

## Pa. House OKs bill on dating awareness

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By Tom Barnes, Post-Gazette Harrisburg Bureau

HARRISBURG -- A state legislator from the State College area has some words of warning for teenagers regarding the people they date.

"Know the facts -- read the signs -- you could be loved to death," said Rep. Scott Conklin, D-Centre County, whose bill to promote education aimed at averting date violence won approval in the House on a 183-13 vote Tuesday.

House Bill 2026 is named the Demi Brae Cuccia bill in honor of a 16-year-old Monroeville girl who was stabbed to death in August 2007 by a young man she had been dating. The convicted killer is now serving a life sentence.

Last week, Demi's father and stepmother, Gary and Johanna Cuccia of Greensburg, came to the House to watch preliminary debate on the bill, along with Joseph and Grace DeLuliis of Mt. Lebanon, whose daughter Sarah, at age 16, was attacked with a hammer by her ex-boyfriend in October 2007, but recovered.

Dr. Cuccia said his daughter died just one day after her 16th birthday. He said Demi "was always smiling and laughing and would brighten up a room. She was an exceptionally beautiful girl, inside and out. It's the worst thing ever. My grief is maddening."

He said he and his wife have worked for 18 months to get the bill passed, and thanked his own legislator, Rep. Tim Krieger, R-Delmont, and Mr. Conklin for being "supportive and helping us raise recognition" of the problem.

By naming the bill after Demi, Mr. Conklin said, "I wanted to put a face to this bill."

The bill is designed to help teen boys and girls become aware of obsessive or dangerous signs in the people they date, but would probably protect more girls than boys, Mr. Conklin said.

In a phone interview, Mr. DeLuliis said violence against a teenage daughter "changes your life in a lot of ways -- you never get back to where you were."

He thanked the House for approving the bill, adding, "The goal is to educate teenagers, primarily teenage girls, as to the warning signs so they know when they are in a dangerous situation and so they can get out of it. I commend the Cuccia family for taking the lead on this."

Some legislators worried that teachers of the course on dating dangers might outline information or opinions on what is proper behavior for teens that some parents wouldn't want their children to learn, or that schools would be assuming advice roles better left to parents. Rep. Gordon Denlinger, R-Lancaster, said he understands the problem but worried about too much government intrusion into family matters.

"I should have a choice, as a parent, as to what is being taught about what my daughter should be doing on a date," said Rep. Michele Brooks, R-Mercer, who got an amendment added to the bill that allows parents to let their children "opt out" of the program if they choose.

Rep. Dan Frankel, D-Squirrel Hill, said violence by teens on dates "is something that urgently needs to be addressed. Our world has changed and we need to make adjustments. We need to protect our children."

These are some of the warning signs, according to Mr. Conklin: a teenager who is "extremely jealous, hypersensitive and controlling; is verbally abusive and threatens violence; has unpredictable mood swings with instances of explosive anger; uses drugs and alcohol, not just experimentation; isolates their partner from friends and family; believes in rigid sex roles [and thinks] women are a possession; blames others for their problems or feelings."

While the problem of violence on dates has likely existed for decades, the fact that almost all teenagers nowadays have cell phones has drastically worsened the situation, Mr. Conklin said. Boys can now call or text girls to meet them somewhere secluded and the girl's parents often know nothing about the danger their daughters could face.

The anti-violence bill now goes to the state Senate for action. It would require middle schools and high schools in Pennsylvania to include information in each year of their curriculums about the warning signs for dating violence, which is almost always committed by teen boys against teen girls. The information could be included in health courses or in other courses.

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