

## After principal's untimely death, his lessons live on

By Mark Di Ionno  
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

The kids went back to school yesterday, piling through doors they decorated over spring break. Some of the signs had blown away, swept off by a week's worth of mild, breezy weather, but there was no rain to speak of so their words were still intact and legible, their messages now 10 days old.

Outside those doors, dried flowers and small stones painted with messages were moved aside, out from underfoot. The kids were back in the old stone-and-brick Tudor building, where footsteps echo down granite halls when class is in session, and where the shrill racket of middle-schoolers bounces off plaster walls when class is not.

The building was full again, yet empty in a way that only adults should have to understand. But the kids at Briarcliff School in Mountain Lakes now know, too. They got a hard lesson on their week of vacation.

Their principal, Mr. Cera - Marco Cera to people outside the school - died on Good Friday, the first day of spring break. He was 39.

Death, to most young teenagers, is for old people. Grandmas and grandpas. On the timeline of expected life, Marco Cera left too early, and too abruptly, and under circumstances that are hard to comprehend even for grownups. He came to the school just 14 months ago - young and vital - and became an immediate force, ever-present in the halls, at the concerts and science and book fairs, at the team events. A few months later, this man who never worked in heavy industry or a shipyard, was diagnosed with mesothelioma, an asbestos-related lung cancer. The news was as perplexing as it was devastating as it was unnerving. Especially to sixth-, seventh- and eighth-graders. He was younger than their parents, and had children younger than them.

Mr. Cera fought it off and hardly missed a day of school at first. There was treatment at Sloan-

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Accreditation still in jeopardy after Kean University is found out of compliance. Page 19

### Transplant patients unaffected by closure

Hackensack kidney cases can transfer to four state centers

By Linda Weinbaum  
STAFF WRITER

With Hackensack University Medical Center temporarily shutting down its kidney transplant program, the state's other kidney centers are gearing up to accept patients on Hackensack's waiting list. The possibility of surgery at Hackensack, as it works to re-open a health care unit that is more than the national average, will have little or no effect on patients waiting to receive a kidney transplant.

John L. Larson, a spokesman for the New Jersey Health Network, said Hackensack's 300 patients cannot be absorbed by the state's four other kidney transplant programs without being added to their lists on the waiting list, said Freeman.

At Saint Barnabas Medical Center in Livingston, the state's largest transplant program received about 25 calls yesterday from patients interested in changing their listing status.

Dr. Robert Collins, director of kidney and pancreas transplant surgery for Saint Barnabas, said he expects to see a steady stream of patients, in many, would come up for a transplant very soon.

"It's imperative to make sure these patients are appropriately transferred and appropriately transplanted," Larson said.

Hackensack on Friday said it will support its medical patients on the list for the next few months. CMS and regulations to quickly re-opened their work, several officials said.

There have been several meetings with the federal government to discuss and discuss the voluntary teaching program will be underwriting beginning next month.

Medicare certifies non-teaching programs and pays for the cost - about \$200,000 per month - patients receive.

Hackensack is in negotiations with Medicare over the terms of a "standard" program for its address, according to a higher than

### Carjack suspects differ on what happened

She says he killed driver, but she says he just burned car

By Wayne Parry  
STAFF WRITER

She says she was bored in her new boyfriend's Atlantic City condo and persuaded to take her to a nearby casino, where they saw a glowing new Lincoln SUV and equipped the driver. Her boyfriend stabbed the owner to death before leaving the vehicle to cover up their crime.

He says his girlfriend was trying to cut off a mysterious \$200,000 check from "some guy."

Hours after she had promised to take him out to dinner and gambling, she showed up with a new SUV, saying she had "a problem" and needed to get rid of it. So he did what any guy with a young girlfriend would do by leaving the car for her. But that will not be the story.

Those two contradictory narratives played out in a courtroom in May leading yesterday to the murder trial of Craig Aron, 46, of Atlantic City. Aron is accused of the carjacking and murder of Marvin

Collins, a 47-year-old North Bergen man who was arrested in the parking garage of the Trump Taj Mahal Casino Resort on May 21, 2010, after dropping his family off at the main entrance. They were there to celebrate his daughter's birthday.

The girlfriend, Jessica Kibby, pleaded guilty to murder in February and will serve 30 years before being released. Kibby, 26, testified yesterday that she and Aron were driving over the Taj Mahal when they saw the Lincoln SUV and



JESSICA KIBBY

### VIRGINIA TECH SHOOTINGS: FIVE YEARS LATER

## The sorrow never goes away



Teresa Polko, left, of Flemington, who lost her son in the Virginia Tech massacre, is comforted by friend Liz Orlando of Branchburg yesterday.

### Parents of slain N.J. students back Menendez safety bill

By Ryan Hutchins  
STAFF WRITER

It was five years ago yesterday when Michael Polko, 17, made that first phone call and began his journey toward homicide.

It was the morning of the Virginia Tech shooting and Polko had been following the news. It wasn't until lunchtime when he spotted the name of his son's college on a TV.

He stayed silent first. He waited seconds and called Michael Jr.'s cell phone. It went to voice mail. He still stayed silent.

