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Meagan Napier
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Inmate speaks to students about DUI

Smallridge tells Gulf Breeze High School pupils about life in prison

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The peace sign on Renee Napier's belt buckle wasn't just for show. Otherwise, Napier couldn't have stood in front of 700 juniors and seniors at Gulf Breeze High School on Thursday and hugged the chained-and-shackled man who killed her 20-year-old daughter and her daughter's friend. And she wouldn't have been able to stand in front of a judge four years ago and ask for his prison sentence to be reduced. "You could become angry and hateful and bitter," Napier, 51, told the hushed students. "But I didn't want to live my life that way."

On May 11, 2002 — the day before Mother's Day — Eric Smallridge, then a 24-year-old University of West Florida student, plowed his Jeep Cherokee into a Mazda that Lisa Dickson, 20, was driving with Meagan Napier in the passenger seat. Smallridge was drunk as he sped along Gulf Breeze Parkway. His blood-alcohol level was 0.201, more than twice the legal driving threshold of 0.08.

On Thursday, Smallridge, who turns 32 on May 3, shuffled into the gym in a light-blue prison uniform. His legs were chained and shackled. His wrists, too.

He's an inmate at Bay Correctional Facility in Panama City but was allowed through a court order to speak to the students at his two victims' alma mater. (In the Class of 2000 photo, the two young women are standing next to each other.)

Renee Napier, who has moved to South Florida, hugged Smallridge. After Santa Rosa County Sheriff Wendell Hall and Sgt. Scott Haines removed the shackles from his wrists, he hugged her back.

The crowd, which clapped politely as Smallridge shuffled into the room, watched spellbound at the embrace. Many students sobbed openly.

"As you can imagine, I'm extremely nervous right now," Smallridge said, his ankles still restrained. "Forgive me if I fumble through this."

But he did little fumbling, recounting the person he "was" before the tragic crime — an Eagle Scout, a soccer player, a popular guy.

"I wasn't always an inmate," he whispered.

Then he told of the "selfish" act that robbed two families of their daughters. He talked about how he had driven drunk before. How he thought he could handle it. How he wasn't thinking about anyone other than himself.

"I did it way too many times before," he said. "I made a bad decision and now two young people are dead because of it."

His mother, Raine Smallridge, listened to him talk. Philip Napier, Meagan's father and a Gulf Breeze resident, and more than a dozen of her other friends and family members also were in the audience.

Saving lives

Both Renee Napier, who organized the visit, and Smallridge said Thursday they hope to save lives by appearing together and talking about the dangers of drunken driving.

Smallridge has recorded public service announcements from prison talking about drunken driving, but this is the first time he has been allowed to speak to a group.

Santa Rosa Sheriff's Office officials picked Smallridge up from Bay County earlier in the week and planned to return him to the correctional facility late Thursday or today.

Smallridge said he wanted to speak to the students because "I want to give back to this community. Because, to this point, all I've done is wreck havoc on this community."

Napier said she is working with the Department of Corrections to have Smallridge appear at other schools across the state to give a similar talk.

Impact of forgiveness

Most high schools bring in speakers to talk about drunken driving, but this was something different.

The impact of seeing Napier smile at Smallridge, hug him and talk about forgiveness was too much for some students to take.

One student couldn't stop sobbing for minutes after the morning assembly, not even to talk about the event's impact. Others managed a few words between tears.

"This really touches everybody," said 18-year-old Samantha Diaz, her voice breaking as she cried. "It's so sad. I don't even know this lady, but I feel so bad for her and admire her, too. And I feel bad for the guy, too. I know he's sorry. It's huge what the (Napier) family has done, forgiving him. It really is beautiful and sad at the same time."

Smallridge originally was sentenced to 22 years in prison. In 2006, that sentence was cut in half at the urging of the Napier and Dickson families. Smallridge's scheduled release date is now November 2012.

Lisa Dickson's parents have said in the past that they have forgiven Smallridge as well, but they did not attend Thursday's assembly. In a 2006 letter to the judge requesting leniency, the Dickson family even referred to Smallridge as a "friend" and a "brother."

Change of perspective

Gulf Breeze High students think Smallridge and Napier will succeed in saving lives. In fact, they're sure they already have.

"It's so powerful to see them together," said senior Bianca Ephraim, 18. "I know my life has changed now. And I know my perspective on drinking and driving has changed."

So, already, they have had success.

But Renee Napier knows that though Smallridge can help save lives in the present and future, it can never make up for the lives he stole in the past.

"I've forgiven Eric Smallridge," she said. "But he will always know that what he did was not OK. I'm sure it helps him somewhat to be forgiven, but he has a very heavy burden he has to live with for the rest of his life."

Moon, Troy. "Inmate speaks to students about DUI." PNJ.com. 23 April 2010. Newspaper on-line.