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## Determined crusader

By PAULA ANN MITCHELL , Correspondent

Carlie Brucia's story horrified the nation. On Feb. 1, 2004, the 11-year-old girl from Sarasota, Fla., was on her way home from a friend's slumber party. She decided to take a shortcut home and chose to walk behind a car wash along the way.

At that moment, Carlie became vulnerable. Someone was watching her. He approached the girl, grabbed her arm and led her away.

Tragically, Carlie's body was found five days later in a church parking lot not far from the car wash. She had been sexually molested and murdered.

A surveillance camera at the car wash captured the abduction on tape, and the national media repeatedly showed it in living rooms nationwide. Florida authorities arrested Joseph P. Smith, a mechanic with a long criminal record, and charged him in the girl's kidnapping and murder. His trial on the charges, which could bring the death penalty, is scheduled to begin in November.

In the mid-Hudson Valley, two men were equally infuriated by what they saw. One of them was Dominick C. Magistro, a martial artist from Marlboro. The other was Magistro's longtime friend and fellow martial artist, Keith Lipsey, who decided it was time to take action.

On April 14, 2004, Lipsey started a children's safety project named Carlie's Crusade, with the blessing of the girl's family. Its goal was to teach youngsters how to avoid becoming victims of abduction.

Magistro read about his friend's efforts. He wanted to get involved.

A short time later, the two men met and brainstormed about ways they could make the project both far-reaching and unforgettable. That's when Magistro, an engineer technician at IBM, discovered he could be useful.

"I became the researcher," said Magistro, the 52-year-old father of two grown children and grandfather of two. "I went to Web sites and probably had more than 3,000 papers on the subject. The idea really was to teach both the parents and the children to know what signs to watch out for."

The result has not only been an educational experience for children, but an equally profound one for parents.

"This is a little bit different because it's more of a self-awareness class for children and parents," said Magistro, an expert kick boxer and black belt in Tae Kwon Do and Kempo karate. "I give parents the cold, hard statistics (on abduction) and what Web sites they can go to. My driving force is to tell them that the laws have to be changed to protect our kids."

The statistics Magistro uses are chilling. According to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, one in five girls and one in 10 boys are sexually exploited before they reach adulthood, yet less than 35 percent of sexual assaults on children are reported to authorities.

The latest National Alert Registry survey shows there are more than 374,270 registered sex offenders in the United States. Further data from a 1997 study by the Washington State Attorney General's Office have indicated that about 100 children are murdered by an abductor each year. In these cases, 74 percent are killed within three hours of their abduction.

Those numbers give Magistro his fire, an all-consuming passion to make parents aware of the danger present, even in Hudson Valley communities.

"You really have to be educated," he said. "These pedophiles will try to gain your confidence. They try to groom your children, and they even groom you. They try to get close to you, where you'd eventually allow them to take your child on an overnight trip.

"To think this stuff doesn't happen really is a huge mistake," he added.

Other factors feed his relentless drive to raise awareness.

"In 2006, more than 3,000 Level One and Level Two sex offenders are going to be coming off the sexual offenders' registry in our area alone," Magistro said. "They're not known by the general public - only to police officers. When they drop off, we're not going to know where they are, even the police officers won't know. It's a scary thing."

It has kept him and his Carlie's Crusade colleagues busy in the valley. Magistro, along with Lipsey, a Washingtonville police officer, and five other Hudson Valley law enforcement officers routinely hold their age-appropriate seminars throughout Dutchess and Orange counties. On July 12, the team will be visiting the Girl Scouts of Ulster County, where they will be educating young, college-bound women.

Their audiences are primarily scouting groups, elementary school children and youngsters in recreational programs like YWCAs, where they teach escape and counter tactics - the self-defense component of their project. Magistro shares his expertise, including Internet safety tips, with parents in a side room.

Andrea Brucia, Carlie's paternal grandmother, said Magistro is more than devoted to the cause.

"Dominick's enthusiasm and passion for educating children and their parents is boundless," she said recently from her Long Island home. "His energy is contagious. Dominick's sincerity is so obvious. His mission is to save lives - pure and simple. His energy is the spark of Carlie's Crusade."

Though she still grieves the loss of her granddaughter, Brucia said the project has strengthened her. "When I became involved with Carlie's Crusade, it put a silver lining on the darkest cloud imaginable," she said. "It helped me to help other people save children's lives."

"Why do I endorse Carlie's Crusade? If it reaches just one child and saves just one life, it is worth it," Brucia added. "Every child is precious, every life is precious."

Others are similarly impressed. Trish Fisher, the director of girlí programs at the Girl Scouts of Dutchess County, said she is glad to have hooked up with Magistro and Lipsey.

"They've delivered the workshop to over 500 girls, and the girls have just raved about it," she said. "The part they like the most is when they're taught self-defense, but they also learn how to check out their environment and how to not put themselves in unsafe situations. Dominick and his group are just great."

Because most of Carlie's Crusade team members are police officers, much of what they do is geared toward prevention. The team often brings fingerprinting and ID kits for the parents who attend their

seminars.

So far, 1,100 Hudson Valley children have learned awareness and self-defense tactics through Carlie's Crusade.

Children at the Gayhead Elementary School in Fishkill are one such group.

"This program certainly supports our commitment to student safety," said Anne Bogen, the assistant principal. "But, also as important as the summer approaches and children go to summer camp or on vacation, (is that) it gives the children and their parents strategies to keep safe in new situations."

Magistro said he believes it's working. Already, the project has caught the notice of some larger, even national groups, but Magistro said he's content to keep it a local effort for now.

"In my opinion, if it takes off too fast, it's not going to save the children," he said. "I had promised Andrea Brucia a while back that I would do everything I could to save our children in Carlie's name. We plan on keeping that promise.

"Right now, we're in the trenches," Magistro added. "We'd like to see it grow in the mid-Hudson Valley. We'd like to see it in every PTA and PTO, in every Girl Scout group, in every library in the Hudson Valley."