

A Stunner At Manolis Murder Trial

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Sniper Victim, 14, On Stand

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Steven McDonald, second from left, and Johann Christoph Arnold address students.

Message of Peace At Mepham H.S.

Ex-cop, author discuss nonviolent resolution

By Jennifer Sinco Kelleher
STAFF WRITER

When Mepham High School's ninth and 10th graders gathered in an auditorium yesterday to discuss nonviolent conflict resolution, no one mentioned the current controversy plaguing their campus.

During a talk given by two peace advocates, there was no direct reference to the school's three football team members accused of sodomizing younger players as part of a hazing rite during a preseason training camp in Pennsylvania a few months ago.

Yet, its presence as an underlying theme was palpable.

School officials said the event was planned months before the sex abuse allegations surfaced, part of typical high school events aimed at addressing teen issues such as anger management and peer pressure. District spokeswoman Kate Collins told the flock of reporters and camera crews who showed up that the media had been invited to the same event two years ago, but only a reporter from a small community paper attended. "I don't think you would be here today," she said, if not for the hazing scandal.

Students listened in silence to New York City Police Det. Steven McDonald, who is paralyzed from being shot while on duty in 1986, and Johann Christoph Arnold, an author who counsels teens on peace tactics.

As McDonald spoke about growing to forgive the 15-year-old who shot him in Central Park, he recounted the cloud of gun smoke on that overcast day, the orange flame that burst from the gun barrel and how his partner held him in his arms until helped arrived.

While not mentioning the events that have thrust Mepham into newspapers and on television outright, he said, "I know you've been through difficult and challenging times." He told students of growing up in nearby Rockville Centre, being part of a family with a long line of police officers, and that he long held on to the anger from losing feeling in his arms and legs.

"If I held on to that pain, that bitterness, it would have killed me," he said. "So I forgave that young teenager."

It was as if McDonald, speaking with the help of a ventilator attached to the back of his wheelchair, was imploring Mepham students to do the same. "Life is not perfect," he said. "But it's beautiful and it's full of love."

Only while speaking with reporters after most of the students had left the auditorium did McDonald vocalize what has been almost taboo on campus: "My heart goes out to the victims and the victimizers," he said. "I find promise for the days ahead. . . . I think the victims will be a great symbol of strength for the other kids here."