

# Dad warns of dating violence

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by CHAUNCEY ROSS

CENTER TOWNSHIP — Homer-Center High School students on Thursday got a lesson no textbook could provide.

Their instructor was Gary Cuccia, of Murrysville.

His subject: Recognizing and preventing dating violence, and he taught it in the sharpest of terms.

His lesson plan: The slaying of his daughter by her ex-boyfriend. Demi Brae Cuccia was stabbed to death in August 2007, one day after she turned 16.

And his challenge: To get his message through to the most impenetrable of minds, the teenager in love.

Bad relationships have clear warning signs, Cuccia said, and he called for people to have courage to recognize and act on them — such as the teenagers being victimized by aggressive boyfriends or girlfriends. Friends looking in on the relationship. Parents seeing what's happening in their children's lives. And even violence-prone young people who just may recognize that their own behavior really isn't right.

When you're getting 200 to 300 text messages a day from someone, asking where you are, what you're doing, who you're with and what you're wearing, "and you find yourself being anxious because you're not responding fast enough, or you make up excuses or lie about where you are when you have no reason to lie, these are things you need to be concerned about," Cuccia said.

"To the guys, I would say that if you have a buddy whose girlfriend broke up with him and he's having a hard time dealing with it," he could be at risk, Cuccia said. "He's isolated, not playing sports anymore, maybe he's aggressive. Speak up and tell somebody. Make sure that young man gets some help and doesn't do something he will regret the rest of his life.

"I tell the students that as peers, they know what's going on with one another way better than we do as parents, teachers and counselors. I tell them to speak up, if they see something going on or find themselves in an unhealthy relationship."

Cuccia warns teenagers going through a breakup to not allow themselves to be alone with the other person, "because almost all the time, that's when these things happen," he said.

Parents need to watch for warning signs that he missed, Cuccia said.

"One day my daughter told me, 'Dad, this boy John doesn't want me to be a cheerleader anymore,' and I basically shrugged her off and said to tell John to be quiet because you love cheerleading," Cuccia said. "That was a warning sign, trying to pick and choose your activities for you."



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Cuccia also said that technology has made it tougher for parents to recognize that their children are having problems.

“When I grew up, we had one phone with a long cord and if I was fighting with a girlfriend, chances are someone would pick up on that,” Cuccia said. “If a boy calls the house 40 times a day checking on your daughter, you’re going to ask why this boy is calling so much.

“That’s what’s missing now. Everything is done through text messaging and Facebook. Parents need to be extra perceptive.”

Children being emotional, not hanging out with their usual friends, dressing differently or slipping in their grades — “these are all red flags,” he said.

Cuccia has devoted his efforts the last six years to trying to save other teenagers’ lives. In the process, he has built a resourceful website in his daughter’s memory, [www.demibrea.com](http://www.demibrea.com), to introduce people to her.

“It is with overwhelming sorrow that I must do so through The Demi Brae Cuccia Awareness Organization,” he writes on the home page.

“My daughter was an exceptionally beautiful young lady with a contagious smile, charming personality and a compassionate, spiritual soul. Her death has broken me beyond repair.”

There’s little difference between teen dating violence and domestic violence in adults and married couples’ relationships, Cuccia said. Research shows children of violent parents are more likely to engage in dating violence.

“Statistically speaking, one out of three teenagers will experience some form of abuse, and one out of five will experience sexual or physical abuse. And that 16-to-24 age group is at highest risk, and that’s scary,” Cuccia said.

For some, Cuccia said, it’s almost an unavoidable destiny.

“I believe it is a learned behavior. If a child is growing up in a household where they experience domestic violence by the parents, it doesn’t necessarily mean that’s the way they have to be — but they have to get help, they have to want to change,” he said.

“If they don’t — it’s a cyclic type of behavior and it gets carried on, over and over again. ... It can be stopped, but it has to come from the groups that I speak to. They have to want to be different.”

Most often, Cuccia said, kids at his assemblies have thanked him for helping them to see problems they hadn’t recognized with their boyfriends or girlfriends, their buddies, and even themselves.

“I’ve gotten emails from boys who said, ‘Those things you talked about, the controlling issues, I’ve seen that with my father and I don’t want to be that person, I want to be better than that.’ And that’s a good thing, to make a lasting difference in their lives,” Cuccia said.

More than 270 students attended Cuccia’s program Thursday, the second that he has given at Homer-Center High School in the past three years. Lisa Adams, a biology teacher at Homer-Center High School, said Cuccia

has spoken to about 70,000 people since he began holding school assemblies to generate awareness of teen dating violence.

Adams, who formerly taught in the Gateway School District and had Demi Brae Cuccia as a student in her classes, arranged for his visit.

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