

Editor [Amanda Gillooly](#) [amanda.gillooly@patch.com](mailto:amanda.gillooly@patch.com)

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## Assembly Addresses Teen Dating Abuse and Violence

The Demi Brae Cuccia Awareness Organization, local officials and friends of Karissa Kunco were on hand Thursday to help Canon-Mac high school students understand the dangers of dating abuse and violence.

By [Amanda Gillooly](#) | [Email the author](#) | April 20, 2012

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George DiLeo warned the [Canon-McMillan High School](#) students in attendance at an assembly Thursday that the presentation on teen dating abuse and violence would be powerful.

“You think it can’t happen in Canon-McMillan,” DiLeo, director of school services at STAR School Programs, told them. “It can.”

Then he told them the story of 16-year-old Demi Brae Cuccia—and how, just 24 miles away—her ex-boyfriend stabbed her to death in 2007 after their breakup.

A murmur went through the crowd before DiLeo added: “Do I have your attention now?”

The district, SMART School Programs, the [Demi Brae Cuccia Awareness Organization](#) and local officials held the program to help students recognize the signs of teen dating violence—and to implore them to reach out for help if they see them in their own relationships or those of a friend.

Students watched a video that shared Demi’s story, with pictures of the pretty brunette cheerleader smiling with family and friends juxtaposed with information about her tragic death.

“I know many of you are either dating or thinking about dating. Today we are presenting this program because we want to enlighten everyone about the dangers of what can happen when dating gets out of control,” Canonsburg Mayor David H. Rhome told the crowd. “As you have heard, two very important characteristics you need to understand in any relationship is power and control. When one partner exhibits power or control over another, this is the beginning of abusive behavior and can lead to violence.”

Then he threw out some statistics—that one in five schools girls report being sexually assaulted, that date rape accounts for almost 70 percent of the sexual assaults reported and that 40 percent of girls between 14 and 17 years old report knowing someone their age who has been hit or beaten by a boyfriend or girlfriend.

“There are frightening and alarming statistics. As an elected official I want all of you to know that I will not tolerate this kind of behavior in our community,” Rhome added. “I also want you to know that anyone who feels unsafe or threatened can contact

my office, the school administration, (the local police departments), or any other protection agency and we will make sure that something will be done to protect you.”

That was a theme that continued when Dr. Gary Cuccia—Demi’s father—got up to speak.

He told the students assembled about having spoken with her just before her murder—about the shock of finding out that Demi’s boyfriend had stabbed her 16 times after sending her numerous text messages asking to meet with him after their breakup.

“By the time I got to the hospital my daughter was gone,” he said. “I never saw any signs of this whatsoever.”

The boyfriend, John Mullarkey, also attempted to kill himself that day. He was tried for Demi’s murder on June 20, 2009 and convicted. He will spend the rest of his life in jail.

“If he couldn’t have Demi, nobody was going to have Demi,” he said.

Since her death, Dr. Cuccia said he and his family have made it their mission to raise awareness of the signs and dangers of teen dating violence, even lobbying the state Legislature to mandate that high schools teach about them.

Now, the Demi Brae Cuccia Awareness Organization works with local schools that voluntarily want to educate their students on the issue.

Dr. Cuccia implored students to “watch each other’s backs.”

And most of all, he asked them to remember that the most dangerous time is before or after a breakup.

“I want to drive that home to you today—never break up alone. That’s what Demi did,” he told them.

And he asked the Canon-Mac high school students there to remember Demi’s story—and the information received at the assembly.

He said if his daughter had sat through a similar program “that might have been enough to save her life.”

“Collectively we can make a difference, but I need your help,” he said.

Also on hand to speak to students were two friends of Karissa Kunco—a Brookline woman who was killed in January, [her car found abandoned in Cecil Township](#) and [her body found a short time later in nearby Westland](#).

Her ex-boyfriend, Jordan Clemons, [is awaiting trial for her homicide](#).

“This just doesn’t happen in movies—this happens in real life and it happened to us,” Nicole Werger said.

Editor's Note: For more information on the Demi Brae Cuccia Awareness Organization, [visit its website here](#).

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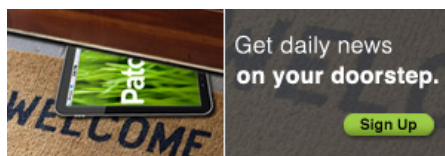
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