

BLAIRSVILLE: Speaker warns against teenage dating violence

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Dr. Gary Cuccia, of Monroeville, has spent the last seven years fighting to educate young people about abusive relationships. He has embarked on a crusade to prevent them from meeting the same fate his daughter did.

Cuccia's daughter Demi Brae Cuccia had just turned 16 when her ex-boyfriend stabbed her to death in response to her decision to break up with him.



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Cuccia recently visited Blairsville High School to share his daughter's story in hopes of protecting students by arming them with knowledge and calling on them to speak out in regards to abusive relationships.

"I'm not an expert on dating violence," said Cuccia. "I'm just a grieving father who misses his daughter every single minute of every single day."

[PHOTO: Dr. Gary Cuccia recently met with students, teachers and Alice Paul House representatives at Blairsville High School. From left are Alice Paul House representatives Erin Smyers, Whitney Mottorn and Tayler Giffen; teacher Mark Wydareney; Cuccia; and students Zechariah Faulkner, Corrine Moore, Viviane Marx, Abby Lewis and Austin McLean. (Submitted photo/Blairsville High School)]

"I didn't know what to do after this," he reflected. "First we tried to get legislation passed." Cuccia was successful in pushing a proposed mandate for teen dating violence education to Congress. It was eventually consolidated with other bills into an omnibus bill that redefined it as a "strong recommendation" for schools, rather than a mandate.

"We just decided, if we go to a school and do a presentation in front the students, we could reach them, and this year, with the exception of one week, we've done a different school every single week." Since Cuccia began touring schools with Demi's story and information on abusive relationships, he has reached more than 100,000 students.

During the course of his presentation, Cuccia handed out free T-shirts and bracelets as a reminder of Demi's story. The shirts and bracelets are a way for students to show their support for the fight against abusive teen relationships.

"That's what we do with the money we raise, we pass it back out to you guys," said Cuccia. Despite the renown that national television appearances have afforded him, Cuccia maintains that his clear goal is to reach as many kids as he can, as effectively as he can.

"We try to open your eyes up to what we hadn't seen in my family. There are good people left. I hope to reach them when I'm speaking at schools. Somebody has to be that person," said Cuccia. "Everyone needs to hear this message. They don't realize what's going on in society."

“In the most current wars we’ve had, 7,000 soldiers lost their lives. But in that same period of time almost 11,000 women lost their lives to domestic violence,” Cuccia said simply. “That’s staggering.”

When presenting a subject so serious to adolescents, students can become uncomfortable. There are times when students aren’t receptive to Cuccia’s message.

Cuccia’s wife, Johanna, shook her head. “If he touches one student, that needed that message, that one life saved could’ve been Demi’s. That’s how he thinks about it.”

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