

Ho-Ho-Kus

Basketball 'Wizard' delivers positive message at ECLC

by Jennifer Crusco

Although he developed epilepsy at age two, "Mighty Mike" Simmel of the Harlem Wizards entertainment basketball team was determined not to let any adversity stand between him and his dreams. Last week, Simmel brought his positive message to the students at the ECLC School in Ho-Ho-Kus courtesy of the Ho-Ho-Kus Municipal Alliance.

Simmel addressed two groups of special needs students, urging them to never let a disability of any type keep them from achieving their goals. He also stressed the importance of staying away from drugs and alcohol and to continue to make smart decisions throughout their lives.

"It was a wonderful program," Ho-Ho-Kus Police Chief Gregory Kallenberg said of Simmel's address. "Each year we bring in someone challenged to challenge them (the students), and the speakers are always well received."

Police Officer Sean Leonard, who is the coordinator for the Ho-Ho-Kus Municipal Alliance, arranged for Simmel's visit. Funding was provided through the Bergen County Municipal Alliance.

After his talk, Simmel taught the approximately 100 students from a variety of grade levels different tricks and skills with a basketball. He also held a question and answer session and signed autographed photos of himself in his Harlem Wizards uniform.

Simmel moved to New Jersey from California as a youth. As a boy, he was unable to hop on one leg or skip due to his epilepsy. When he was six years old, he was placed in a special education gym class. At seven, Simmel received a basketball from his father, who hoped the activity would help the boy develop his motor skills. Simmel was a natural, and he became a point guard and later captain at Don Bosco Prep in Ramsey. He also became a starter and assist leader at the Hun School in Princeton.

As a high school student, he began having grand mal seizures, which continued through his college career. Simmel also faced bipolar disorder, but he persevered, eventually receiving his degree in liberal studies from SUNY Purchase, where he was a two-year captain of the basketball team, and became a leader in assists and steals.

Simmel later became a part time ball boy for the New York Knicks and worked at their home games at Madison Square Garden.

Now seizure free, Simmel has spent the last seven years with the Harlem Wizards. He has been featured on several radio and television programs, including a live performance on NBC's "Showtime at the Apollo." He now performs one-man half-time shows and is a national spokesman for epilepsy awareness.

He has also established a summer camp for children with special needs.



Harlem Wizards star Mike Simmel (center) is flanked at left by Ho-Ho-Kus Police Chief Gregory Kallenberg and Patrolman Sean Leonard and at right by ECLC School Principal Vicki Lindorff and physical education teacher Zara Dovlatyan.