

New Canaan News

Athlete Discusses Respect, Self-Esteem at Forum

By Larissa Lytwyn

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With a drive he once reserved for the football field, Joe Ehrmann is now sacking Madison Avenue stereotypes one critically acclaimed lecture at a time. A former defensive lineman for the Baltimore Colts, Ehrmann has spent the last two decades helping others find meaning in a life he asserts is often obscured by misplaced priorities. Ehrmann shared his message with New Canaan students and their families last week as part of the town's recognition of October's Domestic Violence Awareness Month.

"We are united by a common humanity," Ehrmann said during an exclusive interview prior to his evening lecture. "Life is about the quality of the relationships we have with each another. We all want to love and be loved." Reflecting at the end of one's life, he continued, "is not going to be about how much money you made or what your job title was. You're going to ask yourself if you were a good father, or if you could have been a better husband or a better friend."

At the height of his NFL career, Ehrmann's 18-year-old brother, Billy, was diagnosed with terminal cancer. Billy died in 1973, the same year Ehrmann played the Pro Bowl with the Colts. "As I spent the last five months of my brother's life by his side in the hospital, I began to think about what life was really about," Ehrmann said. At the pinnacle of a sports career filled with all the trappings of fame and wealth, Ehrmann said he had never felt more lost.

"I couldn't understand how something like this could happen to my strong, vital younger brother," Ehrmann said. "He had been following in my footsteps [toward an NFL career]." Most devastating, Ehrmann said, "I didn't know how to comfort him." Ehrmann's father, an amateur boxer, was a remote figure who drifted in and out of Ehrmann's life growing up. Ehrmann said this relationship allowed him to fit naturally into the macho boys' club of high school sports. "We weren't allowed to express emotions," Ehrmann said. Broad-shouldered and well over 6 feet in height, Ehrmann was born an athlete. But while he excelled athletically, Ehrmann said his emotional and spiritual growth was virtually nonexistent.

"It wasn't until my brother died I began to see things differently," Ehrmann said. During his lecture, Ehrmann recalled the anguish he felt during his brother's funeral. "After [the burial] everyone began to walk away," Ehrmann said. "I was seized with anger. I thought, 'That's it? That's the end of it? You live, you die and everyone walks away and moves on?' I knew there had to be more."

Ehrmann embarked on an intense soul-searching journey. During his off-seasons, he began attending theology classes. After finishing his NFL career with the Detroit Lions during the 1981-1982 season, Ehrmann graduated from the Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, specializing in urban ministry. He became an ordained minister in 1985. He helped establish a Ronald McDonald House, a place where the families of seriously ill children can stay at little to no cost, in Baltimore dedicated to his brother's memory.

"Through all these experiences, I began to wonder what society tells us about who men and women should be," Ehrmann said. He believes boys are raised under three dangerous societal constructs: athletic ability, including power and aggression, sexual conquest and economic success.

"Society awards boys who can excel on the playground," Ehrmann said. "Who are our boys' role models? Sports stars." These sports stars, he continued, live essentially *carte blanche*, with seemingly endless access to wealth, fame and women. Underneath the allure, Ehrmann said, "these constructs are lies. They're not going to make you a better person. They're not going to help you live a better life."

As part of building strong relationships with one another, Ehrmann said, "everyone needs to commit to something, to a cause, to something greater than him or herself." Ehrmann and his wife, Paula, a licensed counselor with more than 20 years of psychotherapeutic experience, are the founders of Building Men and Women for Others. The organization's goal is to invoke "individual and societal change," according to its mission statement, by empowering men and women to realize their strength lies within their own humanity, not outside of it.

Ehrmann often talks about "EDD," "Empathy Deficit Disorder," based on society's emphasis on the individual at the expense of all else. "Women are taught to strive for perfection to the extent they are battling eating disorders, mutilating themselves and suffering from low self esteem," Ehrmann said. "Their perfection is based on what they look like, not who they are." Similarly, he said, men are raised to believe their achievement lies almost exclusively in their physical strength and earning power.

While Ehrmann believes sports are a useful way to build respect, discipline and the value of working together as a team, he warns players about falling for the more superficial aspects of sports culture. As a high school football coach and NFL consultant, Ehrmann said he often meets with players to talk to them about how they relate to women and what their values really are. "When I talk to my players about taking girls out for the homecoming dance, I remind them they're taking out someone's cherished daughter or sister," Ehrmann said.

At the end of his lecture, several New Canaan parents expressed concern over a perceived lack of respect adolescent boys show toward girls. Recent studies show a rise in domestic violence and abuse, especially through technology. Ehrmann said the age-old construct of power and aggression underscores a lot of the problems.

"One of the reasons [Ehrmann] is such a compelling speaker is because of his credibility," said DeDe Bartlett of New Canaan's Domestic Violence Partnership, a group that helped sponsor Ehrmann's visit. "He's a man's man. He's been there."

Many students who saw Ehrmann speak said he spoke the truth. "Kids are growing up faster than ever," said New Canaan High School junior Ali Jansen. "There's a big difference from when I was in eighth grade to what it's like now."

New Canaan Grace Community Church Youth Pastor Jake Kircher said it was vital to keep a dialogue open. "There are a lot of subliminal messages and it's important to separate what's [real] and what isn't," he said.

Ehrmann's visit last week was his second to New Canaan. He first came two years ago. Event organizers said they would love to have him again. "His message is more timely than ever," New Canaan Youth Services Director Tony Phillips said.

To learn more about Joe Ehrmann, visit <http://www.buildingmenandwomen.org>.