

The real dirt on weed, booze ...

Actor uses humor, personal experience to tell students about drugs, alcohol

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BURRILLVILLE -- Pulling on a gray jacket and a gray snowflake-patterned wool hat, actor John Morello tells middle and high school students that he's here to tell them about dirt.

High on weed, his character Jason tells students that marijuana's just a plant that grows in the dirt. Then he gets them laughing as he wonders aloud what happened to a stash of weed that was confiscated by authorities and taken to Washington, D.C.

"Cheney, want a hit?" he asks. "It makes you see weapons of mass destruction."

The students were hooked, watching Morello change from the stoner character to several students competing in a poetry contest to an old man who talks of his war experiences and near the end, after several others, to a teenager who lands in rehab.

That teen is the same David Grundy character who stepped in front of the lights during the poetry contest to read his work, "Dirt," which he says he wrote after a weekend of Ecstasy use.

"I am dirt; I come from it," he begins. "I feel like it; I walk on it."

Morello gave several performances in Burrillville last week.

Near the end of the show, David's grandfather, a World War II veteran, laments that his grandson is having "a hard time" in the hospital. The Burrillville High School students were silent.

"If I could talk him out of it, I would," the grandfather says quietly, recounting his recent telephone conversation with the boy he taught to swing a baseball. "I said, 'David, your life is very important to me. Don't waste it. And that's what I say to you kids before I go.'"

No longer were the Burrillville teens laughing at the exploits of a drug addict with a sense of humor or sighing along with characters as they experience life's troubles. Soon, the grandfather turns and shuffles off the stage.

David, the addict, steps back on stage. As he reads another poem -- "Connected," which again talks about him being dirt -- he props up photos of people whom he doesn't explain to his audience.

Woven through the poem is the recurring line, "I am connected to the tree of knowledge in the dirt that connects to hell itself."

Morello's character walks to the back of the stage as the lights come up in the auditorium. Characters aside, Morello himself addressed his audience.

The pictures were of people who have died of heroin overdoses, pulled off a Web site. Morello doesn't know them.

What he does know is the pain of loss.

His older brother was killed in a drunken-driving accident, he told the students. He and his other brother coped by continuing to party. That brother -- the one who had the upper bunk in their room growing up and who played whiffle ball out back with Morello -- became a heroin addict.

With Morello's help, that brother got into rehab and was clean for two years. But he spent the worst \$15 of his life last winter and died of a heroin overdose last Jan. 30, Morello said.



Journal photo / Mary Murphy
John Morello performs his one-man show "I Am Dirt." Here, he is David who claims he's hooked on Ecstasy and booze.



Journal photo / Mary Murphy
Here, he plays Melissa who says she drinks "socially" but in the morning she wakes up and doesn't know what happened the night before.

There are consequences to your actions, Morello told the students at a middle school and two high school performances.

"It will make me think before I make choices," junior Courtney Ellis said.

Standing with Ellis after the show, junior Ashley Hopkins said Morello did an excellent job of approaching his audience and not preaching.

"It makes me cry," she said, turning away to wipe her eyes. " ... It makes me feel bad knowing people go through this."

Hopkins said there's not very much education on drug and alcohol abuse in the schools, but she doesn't know if it would help if it were taught.

She hopes Morello's show helps, she said.

"Everyone was listening, and that was good," she said.

Morello came to Burrillville because members of the high school's Students Against Drunk Driving group worked to bring him to town after seeing him at a summer conference sponsored by Mothers Against Drunk Driving. The Burrillville Organization for Substance Abuse Prevention, BOSAP, sponsored the assemblies.

The SADD students who brought Morello to Burrillville liked his show because he doesn't preach -- and he got his point across through humor and relating to the students' lives.

"I liked it because everyone laughed," said sophomore Kayleigh Petipas-Haggerty, one of those students who brought Morello to the schools. "It was really funny, and he didn't try to lecture us -- because we don't like to listen to people telling us what to do."

Sophomore Fallon Guertin, another student in SADD who saw Morello last summer, heard students saying Morello's "I am Dirt" show was the best assembly they've ever seen.



Journal photo / Mary Murphy

After the middle school show, three seventh-grade boys said they think some of their peers might use pot and some might drink -- "probably more drinking than drugs," John Greenwood said.

But he and the two boys sitting near him, Tyler Dunham and Daniel Ketcham, said they don't do that stuff.

"No, definitely not," Dunham said. "Because it's bad for you."

He has learned that from his dad, Dunham said.

Ketcham, too, demonstrated that his age group hears their parents' messages. He has heard the same advice from his parents, he said.

"They say just that it's really stupid, just not to do it," he said about drinking and drug use.

Greenwood said he learned something from the performance: "That it's really important for you not to get hooked on anything."

Back at the high school's SADD meeting later in the week, sophomore Alisha Petipas-Haggerty said there's probably more drug abuse than alcohol abuse at the high school.

But Janet McLinden, the school's substance abuse prevention specialist, said students' perceptions are inflated about the amount of drug or alcohol use among their peers because those students who abuse the substances tend to be rather visible.

McLinden said drug and alcohol use in Burrillville schools is no different from in other schools.

"We have always mirrored state numbers, and state numbers mirror national numbers," she said.

Another effort the school makes to advocate against drug and alcohol abuse is the upcoming preprom dinner at the high school. Sponsored by SADD on March 30, the dinner for teens and their parents brings a new speaker each year. This year's speaker will tell her personal story of the effects of drinking and driving on her life.

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