

**Shooting for awareness**

## **Basketball program discusses epilepsy**

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BY BOB VOSSELLER  
STAFF WRITER

LACEY — Harlem Wizard Mike Simmel brought some of his basketball magic to the courts of all six of the school district's schools on Thursday. His demonstration of skill was a preview of what he and his fellow teammates will be doing during Friday's benefit game at the Lacey High School.

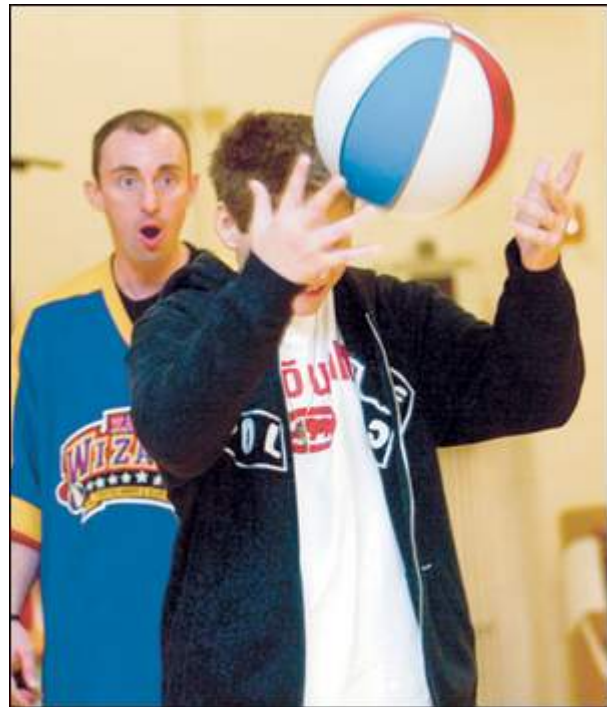
Simmel spoke to students about his time with the Harlem Wizards, a professional basketball team, and his own halftime shows that he's been presenting since 2001. His main topic of conversation however, was epilepsy, a condition he has had since he was a child. He wanted to dispel the myths of epilepsy and to bring awareness of the neurological condition.

Friday's benefit game is for the Epilepsy Foundation. Simmel serves as the national spokesman of the foundation, and has performed on "It's Showtime at The Apollo," at the NBA's "Rhythm n' Rims" festival and at both NBA and college Halftime Shows.

Throughout the past 8 years, Mike Simmel has lectured and performed at more than 350 basketball camps. He speaks annually about epilepsy awareness and performs at the Epilepsy Foundation of America's Kids Speak Up and U.S. Public Policy Institute in Washington, D.C.

It was there that he met Lacey residents Cathy Rapsas and her daughter Mary, 4, who also suffers from epilepsy. Cathy Rapsas helped develop the benefit and reached out to the school district and the community. The Harlem Wizards will be playing against a team formed from the community possibly including members of the Township Committee and Board of Education.

Rapsas said her daughter "kept asking him to carry her dolly as we went up the stairs to speak to federal legislators about funding for research."



"This is the first time a fundraiser like this has come to the school district," Rapsas said.

Simmel has been selected as the Keynote Speaker for several Epilepsy Foundation affiliated events along the East Coast, and was the Honorary Chairman of the 2006 Walk For a Brighter Tomorrow in conjunction with the Family Resource Network of New Jersey.

"I would fall down and shake when I was first diagnosed," Simmel told his audience at the Cedar Creek Elementary School gymnasium. Simmel told the students that he could not "do a lot of things that other kids my age could do. After I was diagnosed and got medication for it it wasn't as bad and then later it seemed to go away for awhile."

"Just because you have an illness doesn't mean you can't reach your dream and do what you want to do. You just have to work hard at it," Simmel said. "There are a lot of myths associated with epilepsy and this appearance and the game on Friday is designed to bring awareness of epilepsy."

Epilepsy is a neurological condition that from time to time produces brief disturbances in the electrical functions of the brain. Normal brain function is made possible by millions of tiny electrical charges passing between nerve cells in the brain and to all parts of the body. When someone has epilepsy, this pattern may be interrupted by intermittent bursts of electrical energy that are much more intense than usual. They may affect a person's consciousness, bodily movements or sensations for a short time.

These physical changes are called epileptic seizures. That is why epilepsy is sometimes called a seizure disorder. The unusual bursts of energy may occur in just one area of the brain (partial seizures), or may affect nerve cells throughout the brain (generalized seizures). Normal brain function cannot return until the electrical bursts subside. Conditions in the brain that produce these episodes may have been present since birth, or they may develop later in life due to injury, infections, structural abnormalities in the brain, exposure to toxic agents, or for reasons that are still not well understood. Many illnesses or severe injuries can affect the brain enough to produce a single seizure. When seizures continue to occur for unknown reasons or because of an underlying problem that cannot be corrected, the condition is known as epilepsy. Epilepsy affects people of all ages, all nations, and all races.

The cost of admission for the event is \$8 for seniors and students while general admission is \$10. Those age 5 and younger are admitted free. For information, call (800) 372-6510.