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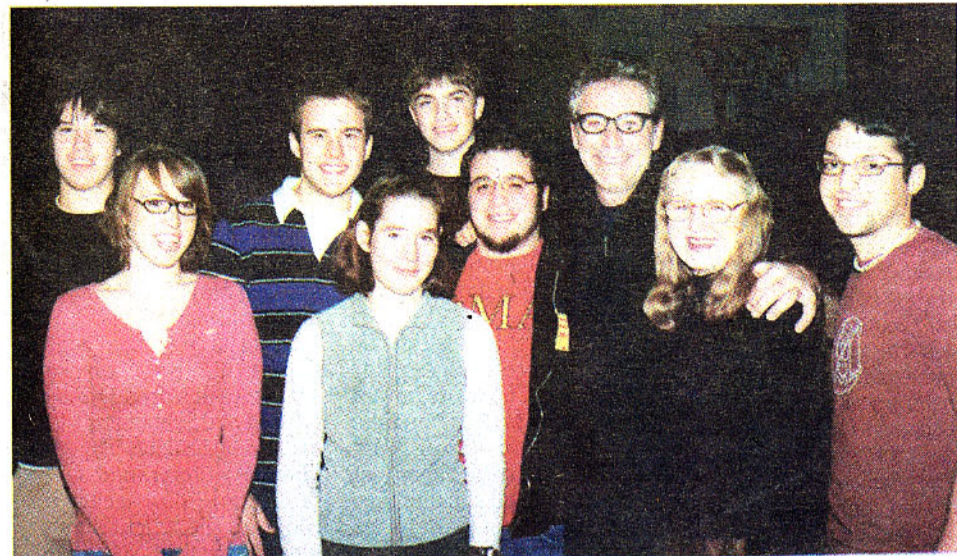
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Penncrest Grad Builds Homes And Hope On 'Extreme Makeover'



Penncrest teacher Judie Roman and students in her communications classes greeted Paul DiMeo following his presentation. Excited to meet and thank DiMeo were students Randy Kreider, Mairead Hanna, Wes Potter, Jesse Tindall, Bradley King, Penncrest alumnus Matthew Prince, DiMeo, Roman and student Nick Grouzes.

By Janet Lloyd Murphy

Imagine having a job in which you could make a huge impact on a struggling family's life in just one week's time. Middletown native and Penncrest High School graduate (Class of '76) Paul DiMeo doesn't have to just imagine it -- he actually lives this dream job. He is the designer/carpenter on the popular ABC show, *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, the award-winning show now in its fourth year (Sunday nights, 8 p.m. ET).

DiMeo was at Penncrest with his wife, Nov. 22, to talk to students about the show, the road that led to his spot on network television, and most important to him -- the message of pursuing a dream and making a difference. His visit to his alma mater, organized by Assistant Principal Dr. Susan Evans, was part of the school's 50th anniversary celebration. DiMeo was in town for his 30th class reunion and to spend Thanksgiving with family and friends who still live in the area.

When introducing DiMeo, Principal Ken Batchelor praised the show, "With all of the violent shows on TV right now, this one stands out as one that focuses on the genuine goodness of human nature, and the power of the community to make a difference."

Batchelor's comments couldn't have been a more appropriate prelude to the presentation. DiMeo stressed that the true meaning behind the show is the real life stories behind the home demolitions and reconstructions. That is, the families that are chosen because of great losses and challenges in their lives and the need to transform their unsafe home environments and ease their financial burdens.

DiMeo told a packed Penncrest auditorium that the show's team just completed their 91st house, 30 in this year alone. Sears is a major sponsor of the show, donating appliances and housewares to the families. Ford Motors has gotten into the act too, donating cars when they are needed. Other companies offer products as well, and these are all listed on the website, www.abc.go.com/primetime/xtremehome.

The show's statistics are hard to comprehend, as more than 100 hours and 20-hour workdays are logged on each renovation, which needs to be done in seven days or less, including the exterior and landscaping. A project of this scope can only happen with a dedicated team of local contractors and several hundred workers behind the scenes.

DiMeo said the show's design team is on the road 220 days a year, meaning the usu-

al TV season taping schedules don't apply. It's a rough schedule, but well worth it as DiMeo and his fellow designers realize the impact they are making with these families.

DiMeo showed students clips from past shows, and one story was of Master Sergeant Luis Rodriguez, of Clarksville, Tenn. Sgt. Rodriguez was working as a medic on the front lines of Iraq, beginning in March 2003, when he suffered a devastating blow.

While traveling with his convoy to a hospital in Mosul, Sgt. Rodriguez's convoy was ambushed by a roadside bomb. He lost his right leg above the knee and two left fingertips, and sustained serious shrapnel wounds to his left leg. It took four months in an amputee ward and 16 separate surgeries for him to learn to walk again with a new prosthetic leg and crutches. The home that he shared with his wife and two daughters was too narrow and awkward to accommodate his new situation, and that's what the show's team changed.

Sgt. Rodriguez now works as an instructor at the Combat School of Medicine at the Army's Ft. Campbell base. His wife is studying to become a counselor to the families of injured or killed soldiers.

