

# Teen crash victims

The musical tribute at Smithtown High School West May 3 in honor of the two seniors who died in a car crash October 31, 2007 was intended to ensure that students, parents and the Smithtown community remember Daniel Distefano and Michael Western.

More than 700 people attended the event, which featured 25 different performing acts ranging from recording artists to students from both Smithtown high schools. Performances included an array of songs, speeches and video presentations that spoke volumes about Michael and Daniel, and about the community's determination to celebrate their lives in a positive, meaningful way.

"The tribute was so special and meaningful to us. In years to come we will be able to reflect on what the students and Craig Cooper put together and remember what great friends my son has. Words can't adequately express what the outpouring of support from the community meant to the families," said Anita Distefano, Daniel's mother.

"In the beginning stages of this tribute, it was just a dream that the friends of our sons could actually accomplish what they did. In the end, they created a musical version of our sons that all could see, feel and hear once again. For this, we are eternally blessed and grateful," said Janet Western, Michael's mother.

"This is our chance to be there for the Distefano and Western families, because they have been here for us," said Smithtown High School West Principal John Dolan. "This was a bittersweet night, and the kids were the sweetness. I was as moved as anyone by the outpouring of love from this community. Now we have to figure out how to keep this going, to do it again and to keep the music playing and the dream alive."

Craig Cooper, a Smithtown resident and video and event producer, volunteered his time to work with the student committee and the families to bring the ambitious plans to fruition. "None of us could have hoped for a more wonderful evening, on every level," Mr. Cooper said. "The emotions were very high, but the tone of the evening was one of celebration and friendship. We hoped to present a concert that would



**REASON TO SING:** Ralph Claudio received a standing ovation for his performance of an original rap song written in memory of Daniel Distefano during the memorial concert at Smithtown high School West May 3.

reflect the boys' musical tastes, while allowing some latitude for performers to bring unique presentations to the audience. In the end, it was one of the most special events I have ever participated in."

The idea for the concert was developed over the winter, with a growing team of students and parents meeting with Mr. Cooper at different homes to shape what would ultimately become a multimedia tribute to Daniel and Michael.

"I was friends with Dan since elementary school and it really touched me to see how many people care. This event was one of the most touching things that I've ever attended, and I'll remember it forever," said Ilyse Raziano, a Smithtown West student.

The night opened with Mr. Distefano's cousin Dennis Coleman playing "The Star Spangled Banner" the way Jimi Hendrix did decades ago. Performers from both high schools, including the

# honored at special memorial concert

Smithtown West Jazz Choir and a "Stomp," a style drum ensemble from Smithtown East called "Street Beat" drew huge applause.

Both of the victims had been taking guitar lessons, and their teachers each came to offer their own musical tributes. Michael Western's teacher, Themy Kyriazis joined Mr. Coleman and a team of student performers including Sarah Kasman on flute, Brett Groneman and Anthony Pino on vocals, Chris Rodriguez on drums, Andrew Fedder on piano and Michael Kennedy on bass. They performed "Stairway to Heaven," the legendary song by Led Zeppelin.

Not to be out-rocked, Mr. Distefano's instructor Randy Coven also performed. Mr. Coven is a world-class bassist who has recorded on his own and performed with many top-name artists like Brian Setzer and Larry Coryell. He is best known as the bassist for the band Mountain, with Leslie West. Mr. Coven brought guitarist Teddy Rondinelli, who played with the 60's-70's band Vanilla Fudge. They performed Mountain's "Mississippi Queen."

Another powerful moment which again brought the audience to its feet was an original rap song written and performed by Mr. Distefano's friend Ralph Claudio. Mr. Cooper, who served as Master of Ceremonies, cautioned the audience that the song was R-rated. "Ralph asked me before he went on stage if he should omit the



FYT performs during the memorial concert at Smithtown High School West Saturday, May 3.

expletives from his lyrics. I told him absolutely not - those words reflect how you reacted, how you felt, and nothing could express the sadness and the hurt you have experienced more truthfully," Mr. Cooper said.

There were tender moments as well. Mr. Cooper and a group of student musicians provided backup instrumentals while Melissa Becker, Sarah Kasman and Val Mercurio sang Sarah McLachlan's "I Will

Remember You" as the opening song after the audience stood for the national anthem.

Two videos - one for Mr. Western and one for Mr. Distefano, produced by Ralph Claudio, Kevin Brosnan, Mike Kennedy and Brett Groneman ended with lengthy standing ovations.

According to Mr. Cooper, the proceeds from the event will exceed \$20,000—double the original expectations. The funds will be used

to create a landscaped area at High School West, which will be known as "The Rock Garden."

Businesses, families and organizations from throughout the metropolitan area donated more than 70 gifts that were auctioned off before the concert. In addition to more than \$7,000 in ticket sales, more than \$10,000 in cash donations enabled the event team to produce a 28-page

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## Many memories at memorial concert

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program with tribute ads and touching letters from the families, the two high school principals, Cooper and members of the student committee.

The program had full-page ads from companies and trade unions that represented thousands of dollars in donations. Even NexCen Franchise Management, which owned the now-closed Maggie Moos Ice Cream franchises on Long Island, saluted their employee Michael Western with a half-page insertion that read, "Mike, the Maggie Moos and NexCen family misses you."

According to Mr. Cooper, "WBAB pulled out the stops for Mike and Dan. They offered to promote the concert on-air, to do a live broadcast from the event, to invite members of the student committee to come on the air and talk about their friends and the importance of safe driving." They even had Joe Rock, a weekend disc-jockey (and soon-to-be Smithtown resident)

join the concert as a guest emcee. Rock bantered with Cooper and before saying goodnight to the audience, brought his own guitar on stage and performed a song for the audience.

The night lasted much longer than anyone expected. Early on, Mr. Cooper told the audience that the concert would end sometime after 11 p.m. Sometime after midnight, he joked that he wasn't sure which time zone he meant. When the final act took the stage at almost 1 a.m., the estimated 300 people still in attendance were treated to one of the most electrifying performances of the night. John Pagano, a 2007 Smithtown graduate and a nationally-known blues performer led the student musicians in a 10-minute jam session, performing the classic "Feelin' Alright." Mr. Pagano, leader of the band JP Blues, brought his wireless electric guitar into the audience and literally played face-to-face with the guests who stayed until the final note was played.