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In photo above, Hashim Garrett, a victim of gun violence in his teenage years, spoke recently to an assembly of Uniontown Area High School students on his choice to forgive. Below, Dan and Tricia Nelson talk about their son Zack Nelson's death and the family's decision to forgive after the accident.

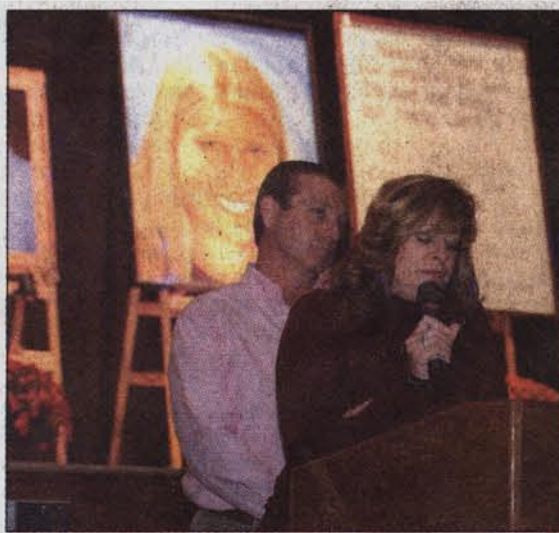
Students hear plea for taking nonviolent paths to diffuse conflict

By CARLA DeSTEFANO
HeraldStandard.com

Nearly 18 years after welcoming their new baby boy at Ruby Memorial Hospital in Morgantown, Dan and Tricia Nelson found themselves there again — this time saying goodbye to their son.

Zack Nelson of Chalk Hill, a senior at Uniontown Area High School who would have turned 18 on Nov. 11, died about a week after the car he was a passenger in slammed into a tree in Farmington in September. The teenage driver is now charged with driving under the influence.

"It would have been very easy to react with anger in the situation," Tricia Nelson told Zack's classmates at the high school this week during



Hashim Garrett of the Breaking the Cycle program at the assembly to tell their stories and inspire the sophomores, juniors and seniors

a program that focused on the act of forgiveness. "If the situation was reversed and Zack was driving, it would have devastated our family just like it has devastated theirs," she said, noting that she and her husband knew the driver's family well. "We realized we need to lead by example and show that forgiveness was the better choice," she said. "We have to make a choice to continue to forgive every single day."

The Nelsons joined J. Christoph Arnold and

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at the school to choose forgiveness.

The program, which seeks to convey a message of nonviolent conflict resolution through forgiveness, was initiated after the 1999 Columbine school shootings as a way to help teens deal with violent situations and help ease the tensions that linger afterward. The program is now delivered to students worldwide.

Garrett described his experience with gang-related activity as a teenager in Brooklyn, N.Y., that resulted in him being shot in the legs and spine.

While his near-death experience has left him with health problems for the rest of his life, Garrett said it was a wake up call to change his path. He said his new outlook enabled him to forgive his attacker

and ultimately led him to partner with the Breaking the Cycle program to help teens.

"The Nelsons and myself are examples of what can happen when you forgive," Garrett said.

Arnold, author of 11 books concerning education, dealing with violence and other related topics, draws his experience from being an active member of the civil rights movement and a friend of Martin Luther King Jr. He also travels the world, collecting stories of forgiveness to share with his audiences.

"Forgiveness is the greatest power," he said. "I have seen the most beautiful people's life destroyed simply because they could not forgive."

After the program, students received books about overcoming fear and prejudice and nurturing forgiveness. Arnold said the Nelson's story will be included in a book he is currently writing.

"We can't change what's done," Tricia Nelson said.