

dailybulletin.com

Rachel's Challenge presentations spread word of hope out of the Columbine shooting tragedy

By Wendy Leung, Staff Writer

Created: 10/06/2011 07:03:14 AM PDT

Like most school assemblies, the one that took place at Etiwanda Intermediate School started with rambunctious middle schoolers using their loud and excited voices.

But by the time the assembly Rachel's Challenge ended, it was a different matter.

Students were quiet and serious. Some walked out with their arms around a friend. Others sobbed.

It was as if the students matured in an hour's time.

Rachel's Challenge is a moving tribute to Rachel Joy Scott, the first victim of the 1999 shootings at Columbine High School. Scott was a compassionate and loving teenager, who tried to reach past school cliques to make everyone - from the school bully to the troubled souls - feel at ease.

For more than a year, Ali Nourbakhsh, who visited the Etiwanda school last week in addition to Heritage Intermediate School in Fontana, has been traveling the country sharing the story of Scott's death. Nourbakhsh and a team of speakers including Scott's father, Darrell Scott, have a goal to spread the story of Scott's abbreviated life with the hopes that her philosophy of compassion and forgiveness will lead to a cultural shift in schools.

"There's nothing I wholeheartedly stand for more than Rachel's message," Nourbakhsh said.

Fifteen people died in the shooting rampage at Columbine, Colo. including the two shooters Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold.

Nourbakhsh told students about Scott's diaries and other essays found after her

death. The writings preached the importance of acceptance and offered the theory that if small, random acts of kindness are committed, it'll start a "chain reaction."

Unfortunately, Harris and Klebold preached something altogether different. Following the shooting, police found a video made by the shooters who uttered the words "chain reaction," too, but they were used to describe violent acts.

During the assembly, students watched news footage, dramatizations and interviews of people whose lives were touched by Scott. Nourbakhsh gave students a series of challenges, asking them to choose positive role models and eliminate prejudice in their lives.

They were weighty subjects for a group of students at the start of their teenage years. Few left the assembly with a dry eye.

Taylor Harper, 12, was born the year the shootings occurred and hadn't heard about the tragedy before.

"She made me want to be a better person, to be kind to others," she said.

Taylor's classmate Janica Barnes, 12, said the assembly made her want to start her own chain reaction.

"I want to treat others the way I want to be treated," she said. "And forgive the things that happened in the past."

After the assembly, Nourbakhsh led a training session with selected students so they can start a Rachel's Challenge club on campus. In the evening, he gave a similar presentation to parents and others in the community.

"We're not interested in a temporary change in atmosphere," Nourbakhsh said. "We want to create a cultural change. We want to take the emotion and turn it into action."

Information: www.rachelschallenge.org

wendy.leung@inlandnewspapers.com 909-483-9376