

DECEMBER 5, 1997

Convict's school speech sparks anger, questions

By JULIE DUPUIS
News Banner Reporter

Imagine it's your daughter who drowned because the drunk driver who killed her was more concerned about losing his career and low insurance rates than helping her out of his car.

Imagine that same man, now serving the maximum sentence of 15 years because the judge found his actions and attitudes to be so

heinous, bamboozles children at a school lecture into writing letters to the parole board on his behalf after telling them through tears that he had killed a "dear friend" and was appealing his case.

William Haensel was enraged when he heard that the drunk doctor who had killed his daughter seemed to be appealing his case to the students of Mandeville Junior

See SPEECH 3-A

Speech

Continued from page 1-A

High School in a series of lectures on drug and alcohol abuse during Red Ribbon Week.

"The school system was the victim here," Haensel said. "They can't have that happen. These children are impressionable."

Indeed, children and even teachers were moved by Dr. Christopher Nabors' speeches. The young dentist offered practically no details about the accident, which occurred when he drove himself and Michele Haensel into Bayou St. John in New Orleans on Feb. 17, 1995. Nabors, now an inmate at the Washington Correctional Institute in Angie, La., offered Haensel no help in getting her out of his sports car's unconventional seatbelt and instead climbed out over her through the car's moon roof. He didn't even acknowledge there was someone else in the car until he got to Charity Hospital, where witnesses testified that Nabors had said, "I didn't know the bitch's name. I just picked her up in a bar."

But Nabors' told none of that to students, leaving out almost all the details of the

accident. Instead, his "Bambi eyes" and talk of how he had killed his "dear friend" compelled Drew Falconer, 13, a student at Mandeville Junior High, to feel sorry for him.

"I thought, 'I hope he gets his license back. He doesn't deserve to be in jail,'" Falconer recalled. "When I read the other side of the story I felt really mad at him."

Teachers circulated old newspaper clippings about Nabors' trial to all the students shortly after Nabors' speeches to make sure they had "both sides of the story." Falconer was not the only student swayed by Nabors' charismatic lecture. Katy Clarke, 12, said she "used to feel bad for him."

"He made you feel sorry for him," Clarke said. "Once our reading teachers read it (the newspaper article) to us, it completely told the other side of the story."

The students said Nabors didn't ask his audience to write letters for him, but some decided to anyway after he announced he was appealing his case. It made them think he was innocent.

"He gave that drift," Falconer said. "He kind of went around the issue."

William Haensel said the fact that Nabors is appealing his sentence should have kept him from being a school

speaker. "An appeal is a right, and that's fine. But it's a statement that you haven't accepted responsibility," he said. "He created a misconception."

The St. Tammany Parish School System has been using this program of having inmates come speak in schools for years with great success, said Richard Sylvest, principal of Mandeville Junior High. In fact, no one has questioned the value or importance of this program.

"We knew nothing of the history of this man," Sylvest said. "Our intended value was to show the pitfalls of alcohol abuse." The schools don't have any idea of who is coming to speak until the day of the event for security purposes.

Warden Ed Day of the Washington Correctional Institute said they chose to send Nabors because they thought students could relate to the young doctor. "He's very articulate, and with the incident he'd been through, we thought he would be a good candidate," Day said.

Day said in the future they might send notice to the sheriff or district attorney of who will be sent to the schools to make sure the parish doesn't have a problem with the chosen inmate. But he said ruling out every inmate who is

appealing their case or sentence is not a viable option.

"Inmates appeal their cases all the time; that's their right," he said. "That doesn't affect our decision."

Sheriff Jack Strain sent a letter to Day requesting that Nabors not be sent back to any schools in St. Tammany Parish. He wrote, "While I'm an advocate of prisoners talking to students about the perils of crime life, I'm afraid Mr. Nabors was using his opportunity to put down on the Justice system and to drum up support for his cause."

Strain's request may be unnecessary. Day said Nabors will not be sent to speak again in any more school programs at all.

"This program is intended for the children," Day said. "It is not intended to offend anybody."

Haensel said other options include getting speakers form victims' groups, such as Mothers Against Drunk Driving. But he said he understands there is a powerful impact on the children when they hear a convicted criminal speak.

"Other than the victim, the perpetrator is someone who is good to talk," Haensel said. But, he said, "the Department of Corrections needs to handle this differently. It's too important."