

Students hear positive message from Columbine survivor

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McFARLAND — For many of the students at a series of school assemblies here Thursday, the words Columbine High School have little of the power they once had to shock and horrify.

The oldest of them were first-graders back then. Some hadn't yet been born.

Nicole Nowlen, 27, brought them a survivor's perspective.

She was a sophomore at the Colorado high school on April 20, 1999, the day two classmates, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, stormed the school, shooting to death one teacher and 12 students before killing themselves. Nowlen was shot through the side of her body in the school library.

For the last four years, Nowlen has traveled the country as one of 25 presenters for Rachel's Challenge, a nonprofit organization started by the father of Rachel Scott, 17, the first student killed at Columbine. By telling about Rachel's efforts to reach out to bullies and troubled classmates, the organization hopes to create safer schools through character education.

"Rachel never mocked anyone," Nowlen told students. "She was known for building people up, not tearing them down."

Nowlen challenged students to do what Rachel did — spread good feelings "through the power of positive gossip."

The presentation incorporated news footage, video interviews of Rachel's family members and excerpts from Rachel's diaries and writings. In one passage, she wrote of creating a "chain reaction of compassion."

About 800 McFarland middle and high school students heard Nowlen speak at three assemblies.

Senior Austin Brandt, 17, said he hadn't thought much about the victims and was stunned to learn someone as kind as Rachel was among them. That made him realize how hard everyone must work to end violence, he said.

"I didn't know a lot about the situation — I thought everyone in the school must have been stuck-up jerks to make those two kids do that," he said. "But now I realize that something like that could happen anywhere."

Senior Briana Wiegand, 18, said the presentation was "extremely difficult" to sit through, in part because she lost a sister to suicide four years ago. But as with suicide, it is important to discuss bullying and school violence and not pretend it doesn't happen, she said.

"I think it was good that it was powerful so that kids couldn't blow it off," she said.