. Called LED (Leadership, Education and Drug Prevention by Tigger) by Tigger, the app is a first-of-its-kind mobile platform that is easily accessible through students' smartphones. Egan explains, "Led by Tigger, it's an enrollment to receive text messages. They don't receive anything during school hours. We'll send you a text with a video of our speakers, or trivia and multiple-choice questions. I think kids want to have hard facts and real reasons not to try something."

The foundation has found that the students are particularly engaged with their programs. With positive incentive through gift card gifts offered through the foundation's app, kids are eager to continue learning, with 1,000 students enrolled with a retention rate of 97%. "The feedback's been great," Egan says, "particularly about things we're finding out they didn't know. Even among older teens, they didn't know about the Good Samaritan Law." Honing this education and awareness while students are younger is critical, as the earlier an individual tries any of these harmful substances, the likelihood of having addiction in-

creases exponentially earlier. "These are the things resonating with kids," Egan says. "It's meeting them where they're at. They might not be hearing this from their parents or the DARE program." Out of the more than 1,000 students enrolled from their 35 partner schools, 91% report feeling better educated to handle a substance crisis.

It's not just students that have positive feedback about LED by Tigger. Joe Isola, the Superintendent of Howell School District says, "Because LED by Tigger is voluntary, kids are viewing it as non-threatening and inviting. It's the engagement and thought-provoking information that steers them toward good decision making, because we're not with them on Saturday nights."

The Tigger Stavola Foundation hopes



to continue to raise funding for their multifaceted educational programs. In the United States, \$22 billion is spent nationally on treatment, but only \$2 billion is spent on education. The foundation hopes to tackle substance abuse disorder before it even manifests. To sign up for LED by Tigger, text TIGGER to 43386. To learn more about the Tigger Stavola Foundation and how to help their cause, visit tiggerstavolafoundation.org