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Though she died at Columbine, Rachel Scott challenges teens

By: Jason R. Vallee , Record-Journal staff

MERIDEN - Touched by the story of Rachel Joy Scott, the first person killed in the 1999 massacre at Columbine High School in Colorado, a Maloney High School sophomore approached presenter Richard Oliner with a tear still in his eye and told him, "I cried."

The teenager, who stood more than six feet tall, was one of more than 100 students who signed a pledge banner to work for a better community Wednesday following Oliner's presentation about Rachel's Challenge, an organization that aims to end violence and promote good citizenship.



Johnathon Henninger / Record-Journal

Brittany Cullinam, a second-year student at Maloney High School in Meriden, signs a banner, pledging to help others and stay positive as part of "Rachel's Challenge," a program started by the parents of Rachel Scott, the first victim of the massacre at Columbine High School on April 20, 1999.

"When you see someone react like that, you know you've been able to reach out and touch them. You know reality has set in and you've done your job," said Oliner, one of 25 national speakers with the group, which includes members of Scott's immediate family. "I'm just a catalyst. The difference maker is Rachel and this program."

The program was more than a year in the making and was brought to Maloney by Paulette Limato, a social worker with the state Department of Children and Families. Lisa Flower, program coordinator with DCF, said Limato was touched when she heard about it during an anti-violence conference two years ago.

Advertisement Scott's story is a tragic one but it has reached more than 13 million people in seven countries, according to Oliner and DCF staff.

Sitting in front of Columbine with a friend on April 20, 1999, the 17-year-old was shot and killed in cold blood.

In the hours that followed, 12 others would be killed and two dozen others hurt in an attack that shocked the community and left Americans asking why. The gunmen, Columbine seniors Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, ended the spree by taking their own lives.

But rather than dwell on the hatred that led to his daughter's death, Darrell Scott asked friends and family to help him form an organization that could inspire others to live as his daughter did.

To those around her, Oliner said, Rachel Scott was known for her "unique perspective" on life, one in which she had vowed to be kind to those who were disabled, different, or not in the popular crowd. Her goal was simple: to positively affect those around her.

From an early age, Scott would express these goals in writing, Oliner said. A note she wrote on her bureau with outlines of her hands at the age of 13 says, "These hands belong to Rachel Joy Scott and will someday touch millions of people's hearts."

The presentation detailed several other incidents and writings in Scott's life, including how she would welcome those new to Columbine and, at 90 pounds, stood up to two of the school's biggest male bullies to defend a classmate.

"I think her message was simple," Oliner said in an interview following the presentation. "Don't judge anyone until you get to know them, and treat others as you'd want to be treated."

Before ending the hour-long program, Oliner asked students to close their eyes and picture the five people they loved most. The reaction was exactly what he wanted: students began to cover their eyes and display emotions.

Oliner then challenged the students to take on five challenges in honor of Scott, asking them to eliminate prejudice, follow their dreams, maintain a positive outlook, use kind words and start a chain reaction of positive acts.

"There are so many people out there and we have no idea what they may be going through," Oliner said. "A simple act of kindness can change their whole world."

The message touched home for both students and parents, many of whom said later that they'd never been more inspired to live and promote positive lifestyles.

Nicole Diaz, a freshman, said she felt the presentation gave a clear, concise message. She said seeing the impact Scott's death had on people worldwide made her realize that violence is never a solution and underscores the importance of maintaining a positive attitude.

"You could see the change in the audience," she said. "It made me proud when I had the chance to help a classmate that lost her brother suddenly last year, but it also makes you realize there is more that can be done. You don't need to do exactly what Rachel did and face the bullies head on, but to just stand up when others are acting out and say, 'That's not cool' will make a difference."

Diaz's mother, Corie Diaz, also attended the program and said she was proud to see the way students reacted. As a DCF employee, she said, she has seen area youth deal with difficult situations, but felt Scott's story could influence a positive change in Meriden and other area communities.

Flower said the response from the students was "a promising start" and pointed to the number who signed the banner.

With students still grappling with the arrest of then-senior Andre West in May after police said he shot and killed a bouncer outside a Waterbury nightclub, Principal Ann Hushin said the district was happy to provide this type of assembly early in the school year to set the tone and foster a positive learning environment.

Hushin said she knows that there will still be some incidents, but "if this program can help us avoid just one issue that would have otherwise occurred, it makes the whole presentation worthwhile."

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