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Students celebrate Red Ribbon Week

By Pat Kumpan

It's Red Ribbon Week, an annual reminder that kids and adults should pledge to be drug-free, a message that gets real personal when Enrique Camarena Jr. delivers it.

These days, Camarena works as a prosecutor for the district attorney, focused on domestic violence and child abuse cases in San Diego, but he is every bit his father's son.

When he visits schools — kids as young as kindergartners up to high school-aged students — have little idea that his father, Enrique "Kiki" Camarena, is the main reason that people wear red ribbons.

This year, Red Ribbon Week is from Oct. 23 through Oct. 31.

Amid a sea of seventh- and eighth-graders on Oct. 20 at Mesa Verde Middle School in Rancho Penasquitos, Camarena, gave youngsters an inside glimpse of what those red ribbons signify to him.

His father was a special agent with the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration from 1974 to 1985, a man who clung to the mantra that one person could indeed make a difference in the lives of others.

After four years of working undercover in Guadalajara, Mexico, on the trail of drug traffickers, his father's true identity leaked out. He was kidnapped and brutally tortured on Feb. 7, 1985 by members of a drug cartel.

Eventually, about a month after Camarena's death, his body was returned to his wife, Mika, and their three sons, Enrique, Daniel and Eric in the United States.

Within weeks, Congressman Duncan Hunter and others launched Camarena Clubs in the Imperial Valley, which Camarena considered home. Those members agreed to pay tribute to Camarena and other DEA agents who work relentlessly to identify and ultimately arrest drug dealers.

Club members pledged to live drug-free lifestyles, a concept that



Enrique Camarena Jr. speaks about the importance of Red Ribbon Week to seventh- and eighth-graders at Mesa Verde Middle School during an Oct. 20 assembly.

Staff photo by Steve Spangler

became the core for the Red Ribbon Week campaign, which quickly spread to other communities.

"During school assemblies, kids always ask me the tough questions," Enrique Jr. said. "What was the torture like?"

His talk gets tailored to the age group, often complete with a mini-video about his dad, but nothing graphic, he said.

"When I start to talk about what happened to my dad, it gets real quiet," he said. "You can hear a pin drop — kids are listening."

Faces register the sadness and Camarena knows instinctively that he has reached his audience with an undeniable impact.

"Hopefully, they step into my shoes and ask themselves 'How would I feel if it happened to my dad?'" Camarena said.

Where his father left off, Enrique

Jr. continues his dad's legacy: tell children and others about the dangers of drugs and alcohol abuse.

"I tell them, someone you know will offer you drugs," Camarena said. "You have to be ready to say 'no' and if you have to disappoint that friend, it's OK."

He simplifies what he tells kindergartners by asking them to repeat, "I promise never to do drugs."

Typically such youngsters will innocently inquire, "What's a drug?"

Without going into much detail, parents can let little ones know they should not consume anything without their parent's permission.

Camarena once thought he would follow in his dad's footsteps as a DEA agent.

"I remember telling my dad 'I want to be an agent just like you,' but his answer was always the same, 'No, no, it's too dangerous.'"

When his dad was working undercover in Mexico, he recalls people asking where he worked.

"I would tell them 'Oh, he's at the consulate,'" Camarena said. "We couldn't say what he really did."

Camarena Jr. has two sons, one a 6-year-old and the other an 8-year-old, and they know what happened to their grandfather.

"One day, they too will tell the story to others," he said.

These days, scarlet ribbons have become much more than a tribute to Kiki Camarena. They signal the commitment that those wearing them want to be both drug-, alcohol- and violence-free.

Now, 21 years after the inception of Red Ribbon Week, the red ribbons speak for themselves.

In the Poway Unified School District, more than 31,000 ribbons were distributed earlier this week.