He found himself a lot of things, but the death toll, slowly climbed. Polko's seven-year-old son had been killed. Teresa, who was at home in Branchburg, New Jersey, didn't know who, but it was killing. He told her she was his son, but he kept calling his son. And calling still occurred.

It wasn't until 11 p.m. when the Public Safety Board told them their football and basketball players, their parents, their family had who always had to be No. 1, who hadn't yet told them about his fiancée - was dead, shot by a student

gunman who also killed 33 others. It was in the aftermath, in the silent classrooms, where first responders shared a commonality with victims' families.

They said one of the most difficult times for them was when they would go into the classrooms and the cell phones would be ringing on those dead kids' Michael Jr.'s cell.

Yesterday, the Polko family passed Sen. Robert Menendez (D-N.J.) in Newark lawmakers had said that would allow penalties for colleges that fail to provide timely information about crimes on their campuses - as they believe Virginia Tech did.

### After principal's untimely death, his lessons live on



Briarcliff School principal Marco Cera died on January 4th. Memorial signs appear outside the school Saturday.

The kids went back to school yesterday, piling through doors they decorated over spring break. Some of the signs had blown away, swept off by a week's worth of mild, breezy weather, but there was no rain to speak of so their words were still intact and legible, their messages now 10 days old.



Mountain Lakes now know. They got a hard lesson on their week of vacation. Their principal, Mr. Cera - Marco Cera to people outside the school - died on Good Friday, the first day of spring break. He was 39. Death, to most young teenagers, is for old people. Grandmas and grandpas. On the timeline of expected life, Marco Cera left too early, and too abruptly, and under circumstances that are hard to comprehend even for grownups. He came to the school just 14 months ago - young and vital - and became an immediate force, ever-present in the halls, at the concerts and science and book fairs, at the team events. A few months later, this man who never worked in heavy industry or a shipyard, was diagnosed with mesothelioma, an asbestos-related lung cancer. The news was as perplexing as it was devastating as it was unnerving. Especially to sixth-, seventh- and eighth-graders. He was younger than their parents, and had children younger than them.

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Kettering, an operation to remove lung lining. Still he was in the building; strong, optimistic, hovering over the kids, meeting with their parents. And then he was not. That was the hard lesson. All that strength

and optimism, all those prayers and goodwill, didn't force a happy ending. Mr. Cera was gone, just like that, it seemed to the kids who had been shielded from the realities of his disease.

But he wasn't done teaching. What happened next were the lessons he gave in death. Lessons of caring, and community, and life, no matter what it brings. The signs, in middle-school scrawl, began to show up Friday, many addressed to his family, all sprinkled with the word "love." Mr. Cera, it seems, got as good as he gave.

There was a spontaneous bake sale by three seventh-grade girls who took cookies and brownies and cupcakes and cake pops to the town's playing fields and sold to whoever was around, and whichever team was practicing. They raised \$175 for Cera's family. A seventh-grade boy started making Mr. Cera T-shirts. Some freshman boys from Mr. Cera's first class are organizing a pizza fundraiser.

And that is just the beginning. As school reconvenes this week, more will be decided on. A scholarship fund for his daughters is being talked about, and while adults will decide structure and fill out appropriate forms, kids will do the work of baking, selling, washing cars or whatever else is needed.

On the day of Mr. Cera's wake, the line at Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church in Boonton went out the church and down the block. The families from every district Mr. Cera worked in came out: Pompton Lakes, Kittatinny, Madison, Franklin Lakes, Mountain Lakes. His wife, Danielle, brother, Christopher, and parents, Anthony and Corinne, met hundreds of his kids. They came and told the family how much Mr. Cera did for them, unaware of how much they may have done for Mr. Cera. They gave him a life as an educator, and a chance to impact each and every one of their lives. Danielle Cera met each one and laid comforting hands on all their shoulders. She was the widow, yes, but a mother first.

There is nothing quite as heartbreaking as watching young teenage girls cry tears not born of some silly drama, but of deep, internal, chest-heaving sadness. Nothing, except watching teenage boys drop their pretense, and do the same. All cried openly and without shame.

The homily by the Rev. Thomas Fallone was directed at all those kids. It was about caring, and community, and living a life of service to both. It, too, was sprinkled with the word "love."

"Never forget this day," he said. "Never forget what Mr. Cera did with his life. Never forget what he did for you, and what you can do for others. Never forget his was a life so lived."

**Carjack**  

A carjack is used to lift the engine from a vehicle. It is a mechanical device that allows a car to be driven onto a platform. The carjack is used in a variety of applications, from lifting a car to a lift truck to lifting a car onto a truck. It is a simple but effective device that has been used for many years.

**Chickadee**  

A chickadee is a small, energetic bird that is known for its ability to survive in winter. It has a unique adaptation called heterothermy, which allows it to temporarily lower its body temperature to survive in freezing temperatures. This allows it to conserve energy when food is scarce.

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**Anniversary**  

Anniversaries are a special time to celebrate the love and commitment shared between two people. It is a day to look back on the memories and milestones that have shaped your relationship. Celebrating an anniversary is a beautiful way to honor the journey you've taken together.

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ers. Never forget his was a life so lived." It was a full life that touched so many, short as it was.

And - does it need to be said? - there are lessons in that for all of us.

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