

## Love is all you need, wounded cop tells kids

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### **CALDWELL – Detective Steven McDonald, brought to national prominence by a near fatal tragedy 18 years ago, brought his message of love and tolerance to Mount St. Dominic Academy on Friday, May 7.**

In 1986, McDonald, then 29, a member of the New York Police Department (NYPD), was paralyzed when struck by three bullets from a gun fired by a teen in New York's Central Park.

Still in a wheelchair 18 years later, McDonald has been on speaking tours for many years, spreading his words of reconciliation.

Earlier this year, he was promoted by Police Commissioner Raymond Kelly to detective rank, 1st grade, the highest-level in the NYPD.

For the past eight years McDonald has worked with members of the Bruderhof Movement in upstate New York on a program they created together called "Project Breaking the Cycle."

Also speaking at Mount St. Dominic was Charles Moore, author and teen counselor at the Bruderhof Communities.

Both speakers lived up to the introduction by Principal Sister Frances Sullivan, who told the assembly of 300 or so students and faculty,



**Assembly on *Nonviolent Conflict Resolution & Forgiveness* with NYPD Det. Steven McDonald (wheel chair), and Dr. Charles Moore of the Bruderhof in the gymnasium of Mount St. Dominic Academy, Caldwell NJ.**

along with local law enforcement guests, "A special, monumental program is in store for us."

In the face of daily violence, the nation has become numb to violence, Sister Frances, noted, treating it as a normal condition. Non-violence, she pointed out "must be taught and learned."

Some of the causes of school violence, she aptly told the student body, are gossip, bullying, peer pressure and racism.

### **Miracle Of Forgiveness**

Moore set the stage for Detective McDonald's talk with some inspiring words of his own.

"Steve and I want to share a life message with you," he said. That message was "the power and miracle of forgiveness."

"Bitterness and hatred never stay put," Moore said. "If left unchecked they consume everyone in their path."

He talked about visiting Columbine High School in Colorado after the fatal shootings by two students there.

"Revenge, hatred and anger was written in the bullet holes and the blood on the walls" in that school, he said.

But later, the bitterness and hatred spread to some of the parents who wanted to cut down two of the memorial trees, which represented the two killers. They didn't want them remembered, he said.

"How is the cycle ever to be broken?" he asked.

Bitterness is a cancer that can only be removed by forgiveness, was his message. The way to experience healing is to let go of the demand for justice, he said.

But Steven McDonald should not be thought of exceptional, Moore said.



Posing outside Mt. St. Dominic Academy with Det. Steven McDonald (wheel chair) are: (L to R) Dr. Charles Moore of the Bruderhof; West Caldwell Det./Sgt. Michael Moran; Lt. Kurt Drombrowski - Caldwell PD; Capt Michael Branhall - West Caldwell PD; Chief Charles Tubbs - West Caldwell PD

through love and forgiveness.

Of his injuries he says, "God's using me in a special way and that's what brings me here."

As a young police officer from a long line of law enforcement men and women, McDonald said he never imagined his life would be like this. Yet he sees a purpose in it.

"I was probably not listening to God. He had a way of getting my attention," the handsome officer said.

McDonald described how 18 years ago as an officer with two years on the force, married less than a year, with a pregnant wife, he was shot and paralyzed from the neck down.

Speaking into the microphone held by Moore, McDonald said on July 12, 1986 he was doing a good job helping people, while working the 4 to 12 p.m. shift, the most dangerous shift. Just 20 minutes into his patrol in a dangerous part of Central Park, 50 yards from where the Central Park jogger was attacked, he and his partner spotted three young men acting in a suspicious way. He chased after them when they ran away and was checking out a suspected gun in the sock of one suspect when one of the others, a 15 year old, shot him three times.

"He is a man with needs just like all of us. We all know what it's like to be 'shot at'," he told his audience, although the "bullets" that fly our way may not be physical ones."

But we have the choice, Moore said, to either "let the bullet fester or to find a way to let go of the violence that has come our way."

"Forgiveness is a power that can change the world if we let it," he concluded.

### Inspiring Words From McDonald

McDonald, confined to his wheelchair, breathing with the aid of a tracheostomy, is living proof of the power of forgiveness.

Despite his physical limitations, McDonald is more whole than most men or women one meets each day. He has healed his heart

"I was terribly frightened," he admits. He described smelling the gunpowder, seeing the orange flash of the blast and hearing his partner radioing in a 10-13. "Assist Police Officer."

Clearly McDonald's faith carried him through this nearly fatal attack. He spoke about the many prayers said for him by his devoted mother, his wife and by people of all faiths who prayed for him at Masses held at the hospital.

But his healing was not yet complete.

"Many times I was angry, bitter, I didn't want to talk about God," McDonald said.

There were also prayers for him to walk again.

"That hasn't happened yet," he said resolutely. "I believe it will some day."

When his son, Connor, now 17, was born six months after the shooting, McDonald decided he wanted to forgive the boy, Shavod Jones, who shot him.

Later he and Jones became friends through letters. A year after McDonald forgave his attacker, the young man called to apologize for what he had done.

"I feel much closer to God as a result of it. Because of the bullet from the gun, because of the young man," McDonald said.

McDonald also became close to Jones' grandmother and they sometimes went to each other's churches together.

The officer shared with the young people of Mount St. Dominic a card used by some students in New York City. One side has a prayer titled "You are very special," the other "My Pledge of Non-Violence."

"I wish someone could have shared that prayer with that young man," he said.

McDonald spoke compassionately about the circumstances, in which his attacker was raised, the lack of love and confusion leading to who he became.

"I don't know how much he knew about love in his home," he said.

In response to a question from the audience, McDonald said the young man was released from prison nine years ago, after having served nine years. Three days after his release he was killed in a motor cycle accident.

Again and again McDonald returned to the central theme of his talk. "A word can be as deadly or as damaging as a bullet or a bomb," he told the girls.

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**Students of the Mt. St. Dominic Academy pose with Dr. Charles Moore (Left) of the Bruderhof and NYPD Det. Steven McDonald (wheel chair) after a stirring assembly on *Nonviolent Conflict Resolution & Forgiveness*.**