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A portrait of teen dating violence

Prime Stage play features Gateway student

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By Kate Luce Angell



Zeke Stewart and Hannah Jo Weisberg, star in "Don't U Luv Me?" next Thursday in the New Hazlett Theater. Ms. Weisberg selected this play as a charity project, in memory of Demi Cuccia, a Gateway student who was murdered in 2007.

With Valentine's Day just past, the phrase "teen dating" may rouse images of moony youngsters in the grip of puppy love.

But those hearts and flowers hide some disturbing statistics.

According to a 2008 study by the Family Violence Prevention Fund, one in three teens have experienced physical or sexual abuse in their relationships, or had the person they're dating threaten them with physical harm.

Teenage girls are three times more likely than adult women to encounter violence in intimate relationships, with the greatest rates of violence occurring to females between ages 16 and 24.

Next Thursday, at the New Hazlett Theater on the North Side, the teen board of

Prime Stage Theatre will present "Don't U Luv Me?"

The play dramatizes these statistics and shows how technological advances such as texting, instant messaging and social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook can sometimes escalate teen dating violence.

Hannah Jo Weisberg, a Gateway High School junior and president of Prime Stage's teen board, helped to choose the theme for the group's annual performance.

Hannah Jo, who has been active in local theater since she was a pre-teen, said the choice of focus was easy because teen dating violence has hit close to home. On Aug. 15, 2007, Gateway junior Demi Brae Cuccia, 16, was stabbed to death by her sometimes boyfriend, John Mullarkey, 19.

Mr. Mullarkey, who attempted suicide immediately after his attack on Demi, survived and was convicted of her murder on June 29. He is serving a life sentence.

Proceeds from the performance of "Don't U Luv Me?" will go to support the Demi Brae Cuccia Awareness organization, which is dedicated to educating teens and their parents about the signs and dangers of teen dating violence. The suggested donation is \$10.

Hannah Jo said that when Prime Stage artistic director Wayne Brinda showed her the script for "Don't U Luv Me?" she immediately realized that it would resonate with the toughest audience to reach - people her age.

Too often, she said, presentations intended to make teens aware of dangers they face don't get through.

"Nobody really listens. They just think, 'That could never happen to me,' " she said. "But this is much closer to teens' actual experience."

The play, written by award-winning Texas playwright Linda Daugherty, premiered at the Dallas Children's Theater last spring.

In Prime Stage's production, Hannah Jo plays freshman Angela, who catches the eye of senior hunk C.J. Soon, the older boy starts texting Angela constantly - and trying to control her every action.

The 10-member cast includes Zeke Stewart as C.J. and several other local high school students.

Hannah Jo noted that the play is realistic in that it shows how physically and emotionally violent abusive teen relationships can become. "There are some violent scenes, yes, and it was very difficult for the cast at times," she said.

She hopes that Gateway High School will bring the production to the school, and other local school districts will do the same.

"I think educating young people about this issue should be mandatory," she said. "Before I started this project, I didn't know the red flags of an abusive relationship - but now our whole cast does."

Jodi Cuccia, Demi's mother, will be speaking after the performance at an educational chat session. She said that only knowledge will prevent more families from going through the Cuccias' experience.

Before her daughter's death, she said, "I didn't know anything about teen dating violence."

Although Demi didn't reveal enough to her about Mr. Mullarkey's behavior for her to be concerned at the time, Mrs. Cuccia said that, in retrospect, she could see the evidence of a controlling relationship.

Demi was a cheerleader, and her mother thought it odd that Mr. Mullarkey would ask her to quit the squad to spend more time with him.

"That didn't sound right - Demi loved cheering, and he was working most of the time anyway," she said.

The investigation into Demi's death also revealed another red flag - frequent text messages from Mr. Mullarkey, some including direct threats.

Mrs. Cuccia noted that abusers in teen relationships often try to completely control the actions of the abused persons, asking them to quit activities, cut off friendships and distance themselves from their families in order to spend more time with them.

Sudden complaints of illness, and changes in weight, eating or study habits also are signs that a teen may be experiencing abuse. Mrs. Cuccia said in the weeks leading up to Mr. Mullarkey's attack, her daughter often complained of feeling sick or nauseated.

Demi's father, Dr. Gary Cuccia, also has been very active in the movement to educate teens about the risk of relationship violence.

Along with his family, he is working for the passage of the Demi Brae Cuccia bill, House Bill 2026, which would require school districts to educate students in grades 7 through 12 about teen dating violence.

"I just didn't connect the dots, neither did her father," said Mrs. Cuccia. "I wish I'd known then what I know now."

For more information about "Don't U Luv Me?" go to www.primestage.com.

For more information on the Demi Brae Cuccia Awareness organization or to find out more about House Bill 2026, go to www.demibrae.com.

For more information on the red flags of an abusive relationship, go to www.loveisnotabuse.com.

Teens and parents anywhere in the country can call toll free, 1-866-331-9474, go to the interactive website, loveisrespect.org, and receive immediate, confidential assistance. The site will offer secure, live interactive chat to teens. While online or on the phone, teens will be given support as well as referrals to local resources to provide them with help.

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