

SCHOOL NEWS

Students learn a lesson in forgiveness

By ELIZABETH COOPER

Students who attend the D.A.R.E. program in the Newburgh Enlarged City School District and East Coldenham Elementary School got a lesson in nonviolent conflict resolutions and forgiveness Jan. 8 when best-selling author Johann Christoph Arnold and New York City Police Detective Steven McDonald spoke at an assembly at Meadow Hill Global Explorations Magnet School.

"Breaking the Cycle" was formed after the 1999 massacre at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colo. Its goal is to stem the tide of school violence by working toward preventing it. The award-winning program stresses honest communication and forgiveness as a way of resolving conflicts and easing the lingering tensions.

The program hopes to generate self-respect and respect for others, which are key to school safety, and strengthen positive links between school employees, parents, students and local law enforcement agencies.

"The message of nonviolence, forgiveness and hope is always timely," Carol Weiss, principal said. "But it seems especially so when we celebrate Dr. (Martin Luther) King's dream."

One of the messages students learn in D.A.R.E. classes is to stop the violence, Sally Black, D.A.R.E. officer, said. "Violence seems to be a solution to our problems, and it shouldn't be," she said.

Nonviolence is how we need to live our lives and resolve our conflicts with others, Black said.

"There is a much, much better way to counteract violence," Arnold said. "And that is with love, respect and forgiveness."

An Ulster County resident, Arnold's books on nonviolence, forgiving, sexuality, child rearing and dying have sold more than 350,000 copies and have been translated into 18 languages. He has appeared on more than 200 talk shows and has spoken at numerous colleges and high schools.

A father of eight and grandfather of 32, Arnold is personally concerned about youth violence. A member of the Bruderhof, an international community movement dedicated to nonviolence, Arnold has worked as a counselor of teens, couples, prison inmates and the terminally ill for 30 years.

He said if children decide at an early age to be nonviolent, they might have a chance to grow up like the Rev. Martin Luther King. Photos of King, the Rev.



Johann Christoph Arnold, best-selling author and guest speaker, urges students to forgive and love those who would harm them. Seated next to him is New York City Police Detective Steven McDonald, who was wounded in 1986.

Mychal Judge, chaplain of the New York City Fire Department who died on Sept. 11, 2001, Sen. Robert F. Kennedy and Gandhi flanked either side of the stage.

Arnold marched with King in the South. "He was quite a man," he said. "A tremendous man. He influenced me greatly." He learned a lot about forgiveness from King, he said.

"If you have the courage to tell someone who does something very horrible to you, 'I forgive you', then you're not afraid," Arnold said.

Judge traveled with Arnold and McDonald to Ireland to speak about forgiveness. "He loved his fellow firemen," Arnold said. Judge was the fire department's chaplain.

Gandhi wasn't a big man, Arnold said, "but he believed in forgiveness. He believed in nonviolence. And he was shot for those beliefs, Arnold said.

"The sooner you decide (to forgive)," Arnold said, "the more better of a constructive citizen you will become."

McDonald said he became a police officer because "I wanted to help people. I wanted to share what was special about me with other people.

"I went to work one day never imagining the worse could happen," McDonald said.

In 1986, McDonald was questioning three youths in

Central Park, who he and his partner thought could be suspects in a chain of bicycle thefts, when one of them shot him three times — in the head, throat and arm.

"It was very scary," he said. "I knew that I was dying, and I didn't want to die." He said he thought of his wife, who was pregnant with their son. "I wanted to live for them," he said.

Although he survived, he was left a quadriplegic. While in the hospital, McDonald received letters, calls and visits from children, teachers and parents. "All of that helped me a lot," he said. Other people's love helped him "get well again," he said.

He said he learned it was very important "to love somebody who hurt me." And, McDonald said, he did that by forgiving the boy who shot him.

"The only thing worse than a bullet in my spine would have been revenge," he said. "Forgiveness is very important to being happy."

He and the boy became friends, he said. "Pretty amazing, huh?"

McDonald said he hoped his story would encourage students to love and forgive any person who teases or bothers them. "Love those people who hurt you," he said.

If you could do that, he said, you'd be sending a great message to everyone.