

Singer's story serves as warning against eating disorders

By RACHEL CANELLI

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At 11 years old, Shannon Cutts had anorexia but didn't know it. After being sexually abused by a male teenage neighbor and witnessing her family deal with her brother's birth defect deformity, Cutts struggled with her own self image.

A middle school girl who was supposed to be her friend told Cutts that she'd never be popular or have any friends because she was too fat.

So she stopped eating, to fit in with her family and classmates. Cutts' mother begged her to stop losing weight, but she couldn't. It was as though something had grabbed a hold of her and wouldn't let go.

By age 18, Cutts was bulimic. A year later, she was contemplating suicide. In her late 20s, she developed an anxiety disorder. At 31, she was date-raped.

But that's when she discovered the key to life. For her, it was music. "I realized I had something worth living for," said Cutts, 36, a speaker and singer who shared her story Monday afternoon with students at Bucks County Community College. "I'd rather die trying to heal than die knowing I could have beaten the monster within me."

To help her deal with the pain, Cutts wrote songs, or what she called "musical journaling," which she performed at the college's Newtown Township campus. Her talk entitled "Beauty Undressed" was presented to mark National Eating Disorders Awareness Week.

Cutts believes eating disorders are an epidemic, a result of biology and culture. "It's a disease of the mind," said Cutts, who leads a recovery group for women with eating disorders.

Commercials and magazine advertisements only encourage 11- to 17-year-old girls to want to be thinner and boys to want to look like weightlifters, Cutts said.

It's one of the reasons why 21-year-old Helen Kruglik put herself on a strict diet last year — causing her kidneys to fail — just so she could fit into a dress for her sister's wedding. "It's like it's better to be skinny than obese," said Kruglik, who is studying speech therapy at BCCC.

But Cutts said society needs to change. She encouraged students to look out for friends who might be experiencing symptoms of an eating disorder, including mood changes, weight fluctuations, withdrawal, insomnia and a loss of interest. "You just have to regain control over your own mind. With the human spirit, the will to live and drive to survive, you can make it through almost anything," she said.

Jennifer Warg, 23, said she was surprised by the messages that ads can send and the effect they might have on people. "Anybody can find their key to life on a daily basis, no matter their problem," Warg said.

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