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Demi Cuccia's 'beautiful spirit' mourned

By Jill King Greenwood

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Gary Cuccia's voice cracked Monday as he read a letter to his slain daughter in front of nearly 1,000 mourners who packed into Monroeville Assembly of God to remember the Gateway High School cheerleader.

"You were what every father wished for in a daughter," Cuccia, of New Alexandria, said during memorial services for Demi Brae Cuccia, 16. "Your spirit was so strong that sometimes you were a handful. I just hope that beautiful spirit carries through so this tragic, unfortunate thing doesn't happen to anyone else's daughter."

Friends, relatives, parents and teachers told stories and shared tears, laughter and memories of the bubbly teenager, who was fatally stabbed Wednesday in her Monroeville home. Police say her former boyfriend, John Mullarkey, 18, stabbed Cuccia 16 times and then slashed his throat in a murder-suicide attempt.

Mullarkey, who was charged Sunday with homicide, is under police guard at Allegheny General Hospital, North Side, with a severe neck laceration.

The church lobby was filled with photo collages of Cuccia posing with friends and relatives, displayed beside her beloved cheerleading uniforms and jackets. On the altar, flowers, photos and poems surrounded Cuccia's cremated remains.

Hundreds of her classmates, fellow cheerleaders and members of the varsity football team filed into the church where Cuccia worshipped in life, many waiting outside in the light rain under cloudy skies to pay their respects. Immediately after the service, 21 white doves were released.

"You're home, where we all will be one day," Cuccia's mother, Jodi Cuccia, said as she read a letter to her middle child. "Demi, you just got there first."

Shayne Hale, 18, arrived at the service with more than a dozen other football players wearing black team jerseys with gold numbering and lettering to remember the cheerleader who was "always so nice to everyone."

"It's a hard day for everyone. This is something you just don't ever expect to happen," said Hale, an incoming senior. "Demi was a beautiful girl, a nice girl. You just can't say enough nice things about her."

Cuccia's friend, Amber Green, 16, said it was "overwhelming" to see so many people at the memorial service.

"Even people who didn't know her that well are here, and that shows you how much she touched people's lives," Green said.

Pastor Lance Lecocq, who said Cuccia read her Bible nightly and believed deeply in God, urged those at the memorial service to remember the pain Mullarkey's family is experiencing.

"We need to let go of any anger or hurt toward John Mullarkey and his family and lend grace toward them because they're hurting, too," Lecocq said. "It's going to take a long time for this community, especially the young people, to begin to understand this. There was a lot of loss in the room ... and people are hurting and missing Demi.

"The biggest question everyone is asking today is 'Why?' "

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