

Father of slain teen lobbies for education

Bill would warn of teen dating violence

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By Tom Barnes, Post-Gazette Harrisburg Bureau

HARRISBURG -- Gary Cuccia came here from Monroeville yesterday to support proposed legislation that could prevent other parents from feeling the horrible grief and pain that he has endured for the past two years.

In August 2007, his 16-year-old daughter, Demi Brae Cuccia, was killed by her boyfriend, who stabbed her 16 times. He is now serving a life sentence in prison.

Mr. Cuccia spoke in support of House Bill 2026, sponsored by Rep. Scott Conklin, D-Centre. It would require all Pennsylvania middle and high schools to add to their curriculums education for students and teachers about the warning signs and dangers of teen dating violence. It's a problem that most adults, including parents of teens, aren't aware of, Mr. Conklin said.

If passed by the House and Senate, the measure will be named the Demi Brae Cuccia Law.

"Demi was murdered in August 2007, one day after her 16th birthday, by her boyfriend," Mr. Cuccia said. "She was always smiling and laughing and would brighten up a room. My grief is maddening."

The young man who killed her was once a friend of Mr. Cuccia's son. "I was unaware that Demi was experiencing teen dating violence," Mr. Cuccia said. "How many more daughters have to lose their lives to an abusive partner?"

Statistics given out at the news conference claim that one in five college women will experience some sort of dating violence, and 38 percent of date-rape victims are girls aged 14 to 17.

"The numbers are even more shocking when you consider students as young as sixth grade have reported being hit by a boyfriend or girlfriend," Mr. Conklin said.

Modern technology, including the near-universal use of cell phones by young people, has accentuated the problem, he said. Many teens -- almost always girls -- are being harassed by boyfriends over the phone but are afraid or unwilling to tell their parents, who don't know the danger their daughters are in.

Teen boys often don't come to the girl's parents' house anymore to pick her up for a date, but merely tell her to meet them somewhere, so parents don't know what a boy is like, Mr. Conklin said.

Also speaking in support of the bill was Thais Ridgeway, a teen from Harrisburg who is now a freshman at the University of Pittsburgh. "Teen dating violence is an issue plaguing women all over the nation," she said.

The Conklin bill would require Pennsylvania schools to do what Rhode Island schools do now because of a teenage girl who was murdered by her boyfriend in 2005. Mr. Conklin said schools would have to warn students of the "signs" of possible teen dating violence, such as when a boy either physically stalks a girl, constantly calls her on her cell phone, regularly sends text messages or uses "sexting," sending naked pictures over the phone.

Other signs include verbal threats, physical blows or "controlling behavior," when a boy tries to isolate his girlfriend from her family and friends.

"We need to raise parents' awareness" of the problem, Mr. Cuccia said. "I don't want any other father or mother to go through what I've gone through."

He and his wife, Johanna, who was Demi's stepmother, have set up a Web site, www.demibrae.com. It has the warning signs and lists the names of state legislators so residents can call them and urge them to pass the bill.

Mr. Conklin said the bill is now in the House Education Committee. He hopes for House passage fairly soon.

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