

Lakota students take on Rachel's Challenge

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By Cameron Fullam

Staff Writer

"These hands belong to Rachel Joy Scott and will someday touch millions of people's hearts."

Rachel Scott's parents found these words just days after their 17-year-old daughter was gunned down outside Columbine High School April 20, 1999.

Rachel had written those words years before her death inside an outline of her hand drawn on her bedroom wall.

Those words have proven to be the young girl's legacy.

Her diaries, prayers, drawings and actions have been shared with millions of students worldwide.

And next week, her message is coming here.

An English class assignment, sketches, poems and excerpts found in Rachel Scott's diaries have become the basis for Rachel's Challenge, a program that inspires, instructs and enables students to bring positive change to their school atmosphere, said Program Director Pete Vargas.

"Through Rachel's story, we touch the hearts of people so that it goes to their heads and that they'll make a difference with their hands," he said.

The program, founded by Rachel's father, Darrell Scott, has been around since 2001 and has been held at more than 1,000 schools around the world.

It is coming to both Lakota high schools and the freshman school Sept. 6-8 and will also be presented to the community at 7 p.m. next Thursday and Friday.

Youth in Philanthropy, a student-led charitable program sponsored by The Community Foundation of West Chester/Liberty and The Pulse-Journal, helped bring the Challenge here to stem what it sees as increasing instances of bullying.

"We saw a need with all the things that have happened in Lakota within the past year. The fights and bomb threats and things, it's starting to get out of hand," said Bethany Dibble, 16, a junior at Lakota East.

As secretary of YIP, Dibble said one of the best ways to address the issue of bullying is to hear from someone who paid its ultimate price.

The Rachel's Challenge presentation includes footage of Scott's life in Littleton, Colo., and the Columbine tragedy that claimed the lives of 12 students, one teacher and the two teen gunmen. Speakers also share revealing glimpses into Scott's thoughts leading up to her death and how she refused to "be labeled as average."

In the evening, speakers conduct a similar session with parents and community leaders, showing them how they can reinforce the decisions their youth are making.

"We just really get to the root of the problem, and that's really just looking for the best in other people," Vargas said.

The challenge is pulled from an English class essay Scott wrote months before her death.

"I have this theory that if one person can go out of their way to show compassion, then it will start a chain reaction of the same," it read. "Until you know (someone) and not just their 'type,' you have no right to shun them. You have not looked for their beauty, their good. You have not seen the light in their eyes."

Lakota West High School Principal Dick Hamilton said he hopes Scott's message of inclusion and reaching out to others inspires his students, who will hear the presentation Wednesday at an in-school assembly.

"The bigger we get, the less personal we get," he said. "It's easier to just turn your back and walk away and ignore something. My hope is that this is going to reinforce the importance of an individual in a building that is getting close to 2,050 students and the impact one individual can make."

The Lakota Freshman School will hold two assemblies Sept. 7 for its students. Many instances of bullying reported last year happened at this school, but Principal Keith Kline said the Challenge would be appropriate for any school at any time.

"We would have done this regardless because I think it is good for kids," he said. "It's important that our young people learn how to take care of each other and help make a positive difference in other's lives every day."

The powerful presentation students see in school is not the end of the story.

Vargas said it is important the impact of Rachel's Challenge stays with students long after the assemblies are over.

At each school, program staff will train a cross-section of the student body who will become the Friends of Rachel, a group that is for things, not against them, Vargas said.

"FOR is for compassion, kindness, for change — that's the whole motto of the group."

Rachel's Challenge staff also leave behind training curriculum on character education and ways for school officials to contact them if necessary.

Students and adults are also invited to join a forum on the Rachel's Challenge Web site where they can discuss the ways the program made an impact and what changes they have begun to make.

An Australian student who heard the Challenge last week in New South Wales joined the forum to share his thoughts.

Tenth-grader Kevin Soares, 15, said hearing the essay had a lasting impact on him, prompting him to write down goals for his life and be "more of an outgoing person."

"From the time I heard them tell of this story even until now, I have changed. When I read Rachel's speech, I was amazed at how one super girl was able to change the lives of millions of people around the world," he said.

For more information, visit www.rachelschallenge.com.

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