

Disability didn't end his dreams

Hoops wiz tells story at special-needs school

By **EVONNE COUTROS**

STAFF WRITER

HO-HO-KUS – Students who attend a private special-needs school in the borough netted a few lessons in hoops and goals on Friday from entertainment basketball pro Mike Simmel, who overcame a childhood diagnosis of epilepsy to become a player with the Harlem Wizards.

“Basketball has been my vehicle to success,” Simmel, 31, of Alendale, told students in the gym of the ECLC of New Jersey school campus in Ho-Ho-Kus. “Find something you love to do and ride it out. You don’t know where it is going to take you.”

The 1996 graduate of Don Bosco Preparatory High School in Ramsey was diagnosed with

epilepsy as a child and longed to participate in many of the same activities and gym classes as his friends, but was prohibited. Simmel, who stands 5-foot-9 and is known to Wizards fans as “Mighty Mike,” told students the Internet has changed all that because the public has access to sites and organizations formed to provide information about epilepsy.

“I’ve been seizure-free for three years,” Simmel told the students, advising them to avoid substance abuse and to live a healthy, active life. “You’re going to have setbacks and adversity. Remember that limits don’t define you, you define your limits.”

He advised the students to write down their goals on paper so they may define what they want to be in life. Simmel’s focus

changed early in life, when his father handed him a basketball.

“I dribbled that basketball everywhere” Simmel said.

He would sneak into the gym at Don Bosco to practice off-hours and watched drill tapes until he believed he’d perfected his precision playing – and the trick moves that eventually landed him a job with the Harlem Wizards.

Simmel advised some of the 100 students attending the assembly to strive as best they can for their goals. A national spokesman for Epilepsy Awareness, Simmel was captain of the college basketball team at SUNY Purchase, graduating in 2002 with a degree in liberal studies before joining the Harlem Wizards.

Simmel’s visit to the non-profit ECLC of New Jersey was

through the Bergen County Municipal Alliance and Ho-Ho-Kus Police Officer Sean Leonard, coordinator of the Alliance in the borough. Simmel is a well-known motivational speaker with his own Web site – www.mightymikebasketball.com – who has lectured and performed at more than 450 basketball camps. Simmel is one of 19 players listed on the Harlem Wizards site.

“Here is someone who spoke of having a disability and he was able to overcome this in his life,” said Vicki Lindorff, assistant director of the ECLC of New Jersey. “For our students, it’s important to know what they can do and that someone in real life has overcome their challenges, and they too have that opportunity.”

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Mike Simmel, who was diagnosed with epilepsy as a boy, plays for the Harlem Wizards.