

Echoes Sentinel  
Hills alumni lead presentation on stem cell research  
By DENIS J. KELLY Editor  
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WARREN TWP. – Two students who are graduates of Watchung Hills Regional High School were among the presenters at an assembly at the school on Wednesday, Nov. 23, about stem cell research.

Carl Riccio, a 2004 graduate and sophomore at Villanova University, Villanova, Pa., who is a quadraplegic as a result of a high school wrestling injury, and Rob Margolin, a 1999 graduate who is a first-year student at the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey (UMDNJ), Newark and Piscataway Township, were among the presenters at the assembly.

They were part of a group of representatives of the New Jersey Stem Cell Research and Education Foundation (NJSCREF). NJSCREF officials said the presentation was the first of what they hoped would be many forums at high schools educating students about stem cell research.

Bradley W. McGowan of Madison, who is chief operating officer of NJSCREF and who has diabetes, said the organization is hoping to hold similar assemblies in high schools in West Orange and Newark. Similar but more scholarly presentations have already been given to groups of medical and research professionals, McGowan said.

According to the NJSCREF's pamphlet distributed at assembly, "The foundation is instituting a comprehensive educational program to engage all the constituencies in health care , patients, the general public both children and adults, caregivers, clinicians, staff and researchers , in understanding the implications of regenerative medicine for health, healing and humanity.

Carl Riccio told the students why he was such an advocate for more stem cell research.

"An important part of my life is to continue exercising and keep my body in shape for a potential cure," Riccio told the students. "The number one thing that gives me hope to be cured one day is stem cell research."

He said the potential is for stem cell research to help not just people with spinal cord injuries, but also people with diseases such as diabetes, Parkinson's Disease and Alzheimer's Disease.

"If not already, eventually many of you in some way or another could be affected by these diseases," he said. "By supporting research today, hopefully when you are affected one day in the future, there will be cures already found."

Riccio was one of three patient advocates at the presentation. The others were Drew Weinstein of Parsippany-Troy Hills Township, who is a freshman at Barnstable Academy, Oakland, and has juvenile diabetes, and Richard Gaskin of Montclair, also known as rap artist Professor X, who is paralyzed as a result of gunshot wound in the neck.

Speaking along with Gaskin was his cousin, Prince Jahid, also of Montclair, who performs with Gaskin as a rap duo and advocate for more stem cell research.

All four speakers gave stirring first-person accounts of their struggles with disease and injury, and reasons why they advocate for more stem cell research.

Margolin, who received his undergraduate degree from St. Michael's College, Colchester, Vt., enlisted the assistance of Hills students to help deliver an informative power point presentation about stem cell research.

Also speaking at the event were Dr. Michael LaSalle of Roseland, a surgeon with MJSCREF, and Warren H. Victor of Westfield, founding trustee of NJSCREF. Gabriel Milton of West Orange, appointed by Gov. Richard Codey as executive director of the New Jersey Commission on Spinal Cord Research, was also in attendance at the assembly.