

# Tuning up to honor deceased classmates

*Smithtown students plan tribute concert for two teens killed in October car crash*

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If there was any question of who Daniel DiStefano and Michael Western were, the montage of pictures said it all: they were young men who loved rock and roll, young men who jammed with their guitars slung over classic T-shirts of hard rock bands from days gone by.

ACDC, Led Zeppelin, Black Sabbath: they wore their shirts in tribute to these bands. Now they too will receive their own tribute, as the students of Smithtown East and West high schools will be organizing a classic rock concert in their honor, a night to eulogize with plaintive guitar solos and driving drum beats two students who died too young, taken in a car accident four months ago on Jericho Turnpike in Smithtown while on a morning break from classes.

“Mike and Dan both loved music,

and their favorite thing in the world was to jam,” said Anthony Pino, a senior at Smithtown East. “For two rock heads, what better way to honor them than a rock concert.”

The concert is slated for May 3, and in addition to the music, it will feature poetry and short films performed by high school students.

The proceeds will go toward a scholarship fund in Western and DiStefano’s names, to be used to help Smithtown students pay for college-level classes that seniors can take while still in high school. Both Western and DiStefano had taken part in the program.

The accident happened on October 31 of last year. Western and DiStefano, both 17, were passengers riding along with student driver Steven Badke, also 17, when he drove into oncoming traffic and struck a minivan.

Western and DiStefano were thrown from the car and died at the scene. John Aruanno, 13, who had been in the minivan, was later pronounced dead at Stony Brook Medical Center.

Craig Cooper of Smithtown, a video and event producer who has volunteered to help organize the event, said the tribute concert is all about moving forward. He is focusing on positives that have emerged in the wake of the tragic event, namely the incredible contributions of a band of teenagers who have come together to memorialize their friends.

“I never expected to see this type of reaction, this type of response,” said Cooper, who did not know the teens



Photos by Kevin Mulryan

Smithtown students gather to plan a May 3 tribute concert in the memory of Daniel DiStefano and Michael Western, who died at 17 in a car crash last year. Craig Cooper, standing, a video and event producer, has donated his time to help organize the event.

events like these, they often lose steam,” Cooper said. “But what has happened this time is it’s grown. Each time we have a meeting there are more and more students there. There is no limit to what they want to do.”

Members of the Aruanno family were invited to join in the memorial effort, Cooper said, but thus far they have opted not to participate.

In addition to the concert, friends of Western and DiStefano are planning on building a rock garden at Smithtown West.

Brett Groneman, 18, said that a rock garden was chosen to pay homage to his friends’ love of music and the outdoors, but many of the students interviewed believed it would also be something more: a place to reflect on what was lost, on the

them than to be sitting in a garden on a sunny afternoon [surrounded by] music, laughter and friends,” Groneman said.

To complete the project, the students are seeking contributions from the community. They have already lined up donations from numerous companies, including The Ketcham Group, a Kings Park materials recycling company that is supplying the boulders.

Still, they are looking for more monetary aid, as the goal is to complete the rock garden without using any of the concert funds, which the students aim to use exclusively for the scholarship.

Those who wish to donate can contact Cooper at Craig Cooper Productions. His email is CooperEvents@aol.com.

“We’re simply asking for communi-

