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# 'You just can't put a price tag on our children'

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By JENNIFER C. YATES Associated Press Writer October 5, 2010

NEW ALEXANDRIA, Pa. (AP) — Demi Cuccia hadn't felt like eating much during a family dinner a few days before her 16th birthday. She seemed distracted. The high school cheerleader had recently broken up with one of her brother's friends, who was texting her incessantly and wanted to see her.

A day after her birthday, Cuccia agreed to meet John Mullarky at her house. He brought a knife, and stabbed her 16 times, killing her before cutting his own throat.

Three years after Demi's death, her family has been lobbying for "Demi's bill," legislation that would mandate dating violence education in Pennsylvania schools. If approved, the state would join Rhode Island and a handful of other states that already require such programs.

Demi's father, Gary Cuccia, said he knows his daughter didn't think Mullarky was violent, however she might have had a chance to live if she knew the warning signs: extreme jealousy, controlling behavior, isolating someone from friends or family, even a loss of appetite, among others.

"He wanted her to quit cheerleading. That's not normal," said Cuccia, surrounded by large pictures of his smiling daughter hanging on the walls of his office.

Girls between the ages of 16 and 24 most commonly experience dating violence, and as many as 1 in 3 teens have experienced either physical or emotional abuse in a romantic relationship, according to the Department of Justice. About 22 percent of homicides of teenage girls between the ages of 16 and 19 were committed by a romantic partner.

Ann Burke's daughter, Lindsay, was killed in 2005 by her former boyfriend. She was found stabbed to death in a Warwick, R.I., home after she had broken up with Gerardo Martinez, who is now serving a life sentence for her murder.

Burke's family and friends thought Martinez was controlling, and saw her pulling away from them, her mother said. They tried to convince Lindsay to leave him, and she did several times, but he kept convincing her to see him.

"We recognized that things weren't quite right and I had never been educated about dating or domestic violence so we were really clueless," said Burke, a retired health teacher.

Rhode Island's law requires public school students in grades seven through 12 to learn about dating violence in their health curriculum each year. Burke said schools can use any curriculum they like; many are free, including one developed in 2005 by women's clothing maker Liz Claiborne Inc.

Nebraska approved the Lindsay Ann Burke law in 2007, and states including Washington, Virginia and Ohio have passed laws addressing dating violence education. Oregon has not, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures [website](#).

Some see the laws as unfunded mandates, but Burke said the costs are minimal. The [Lindsay Ann Burke Memorial Fund](#) established by her family has created a low-cost DVD to help train administrators and teachers on how to establish programs in their schools.

"When people say how can we afford it, I would just say how can we not?" Burke said. "You just can't put a price tag on our children."

In Pennsylvania, Demi's law was introduced by Rep. Scott Conklin, D-Centre, with bipartisan support, but has been sitting in committee with no action for six months; a different version of the bill that would only recommend dating violence education be placed in the curriculum, not require it, has been packaged together with several bills and is awaiting action by the state House.

The Cuccia family and several lawmakers plan a rally at the state Capitol on Tuesday to urge action on Demi's bill before it expires.

"It's not sex education. It's not taking anything away from the parents. It's only teaching the warning signs of a bad relationship," Conklin said. He said he will reintroduce the bill next year if it does not get passed.

Gary Cuccia plans to keep up his fight, too. He is eager to tell Demi's story to help others, and only tears up when he thinks about the events of Aug. 15, 2007. Mullarky survived his wounds, and is serving a life sentence for Demi's murder.

On his office wall, Cuccia keeps several pictures of Demi and his four other children. One picture, taken just days before her death, shows Demi at her birthday dinner with her dad. The two stand together behind a cake with a large 16-shaped candle and with smiles that mirror each other.

"I have to do something. The pain will eat me alive," Cuccia said. "I have to do it for my daughter."

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