

Pennsbury students get surprise visit from filmmakers

By **ANTHONY DIMATTIA**
STAFF WRITER

Aspiring writer Andrew Dugan sat with his eyes glued to the front of the Pennsbury High School East auditorium, taking in all he could from two Hollywood filmmakers.

The junior from Lower Makefield was among roughly 50 students who stayed after school Wednesday for a surprise visit from husband and wife filmmaking duo Michael and Janeen Damian, whose movie “High Strung” is scheduled to hit theaters April 8.

As part of a U.S. promotional tour, the veteran filmmakers gave students from the school’s media production, dance team, drama club and English department a crash course on how movies go from concept to screen.

“I’ve learned that there are so many types of different art forms



BILL FRASER / PHOTOJOURNALIST
Students meet filmmakers and get a sneak peek at the upcoming movie “High Strung” at Pennsbury High School on Wednesday.

in the world of entertainment and they all flow together so beautifully,” Dugan said. “For me personally as a writer, it’s very interesting to see singing and dancing can relate to that and all the other art forms.”

Michael Damien, the film’s director, urged students to use

social media as a way to break into the business. “Perseverance will pay if you stay true to yourself and remain a good person while you’re fighting to get to the top,” he said. “We had a couple breaks along the way, but it wasn’t easy (because) we didn’t have a connection to the business. You find ways to find opportunity.”

Students also got a sneak peek of parts of the movie and a performance from singer Sofi Tyler, whose song will be featured in the film.

English teacher Mary Ann Daley, who helped schedule the event, said she was glad to see students learn a valuable lesson from professionals in the entertainment business.

“I think they really took to heart what it takes ... to go to concept, to screenplay, to the big screen,” she said. “I loved the question about writer’s block, so

many kids that I have that struggle with that, it’s nice to hear (filmmakers) say it’s not a thing and to keep going and pushing through.”

The hardest part of making the film, Michael Damian said, was protecting their vision for the film.

“When we passed the script to studios and got pretty much a pass from everybody because they said it was not edgy enough,” he said. “That’s when we had to decide to make the movie our way or go against everything we felt was right and succumb to the demands.”

Janeen Damian, the film’s co-screen writer, encouraged students to not chase the “fad of the day” while trying to make it in Hollywood.

“You just have to persevere and be true to your voice,” Janeen Damian said.

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Bucks homeless groups get \$500K in grants

By **JAMES BOYLE**
STAFF WRITER

More than \$500,000 in renewed federal grants has been awarded to a network of Bucks County organizations working to turn the tide of local homelessness.

Led by the county’s Department of Housing and Community Development, the network uses a hotline and evaluation system to determine the best ways to serve the at-risk community. It’s the kind of operation that can’t survive without a steady stream of funding.

“We are a coalition of government agencies and nonprofits that address homelessness in Bucks County,” said Marti Woglom, executive director of housing and community development. “The grant application goes through us, and the money goes directly to the organizations.”

Seven groups will receive a portion of an \$82.6 million grant awarded to 432 local homeless housing and service programs in Pennsylvania by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. The programs are part of the Continuum of Care program funded

through the HEARTH Act, which provides funding for programs working to transition families from homelessness to housing.

More than 5,200 households were screened in 2015 through the Bucks County Housing Link hotline, the first point of contact for families or individuals facing the possibility of losing their homes. From there, each are evaluated to determine what resources would be most useful, such as an emergency shelter or transitional housing at organizations like the Keystone Opportunity Council.

“We are based in Souderton, but we have a property in Sellersville with four apartment units,” said Executive Director Rich Aichele. “There’s three, two-bedroom units and one three-bedroom unit. They are not available for single people or couples without children.”

Once it is found that a family is a good candidate to stay in the transitional housing, case workers begin determining what kind of support to provide. Many who are accepted into the two-year program are single mothers who need child care, said Aichele, while others

may need help either finding a job or keeping a job.

“The homes are made available for the most vulnerable families,” said Aichele. “They are not in a position to find their own apartment or employment. The case managers meet with them once a week or every two weeks, giving them that extra layer of support.”

Having direct access to grant funding will be a bit of a change of pace for Pennsylvania nonprofit organizations that struggle to keep doors open during the budget impasse in Harrisburg. The Keystone Opportunity Council, for example, had to take out a line of credit to keep its educational program open from July 1 to Feb. 8, when it received money freed by Gov. Tom Wolf’s signing of a partial budget at the end of 2015.

“It is supposed to be funded through the Department of Education,” said Aichele. “We didn’t want to close it up, because unsuccessful programs won’t get funding the following year.”

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