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Columbine victim inspires teens

Writings of 17-year-old encourage students to care for one another

By Denise Smith Amos
damos@enquirer.com

Two teenage boys in 1999 shot to death 12 schoolmates and a teacher and wounded 23 others at Columbine High before killing themselves.

Tuesday, their first victim, 17-year-old Rachel Joy Scott, spoke from the grave to some 600 Cincinnati-area students at an assembly at Diamond Oaks Career Development Campus in Dent.

The assembly, part of a nationwide school campaign called Rachel's Challenge, is designed to quell school violence, bullying and suicide by encouraging students to form inclusive clubs and behave compassionately toward each other.

Speakers use Rachel Scott's diary entries, poems and essays on compassion - as well as news coverage of the Columbine shootings - to encourage students to care for one another.

"I have this theory," Rachel wrote just six weeks before her death, "if one person can go out of their way to show compassion, then it will start a chain reaction of the same. People will never know how far a little kindness can go."

Those words inspired her family to publish some of her writings and to found several nonprofits, including <http://www.rachelschallenge.org/> target="_new">Rachel's Challenge, which sends speakers to schools, colleges and businesses.

Students sign pledges to show kindness and create a "culture of caring."

The program is one of the largest character education efforts in the country, with more than 3,484 presentations last year and more than 324 so far this year. Its web site says it is non-religious, non-political, and non-profit.

It has held presentations in Lakota, Loveland and Boone County schools and charged \$3,000 to \$4,000 for such programs, local school officials said.

Shane Hamman, a two-time Olympian weightlifter considered by many America's strongest man, spoke for the movement Tuesday. Barrel-chested, sporting a T-shirt, a long, twisted beard and spiky hair, Hamman told students he got involved after Rachel's death.

He described testimony Rachel's father, brother and sister gave to audiences, including to Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush. Students listened silently.

Hamman said that just 10 minutes before the shooting began, Rachel had drawn a picture of eyes in the sky, crying tears down onto a rose that was dripping with blood. When the teacher asked Rachel what the drawing meant, she said she didn't know but had felt inspired to draw it.

She died a few minutes later while eating lunch on grass outside the school.

Her younger brother, Craig, 16, a sophomore, was upstairs in the school library when he heard what he assumed were firecrackers that he assumed was a senior prank.

In a videotaped interview, Craig said a boy stumbled into the library, bleeding, and a teacher yelled to hide under the tables.

Craig waved at a friend in the hallway, getting him to hide with him and another friend. That friend, Isaiah, was one of the few black students in the school, Craig said.

The gunmen yelled racial slurs before shooting him in the head, Craig said, and then shot another friend Matt. One trained his gun on Craig but fire sprinklers went off in the ceiling, distracting him.

Ultimately 10 died in the library.

"I'll never forget the last things my friend Isaiah heard," Craig said. "So I want to challenge students to get rid of their prejudices in life."

Rachel wrote about an experiment: she urged students to pick an outcast student and try to befriend them. Even if they're rebuffed or feel strange about it, Rachel said to give the effort three shots "because you never know what's happening in their life," Hamman said.

After Rachel's death a schoolmate with a disability told how Rachel jumped between him and two bigger boys who were assaulting him. Another classmate wrote to Rachel's parents about how on her first day in the new school, after her mother had died, Rachel befriended her despite her shy rebuff.

Rachel wrote six diaries. Her last one was found in her backpack with a bullet hole through it, next to this hand-written motto; "I won't be labeled as average!"

After the talk, students at Diamond Oaks signed a banner committing to the challenges and several dozen stayed for additional training.

"It was touching," said Scott Hudgins, a junior from Harrison. "It made you think of being nicer to people."

Added Domonique Wenstrup, a Delhi Township junior, "I didn't think it was going to be that sad... It makes people think about all the bad things they've done."

Additional Facts

Rachel's Challenge

"Rachel's Challenge" is a Colorado-based organization that reflects on the life of Rachel Scott, killed in the 1999 Columbine High School shooting in Littleton. The group offers five challenges to staff and students trying to make schools safer:

- Eliminate prejudice. Look for the best in others
- Dare to dream. Set goals and keep a journal.
- Choose positive influences. Input determines output.
- Kind words, little acts of kindness
- Start a chain reaction.

