

“I hope someone will now be able to say, ‘Well, if someone like Ryan Leaf had struggles, then it is okay for me for me to say I have struggles too—and that I need help,” said Senator Ritchie. “I think it is important for people—especially our young people—to hear his story, learn what he’s been through and see how’s he’s turned his life around and is focusing on helping others.”

Leaf’s inspiring message helped students better understand the struggles of addiction and realize that there is light at the end of the tunnel.

Unfortunately, recent statistics for Jefferson, Oswego and St. Lawrence Counties show that one out of ten children aged 12-17 have tried an illegal drug. That number grows to one out of every four by the time they turn 18.

In his presentation, Leaf opened up about his life as a famous football player, and how the pressures of that life became too much. Leaf’s struggles ultimately ended up ruining his career and led on the path of drug abuse. Leaf battled his addiction for more than a decade. He was arrested several times after his career ended and he even considered suicide.

Leaf says he had served more than two years in prison before finally understanding that his life had meaning. He worked hard to find himself again and in a prison program, began to help other inmates learn how to read. Upon his release, he continued his work helping others as a driver for others trying to recover from addiction.

Leaf now travels the country sharing his story, hoping people can relate to his experiences and be brave enough to seek help if they need it.

“One of the three things I talk about is community and this is a perfect example of that. This is a solution-based community trying to help every single one of us. I want to commend Senator Ritchie for allowing me this opportunity to be of service,” Leaf said.

Senator Ritchie serves on the New York State Senate Task Force on Heroin and Opioid Addiction. In that role, she has worked to stop the spread of illegal substances in our region. One of her efforts includes securing over \$200,000 to help school districts throughout Jefferson, Oswego and St. Lawrence Counties have anti-drug programs available to students. In many cases, area schools have had to scale-back or even eliminate anti-drug programs due to budget constraints.

In addition, she has also worked to secure funding to help law local enforcement address the issue, and sponsored legislation to help better provide help to those looking to break the cycle of addiction. Most recently, she successfully advocated for record state budget funding to help combat the opioid epidemic, totaling \$247 million.

More than 500 community members are expected to attend the second session of Leaf's presentation, which is set to begin at 7pm Thursday at the Watertown High School Auditorium.