



CARRIE JONES ROSS

Sergio Argueta speaks to students.

## Cycle of forgiveness

Speakers tell KHS freshmen that violence isn't the way **BY CARRIE JONES ROSS**

**H**OW DOES ONE TRANSCEND a world filled with drug-gunning and thugging into a place of non-violence and forgiveness? Several speakers from the national Breaking the Cycle anti-violence program presented their solutions and stories to ninth-graders at Kingston High School last Friday afternoon.

Organizer, author and pastor Johann Christoph Arnold of Maple Ridge Bruderhof Church Communities, the Ulster County Sheriff's chaplain, gave each student a copy of his book *Why Forgive?*, as well as *She Said Yes: The Unlikely Martyr-*

**'I was the one who put myself out there on the corner. I had to forgive me.'**  
**— Hashim Garrett**

dom of Cassie Bernall by Misty Bernall, the story of the 17-year-old who was killed in the Columbine shootings after, according

to some accounts, she answered that she believed in God.

Arnold said he developed the Breaking the Violence program in response to the 1999 Columbine shootings; the Bruderhof Community offered grief counseling in Columbine and surrounding schools in the wake of the massacre. "High schools everywhere wanted an alternative to violence," explained Arnold of the program's genesis. "There's a better way than violence — which is non-violence and forgiveness."

The Kingston High stage was filled with large displays of portraits and quotes from famous peace-makers, like Mohandas K. "Mahatma" Gandhi, the Rev. Dr.

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### Cycle of forgiveness

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Martin Luther King, John F. Kennedy, Cassie Bernall and others. Arnold said he knew Martin Luther King personally, and marched with him in Alabama when he was 23. Also on stage was an image of Crosby Middle School's beloved school resource officer, Town of Ulster police officer Travis Nissen, who recently lost his life in a car accident. "All these people left a legacy," said Arnold. "Will these ninth graders be the leaders? ... That is the inspiration we hope to give them. Life is worth living if it is in service to other people."

Breaking the Cycle has presented its conflict resolution strategies to at least 300-400 schools in the last 15 years, including some in England, Israel, Ireland and more, espousing the message of peace, sharing stories of survival and hope, offering perspectives, encouragement and a place to share their own stories. Arnold recognized that so many kids are dealing with tragic family situations — alcohol, divorce, drugs and sometimes worse. "We have to zero in on our young," said Arnold. "They have to realize that we care for them. Their lives are important to us. When they leave this assembly, we hope they have been encouraged because we are in a very unfriendly world."

**A**RNOLD BESEECED THE YOUNG STUDENTS to ask themselves whether they have encouraged someone, or if they were willing to put their lives down for others. "Our country is waiting for young people to say, 'I want to lay down my life for my fellow man, my country,'" said Arnold, the father of eight and grandfather of 42.

Kingston High School Principal Adrian Manuel told students he grew up in Kingston, and remembers seeing drug deals go down. He described making cognizant choices to avoid those people and those streets and even talked about running away from gunfire one day on Van Buren Street. As he recounted his memories, students slowly nodded their heads in recognition and agreement. "These stories are not far away from you guys," Manuel said.

Long Islander Sergio Argueta then took the stage. Not needing a mic, he delivered his story in a strong and loud voice, energy seeming to rise through him from the bottom of his feet and the telling of it bringing tears to his eyes. Argueta said from a young age he wasn't interested in school, and didn't listen to what was said to him in the classrooms. "The streetcorner individuals talked to me a lot about life, and told me gladiator stories about how glamorous the lifestyles were. They didn't tell me about being in handcuffs at 13 years old. They didn't tell me about seeing my best friend in a coffin at 18 years old."

Argueta passionately rhymed about cursing at a gun in his face, and kids getting high off gangs and guns. "What you wanna be when you grow up? You wouldn't have said, 'On drugs, in jail.'" Argueta reflected how his friends died so that Argueta could, "wake up"; a wakeup that entailed prison to a criminal justice degree from Hofstra, then a master's degree from Stony Brook, now law school. "It took seeing my mother crying and struggling, but I was bleeding and driving down a dead-end." Argueta stood before the Kingston ninth-graders, humbly dressed in Timberland boots, baggy jeans and a hoodie, and smiled saying that he is also currently a college administrator at Adelphi University as well. "I dressed in street clothes, do you know that I am just like you," to which the students' eyes widened.

Argueta concluded by letting the student body know that each one of them is special, and needs to hang on. He dedicated his talk in memory of his brother Lord Carter, who was gunned down by a 14-year-old at the age of 21.

**H**ASHIM GARRETT OF BROOKLYN STRUGGLED TO his feet on forearm crutches to address the curious, whispering students. Half his lifetime ago, at age 16, Garrett was shot six times in his spine by a kid wielding a submachine gun, with a bullet exiting out his chest near his heart. "I was able to forgive the kid who shot me," said Garrett. "I never even met him." Garrett described the circumstances of being set up by his so-called friends for the attempted murder, enduring an insatiable desire for vindication and revenge, struggling to forgive and let go, then choosing not to

identify his shooter to the police and learning that the shooter went straight out and shot one of Garrett's friends, resulting in paralysis. Garrett felt drowned by his own anger, grief and depression, and recognized that he had to forgive himself as well. "I didn't want to dedicate myself to [physical] recovery. I just wanted to kill the person who shot me."

Garrett told the students that as a teen, he never envisioned an outcome of physical pain and suffering as a kid, admitting he assumed the worst-case scenario in his future would be his own death, or going to prison upstate where his friends were. Garrett imparted the details of the attempted murder on his life in detail for the students, including how he lied in the street, motionless, so the killer would assume he was dead. "I waited for 30 minutes [for the police] bleeding out of 12 holes," he said.

Garrett also clearly described the feeling of his soul leaving his body in the ambulance ride, and warned the students how there was no warm welcoming white light. Garrett snapped back upon hearing his mother's voice "nagging" him in his head with a list of chores he'd ignored. "Now you're looking at a father of a 2-year-old girl, who, without forgiveness, wouldn't be a father, husband, CEO. I learned how to forgive others, and learned how to forgive myself. Young human beings make mistakes," Garrett said. "I have to forgive myself. I was the one who put myself out there on the corner. I had to forgive me."

Garrett later described his transformation from anger into forgiveness as being a path filled with spending time with his parents, reading the Bible every day, questioning the greater reasons as to why he was in this position, wanting to make his mother proud and make better decisions.

Garrett, who is now an educational consultant and motivational speaker, encouraged the students to be mindful of how they speak before a conflict erupts into violence. He directed students to associate with good people.

Kingston Police Chief Egidio Tinti spoke for a minute to encourage kids to reflect on whether they are doing the right things, and if they have made a difference. "And if you didn't," he said, "Tomorrow is that time."