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Students inspired by Columbine story

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NEW CONCORD --When the shootings at Columbine High School in Colorado happened, John Glenn High School sophomore Tiffany Leonard was 5.

She was too young at the time to understand what had happened, but as she grew older, she heard about the tragedy. By the time an hour-long presentation, called Rachel's Challenge, was completed Thursday in the high school's gym, she had chills running up and down her spine.

"It was a lot more than what I expected," she said.

She and the rest of the students of JGHS listened as Rachel's Challenge speaker Shane Hamman told Rachel Scott's story. Scott was the first of 13 people shot at Columbine High School on April 20, 1999. Two students, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, opened fire before taking their own lives.

The full gym of students immediately fell silent at the beginning of the presentation, when frantic 911 calls from teachers begging for help began to play. Gunshots, followed by sirens played in the background and images of the school flashed across a large screen. Emotional interview clips from Rachel's classmates and brother, Craig, who survived, played throughout the presentation. Craig lost his sister and two friends. He is alive today, he believes, because the sprinkler system went off a second before he said he was next to be shot.

Senior Matt DeLong said Hamman's presentation was emotional and powerful.

"I was blown away by how awesome she (Scott) was. It was moving," DeLong said.

Hamman, who is originally from Oklahoma but was living in Colorado at the time of the shootings, became friends with the Scotts shortly after the shooting and was, himself, moved by Rachel's story. He has been speaking on her behalf to students across the country since 2005, but became supportive of her message after the shootings.

"I was so shocked that this was going on at a school and only 50 miles from where I was," Hamman said.

Hamman, like the others in the video he showed Thursday, described Rachel as kind, compassionate, caring and someone who was making a change for the better in her school and community. She made it a point to reach out to new students, disabled students and students who were bullied, friends testified. One classmate even testified during the video that he had planned to go home one day from school and kill himself, but Rachel stepped in between him and two other students who were bullying him and stood up for him. He's alive today and testified in the video that it was Rachel that saved and changed his life.

Hamman encouraged students to "start a chain reaction" of kindness and compassion, what Rachel tried to instill in her classmates.

According to the video Hamman played, Rachel's dad, Darrell Scott, found one of Rachel's last diary entries when he picked up Rachel's book bag from the sheriff's office a week after the shootings. He found the words "I will not be labeled as average," written by Rachel. There was a bullet hole through the page.

"I was so inspired by the way she lived and the things she wrote," he said.

He shared Rachel's diary entries, most of which said the same things she told her friends: that she was going to have an impact on the world. She also wrote in diary entries and told classmates and family that she knew she wouldn't live to be old.

"I was very moved," said Alisha Adams, a junior. "It was interesting she realized she wasn't going to live long and that she knew she was going to have an impact."

Adams said she knew of the Columbine shootings, but had never heard the Scott family's story.

Hamman stayed after the presentation and met with students to start a Friends of Rachel club to spread awareness about doing random acts of kindness and compassion.

"Our school, I think, will benefit a bunch from this and hopefully keep it going," Adams said.

Rachel's Challenge was brought to the school by Family and Consumer Sciences teacher Gail Bell. She and three students of the Family, Career and Community Leaders of America organization within the school had watched the presentation earlier in the year at Tri-Valley High School. Bell wanted to bring the presentation to JGHS because she's watched the world around her change in the nearly 40 years she's been in education.

"When I started, boys had shotguns hanging in the backs of their trucks for hunting. Now we have electronic doors to the schools and a deputy in our hallways," Bell said. "I really think our culture has changed and it changed a long time ago."

Her hope is that the presentation will have a strong enough effect on the high school students that they will spread kindness and compassion to the rest of the students in the East Muskingum Local School District.

Seniors and FCCLA members Taylor Morton and Mallory Glosser were two who watched the presentation for the second time Thursday.

"It was an emotional roller coaster. (Rachel was) amazing," Morton said.

Glosser called Rachel's story inspiring and moving.

"She was definitely a role model to everybody around her," Glosser said.
