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## Amazing Dad: Gary Cuccia

 by [Honey Berk](#) (Subscribe to Honey Berk's posts)  
 Jun 20th 2010 3:00PM

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**Amazing Dad:** Dr. Gary Cuccia, founder of the [Demi Brae Cuccia Awareness Organization](#), which raises awareness about the dangers of teen dating violence

**Gary's Family:** Wife: Johanna, married for 6 years;  
 Kids: Jake, 21, Demi, forever 16, Saige, 16, Steven, 16, Alexa, 9

**Gary Lives In:** Greensburg, Pennsylvania

**Why Gary Is Amazing:** Dr. Gary Cuccia's daughter, Demi Brae Cuccia, was brutally murdered in August 2007 by her ex-boyfriend just one day after celebrating her 16th birthday. Demi had recently broken up with the boy after dating on and off for a couple of years, but no one realized the situation had the potential to turn violent.

"The boy was a good friend of her older brother's and he

Gary Cuccia advocates for teen dating violence education in schools, in memory of his daughter, Demi Brae, who was murdered by her ex-boyfriend. Credit: Courtesy of Gary Cuccia

was always hanging out at our home, but he was very deceptive, and was obviously controlling my daughter," Gary tells ParentDish. "She broke up with him, but he was still hanging out with our son -- we never realized that he could hurt her."

Gary says that details which surfaced after Demi's death made it clear that she had been in an abusive dating situation. He explains that Demi was experiencing digestive issues during the last two to three weeks of her life, and was not spending as much time with her other friends. In addition, her ex-boyfriend did not want her to participate in activities she loved, like cheerleading camp.

Testimony at the trial from friends revealed that the ex-boyfriend was very controlling and extremely jealous, to the point of threatening to break the car window of another teen who was visiting Demi just a few days before her death. Cell phone records documented that the boy had sent her a constant barrage of text messages for days before he killed her, begging her to see him and trying to convince her that they should be together. One friend testified that the rate of texts was so excessive while she was out celebrating her 16th birthday that she finally turned off her phone to make them stop.

Some of the texts found in Demi's phone were used as evidence in the trial, including one that read, "Wow... You no you love me and can't live without me." Gary explains that Demi finally gave in and agreed to let him come over to talk, and that was when he fatally stabbed her.

Today, Gary urges parents to learn the [warning signs of abusive relationships](#), such as eating and/or digestive issues, isolation, a lack of interest in activities that used to be important or receiving excessive text messages from the person they're dating. To reach teens directly, Gary set up a [Facebook page](#) in Demi's honor.

Unfortunately, Demi's story is not an isolated case, as teen dating abuse is shockingly prevalent in the United States, with the [National Council on Crime Delinquency](#) reporting that one in three adolescent girls is a victim of violence in a relationship.

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After his daughter's tragic death, Gary founded the [Demi Brae Cuccia Awareness Organization](#) to help educate the public on the warning signs. Though he works full time as a chiropractor in private practice, he also took on the daunting task of contacting Pennsylvania's state representatives and senators, asking them to help pass a law that would require awareness education in the state's public schools.

"We just want to talk to teens in seventh to twelfth grades about the warning signs and types of violence," Gary explains. "Kids then bring home materials which parents have access to, and it makes them aware -- as well as teachers and counselors."

The advocating dad finally convinced [state Representative Scott Conklin](#) to help, and the [Demi Brae Cuccia Bill](#) was announced in December 2009, mandating teen dating violence education in middle and high schools, and requiring school districts to develop an anti-dating violence policy.

On March 16, 2010, the Pennsylvania House of Representatives passed the bill, but it has been held up ever since in the Pennsylvania Senate Educational Committee. Gary says he and others have contacted committee chair [Senator Jeffrey Piccola](#) on many occasions to ask why he has failed to act on the bill, but has never received an explanation. Piccola did not respond to a request for an interview for this article.

November 2010 is the deadline for the bill to pass, so Gary has been visiting individual townships, asking them to pass supporting resolutions; to date, 13 have done so. He says he will do whatever he can to get the bill passed, and has been urging everyone to [contact Senator Piccola](#) to help press him to action.

Nationwide, [11 states have enacted laws](#) that address teen dating violence, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures, however, only three of them require awareness education for public school students.

For Gary, the pain of losing his beloved daughter Demi never goes away, but he feels blessed to have his wife and children by his side.

"I tell my kids I refuse to live my life as a victim, and I also want people to remember Demi as an advocate for this cause, not as a victim," he says.

**Gary's Wife Johanna Says:** "Gary is very passionate about what he's doing on behalf of Demi, even though she's not here physically, and is determined to devote this time to her and do something on behalf of her memory so other girls can be saved."

**Recognition:** In March 2010, the Harrisburg Pennsylvania House of Representatives passed the Demi Brae Cuccia Bill, which requires public schools to integrate teen dating violence education into middle and high school curricula.

**Gary's Guilty Pleasures:** Weightlifting and riding dirt bikes and quads, though he hasn't had time to indulge in quite a while -- "I am spending almost every single second I have on this bill; for the past two years it's been non-stop, just trying to raise awareness."

**Gary's Best Advice:** "Pay attention very early on in your kids' relationships: If you notice your child is getting texted excessively, if your child shows no interest in activities that used to be important, not hanging out with their friends, not eating right, can't digest their food, these are all signs you need to pay attention to."

For more information on teen dating abuse, visit the [resources section](#) of the Demi Brae Cuccia Awareness Organization website.

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**Correction, June 24, 2010: An earlier version of this article erroneously referred to Gary Cuccia being married to Johanna for 16 years. They have been married for 6 years.**

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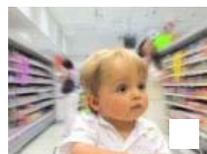
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