DiMeo has had experience with family difficulties because at age 5, his family's home burned to the ground. It was at this young age that his love of carpentry was born, as he worked with his father

to rebuild the house. However, his love of theater surfaced not much later, as he had a role in Penncrest's production of the Broadway musical *Mame* at age 10.

Penncrest theater and oral communications teacher Judie Roman told students that DiMeo was a focused performer in the Emanon theater group, especially in the role of the leprechaun "Og" in *Finian's Rainbow*.

"Whatever Paul did for us,

whether in the choir or theater, we knew we could count on him for an energetic and polished performance, said Roman. "I am proud to say that I once taught and directed him, and he will always have a special place in my heart."

Turning the tables, DiMeo credited Roman's guidance and his whole Penncrest experience for teaching him the fundamentals needed for his career and for life in general.

Following graduation, DiMeo attended Point Park College in Pittsburgh, majoring in theater arts. He also developed his skill as a set builder for the Pittsburgh Playhouse and worked as a stage manager for the American Dance Ensemble.

The Ensemble later moved to New York City and so did DiMeo, continuing to enhance his reputation both on and off stage. When he added the

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Open Space Theater on St. Mark's Place to his credit, his set building skills began to be noticed by other groups, leading to freelance work with the Dance Theater of Harlem, the Yiddish Theater, Carnegie Hall and numerous off-Broadway and Broadway venues. He was also a pioneer in loft living and brownstone design, and was master carpenter on the renovation of the landmark brownstone of Aaron Burr.

Meanwhile, in his acting life, DiMeo played the lead in director Al Carmine's *In Circles* off-Broadway, and was stage manager for *On 2nd Avenue* and *The Golden Boy*. As a resident actor, he played *Hamlet* at King's County Shakespeare, *Benedick* in *Much Ado About Nothing* and a lead role in *The Bull and Wisdom's Age* at the New York One Act Festival, where he won first place for his performance.

On television, he costarred

with John Lithgow on the sitcom *Third Rock From The Sun* and on Dick Wolf's *New York Under Cover*, and in film, he played the lead in director Peter Maguire's *No School Today* and *Sparky* in the children's video, *Sparky Moves To Manhattan*.

After 17 years in New York, DiMeo decided to move to Los Angeles, renovating the homes and businesses of Hollywood's movers and shakers. His client list includes the Beverly Hills Ralph Lauren Polo store, the William Morris Agency, Glenn Close, David Niven Jr., Ann Archer and George Hamilton.

DiMeo acknowledged that high schoolers might not know these names, but added that he has also been on the production team for rock bands that still grab the attention of today's teens, including the Grateful Dead and the Rolling Stones. As if that weren't enough, he also completed a renovation of

Madonna's home in New York's Central Park. He has been an invited dinner guest at the White House, and has played guitar for "Kermit the Frog," which was his favorite gig.

It was his work with Hollywood executives and their design projects that led to his interview for *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*.

"They called me in to pitch the show because I had built a deck for the co-executive producer," said DiMeo. "They showed me a blueprint and told me that they wanted to build a gymnasium on top of a swimming pool. I told them it could be done with hydraulics, and I could do it. Then they told me it had to be done in five days -- I told them it couldn't be done."

DiMeo left the interview feeling certain that he would receive a rejection letter. But with a call the next day, he was offered the opportunity of his life.

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However, lest some dismiss this as a "lucky break," DiMeo told students that amazing things can happen to them, too, if they follow their passion, never give up and keep learning new things. Central to his message was the fact that this can be done despite what some may view as disabilities or flaws.

In DiMeo's case, he has dyslexia, and had trouble with reading and spelling in school. However, he found a way to accentuate his talents and minimize whatever hindered his progress.

Another central message of DiMeo's was the importance of fostering a sense of community and helping each other. This, he added, can be done as much in school as in the towns where DiMeo and his crew find themselves each week.

"Our projects always run smoother with a strong community backing us, including local contractors, family, friends and the neighbors who lend them a hand," said DiMeo. "We can often do better in a place like Iowa than we can in L.A."

Students can foster this same atmosphere in their school, said DiMeo, by respecting each other, finding the positive in each situation and keeping an open mind.

As for future plans, DiMeo told students he has a dream that involves the setting of one of their shows, Camp Barnabas (www.campbarnabas.org), in southwest Missouri. The camp serves special needs children and allows them some down time from their disability or disease, and each summer 900 campers take advantage of this opportunity.

DiMeo hopes to open up similar camps across the country and perhaps even internationally. One group of children he would especially like to target are those with autism, a neurological disorder that affects the brain, impacting social interaction and communication skills.

He hopes to give children a taste of the carefree life that every child deserves. If the camp changes their outlook in even a small way it is worthwhile, says DiMeo.

"To be part of something that changes someone's life -- that is the goal," summed up DiMeo.

With that intention, he's right on target.

FOR THE POLL QUESTION

See the editorial page in the front section and answer at www.CountyPressOnline.com