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News

McGee School students accept Rachel's Challenge

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BERLIN — Craig Scott came to town Wednesday. He told Catherine McGee Middle School students, their parents and teachers, about his late sister. Though Rachel Scott was killed during the Columbine High School tragedy in 1999 her life — and death — has had a positive effect on the thousands of people who know about her.

Following his presentation, which evoked both laughter and tears from a nearly filled auditorium, students, some with parents, came forward to thank Scott and hug him. Others posed for photos with him as friends snapped the picture.

"How can you go before audiences night after night and recount this tragedy?" Scott was asked. "Isn't it like opening an old wound?"

"I just had a lady tell me that after 15 years she has forgiven her husband for killing himself," Scott said. "I hear stories like this every time I do this. It's worth anything I have to go through to hear something like that."

Though Rachel's story evolved out of tragedy, the message students received on Wednesday was upbeat, powerful and non-violent. Many said they were motivated to make positive changes in their lives and in the way they treat others.

The audience Wednesday evening was left with certain precepts:

"Get rid of prejudice. Look for the best in others. Choose positive influences. Dare to dream. Do small acts of kindness; use kind words and start a chain reaction of niceness with family and friends."

McGee's Dean of Students Kelly Maio said she had first heard about "Rachel's Challenge" from school counselor Amy Briente. Maio and her staff then previewed Scott's presentation at a Cheshire school and came away impressed. The program, based on the writings of Rachel Scott, is meant to inspire, instruct and enable students to bring positive change in a school's atmosphere. Through video clips and stories about his sister, who was influenced by Anne Frank and kept a diary like the young holocaust victim, her brother led his audience through an intense emotional experience.

According to Scott, the mission of his non-profit organization is to inspire, equip, and empower people to create a permanent, positive cultural change in schools, businesses and communities. This is done by starting a chain reaction of kindness and compassion.

Scott says for every dollar spent in 2008, 85 percent went back into program development and delivery. Ten percent covers administrative overhead; five percent is used for fund raising. Funds for the McGee school event came from a private grant.

"We think character is important, how kids treat one another," said Maio. "Parents told me it was an amazing day. Their