

# Observer-Reporter (Washington, PA)

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### Father on mission to educate teens on dating violence

By Terri T. Johnson

Almanac staff writer

[tjohnson@thealmanac.net](mailto:tjohnson@thealmanac.net)

Dr. Gary Cuccia's smile isn't as bright as it once was. The happy moments he shares with his family and friends are always tempered with the knowledge that his daughter, Demi, is no longer a part of his life. Demi Brae Cuccia was brutally murdered by her former boyfriend on Aug. 15, 2007, the day after she turned 16. The boyfriend, John Mullarkey, then 18, was convicted in her stabbing death and will spend the rest of his life in prison without the possibility of parole.

Gary Cuccia spoke to an assembly of about 350 seniors in the Upper St. Clair High School March 15 to stress the need to recognize teen dating violence. His mission is to share Demi's story with the hope of preventing another teen death from dating violence and his goal is to speak to 20,000 students this school year. "In the past 4 1/2 years, I've learned a lot," Gary Cuccia told the students. "One in three teens experiences some form of abuse." For the Cuccia family, healing also means educating others to the often hidden signs of the potential for teen dating violence.

The family was successful in promoting legislation in the state House of Representatives, mandating education on dating violence as part of the school health curriculum. However, the legislation was combined with other educational initiatives when it passed the state Senate. In its current form, the law, H.B. 101, eliminates any education in the middle school and does not mandate the classes. The state Department of Education, Gary Cuccia said, is developing curriculum if a school chooses to teach the course. For now, Cuccia is traveling to as many schools and speaking to as many students as he can. The main message, Cuccia said, is to open teens' eyes. He started the Demi Brae Cuccia Awareness Organization to get out his message. More information is available at the website: <http://www.demibrae.com/> Abuse, he said, comes in many forms including a fairly new form of digital dating abuse, where one person in the relationship constantly texts the other. Talk to your friends, parents, guidance counselor or anyone who will listen if concerns arise, he stressed.

Cuccia said he had no idea that his daughter's upset stomach during the two weeks she broke up with Mullarkey, her first boyfriend, was the result of stress. "Educate yourself," he told the students. Mark Tranquilli, Allegheny County Assistant District Attorney, prosecuted the Mullarkey case. "Prominent in the case were the text messages between John and Demi," Tranquilli said. Mullarkey, Tranquilli said, became very jealous and possessive in the relationship. "He wanted to monopolize her time," Tranquilli said.

After the breakup, Mullarkey continued to text Demi and on Aug. 15, 2007, she responded that he could come over to talk. Mullarkey knew she was alone in the house and when he arrived, he was carrying a knife. Demi was stabbed 16 times in the chest and neck. Afterward, Mullarkey sent his family a text, stood in front of a mirror and slit his throat. His suicide attempt was not successful, Tranquilli said. Another message Cuccia is imparting is: Never break up alone so the person does not have control of the situation. Know the signs, watch for changes and help a friend who is in an abusive, violent relationship. "If there is a problem, walk away," Tranquilli said. "Police each other, if it's a friend, take that friend aside and always remember Demi Cuccia."

Also attending the assembly were Canonsburg Mayor Dave Rhome and Shianne Kampf, president of the Canon-McMillan Parent Council. The pair were impressed with what they heard. "I came as a parent and to bring it back to (school) council," Kampf said. Rhome said he hopes to see the curriculum implemented in the Canon-McMillan School District.

Warning signs One in three teens experience some kind of abuse in their romantic relationships.

Here are the warning signs adapted from "Project for Victims of Family Violence", Fayetteville, Arkansas and the Domestic Violence Resource Center of South County materials. Courtesy of The Lindsay Ann Burke Memorial Fund - [www.labmf.org](http://www.labmf.org).

- \* extreme jealousy
- \* controlling behavior
- \* quick involvement
- \* unrealistic expectations
- \* isolation, keeping victim from friends, school
  - \* blames others for their problems and feelings
- \* hypersensitivity
- \* cruelty to animals or children
- \* "playful" use of force in sex
- \* verbal abuse
- \* rigid sex roles
- \* Dr. Jeckyll and Mr. Hyde
- \* past battering
- \* threats of violence
- \* breaking or striking objects
- \* any force during an argument

For more information visit <http://www.demibrae.com/signs/>

Source: The Demi Brae Cuccia Awareness Organization.

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