



## Speaker teaches McKeesport Area students to look for signs of dating violence

By Eric Slagle

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The death of his teenage daughter at the hands of her ex-boyfriend during a bad breakup is a story Gary Cuccia has told many times.

On Thursday, the Monroeville chiropractor once more revisited the details of the incident and the life of the daughter, Demi Brae Cuccia, he lost to teen dating violence in 2007, during a visit to McKeesport Area High School.

Demi Brae was stabbed to death by the first boy she'd ever dated two weeks after telling him she wanted to break up. The Gateway High School cheerleader, who celebrated her 16th birthday the day before her death, was being pressured by the former boyfriend to get back together. She responded to one of the many texts he'd sent and invited him over to talk when no one else was home.

It proved to be a bad decision. She was stabbed 16 times by John Mularkey, who then tried to take his own life. In 2009, Mularkey was sentenced to life in prison without parole.

Cuccia tells his daughter's story to students all over the region and is outspoken about recognizing the signs of teen dating violence.

"I never had this kind of conversation with my kids," Cuccia told students, recalling that before his daughter was killed, he thought tales of dating violence were something that affected other people. He said he was misguided and told teens that statistics show such abuses may very well happen to them or someone they know. He noted that one in three teens experience some form of dating abuse and one in five are physically abused by a partner.

Cuccia aimed his discussion at both boys and girls. Though boys are more likely to abuse girls, boys can be victims, as well.

He told boys to think before they act if they are upset with a girlfriend and said a bad decision can haunt them the rest of their life.

"How pitiful is that to throw your life away because some girl didn't want to date you?" he asked. He told boys to channel their aggression into something else when they are upset by a girl and advised them to act if they see a friend being abusive to a girlfriend. "Man up, stand



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up and get involved.”

He advised girls to recognize the signs of dating violence and abuse if it is happening to them and not to be afraid to talk to their friends if they see it affecting their lives.

Because domestic and dating violence often occur when a victim is separated or about to terminate a relationship, Cuccia told teens they should never break up if they are home alone or in a private setting.

Cuccia visited McKeesport Area High School several years ago. He said he has visited more than 170 schools since he became a speaker on the subject.

“We are received well at all the schools,” he said. “They need to hear this story.”

Cuccia's campaign against dating violence has led to the passage of state legislation recommending that information about dating abuse and violence be taught to high school students. Cuccia said he would like to see even stronger educational mandates in place.

The visit was organized by the school's The Future is Mine Club.

Teacher and club adviser Kelly Mursch said the club advocates for a peer-to-peer approach for making teens more aware of dating violence. Later this year, she said, the club plans to put up posters around the school about dating violence. There are plans to offer self-defense classes for students, she said.

Club member Emily Mille, a junior, said she hopes her fellow students take the message from the assembly to heart.

“This is a reality,” she said. “If this is going on, they need to tell someone.”

Junior Jenna Blair said she's heard examples of dating abuse from friends.

“It happens,” she said. “You need to be empowered and stand up against it.”

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**Jeanne Loy Brown**

Dr. Cuccia is awesome & through his pain he is able to Raise Awareness & Educate to Stop Senseless Violence.

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*Cindy Shegan Keeley | Trib Total Media*

Gary Cuccia spoke to students at McKeesport Area High School on Thursday about recognizing the signs of teen dating violence. Cuccia's daughter Demi Brae was killed by her former boyfriend in Monroeville in 2007.

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