

The History of Red Ribbon

The Story Behind the Symbol

It was a warm afternoon on February 7, 1985 in Guadalajara, Mexico, when U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) agent Enrique (Kiki) Camarena locked his badge and revolver in his desk drawer and left to meet his wife for lunch. Kiki unsuspectingly crossed the street to his pickup truck. While unlocking the doors to his vehicle, he was grabbed by five men who shoved him into a beige Volkswagen. One month later, his body was discovered in a shallow grave. Kiki and his informant, Alfredo Zavala Avelar, were savagely and grotesquely murdered.

Enrique "Kiki" Camarena grew up in a dirt-floored house with hopes and dreams of making a difference. Camarena worked his way through college, served in the Marines and became a police officer. When he decided to join the DEA, his mother tried to talk him out of it. "I can't not do this," he told her. "I'm only one person, but I want to make a difference."

Kiki joined the DEA in 1974 and asked to be transferred to Guadalajara, Mexico, the center of the drug trafficking empire. While investigating a multi-billion dollar drug scam, he confiscated thousands of pounds of cocaine, and hundreds of thousands of pounds of marijuana. He suspected the drug scam involved officers in the Mexican army, police and government. Kiki was a believer that one person CAN make a difference and he sacrificed his life to prevent drugs from entering the United States.

In honor of Camarena's memory and his battle against illegal drugs, friends and neighbors began to wear red badges of satin. Parents, sick of the destruction of alcohol and other drugs, had begun forming coalitions. Some of these new coalitions took Camarena as their model and embraced his belief that one person can make a difference. These coalitions also adopted the symbol of Camarena's memory, the red ribbon.

Twenty years ago, in 1985, the National Federation of Parents for Drug Free Youth joined with the DEA and implemented a Red Ribbon campaign that spread to places as far away as Europe. The National Red Ribbon Week is celebrated every year October 23-31, and is dedicated to Kiki Camarena and all of the people who have been wrongly killed due to the violence of drugs.

Since then, millions of Americans have gotten involved in, and been touched by the Red Ribbon Campaign efforts. No other single drug prevention movement has had such an impact on so many lives.