

Teenager plays his most challenging role

Actor helps community face tragedy

By Mike Latona
Staff writer

SHORTSVILLE — When introduced to each other earlier this year, Jonathan Guastafarro and James McNinch discovered that they had something in common: both were slated to portray the lead male, "Danny," in their respective high-school productions of the play *Grease*.

"Jim (McNinch) came back and was all excited. He was saying, 'I met the other Danny,'" recalled Katie Eddinger, a junior at Red Jacket High School. She portrayed "Rizzo" in the play.

Tragically, James never had the opportunity to act out his role for an audience. On the night of March 10, just 15 days before the play was to open, he and two other members of his junior class were killed in an automobile accident.

The three youths had been en route to a Red Jacket girls' basketball state playoff game at the State University of New York College at Geneseo. Also killed were the driver, Joshua Herendeen, and another passenger, Bridget Brown. After sliding on an icy patch, Joshua's car collided with an oncoming vehicle on Routes 5 and 20 in Avon.

In the ensuing days, the student body at this small Ontario County high school stumbled around in shock.

"No one was talking at all. Everyone just had a (blank) look on their face," said Eddinger.

At that point, it didn't seem likely that the play could go on without its lead performer.

And that's when the 17-year-old Guastafarro got into the act.

Guastafarro, a senior at nearby Canandaigua Academy, recalls that he "wanted to help out in any way I could" upon hearing of Red Jacket's predicament.



Canandaigua Academy senior Jonathan Guastafarro (left) sits in the Red Jacket High School Auditorium with Katie Eddinger (middle) and Jody Henry. Guastafarro substituted for the lead role in R-J's production of the musical *Grease* after James McNinch was tragically killed.

S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer

Red Jacket school officials met with Guastafarro about the possibility of his replacing James in the play. Guastafarro, whose *Grease* production at Canandaigua fell one week prior to Red Jacket's scheduled dates of March 25-28, agreed.

Monette Mahoney, the youth-group coordinator at St. Mary's Church, 95 Main St. N., Canandaigua, was not surprised to hear that Guastafarro had consented to fill in for James.

"Jonathan is a very sensitive person," Mahoney said of her senior youth-group member. "A lot of high schoolers wouldn't have done what he did, but I don't know that Jonathan had to think about this too much. It was a natural reaction for him."

Still, Guastafarro carried a fair amount of apprehension

about the delicate position into which he was stepping.

"I didn't want any hard feelings," Guastafarro said. "I don't even know how I did it. I prayed a lot, and had a lot of people praying for me."

His anxiety began to fade on the first day he showed up at Red Jacket for rehearsal with his new troupe.

"People got out of their classrooms and met me. It was nice," he said. "By opening night, I felt confident."

The play turned out to be a big hit, said Jody Henry, a Red Jacket sophomore who played "Sandy."

"We sold out all four shows.

We had a lot of support," said Henry, who, along with Eddinger, is a youth-group member at St. Dominic's Church, 6 Canandaigua St., Shortsville.

The experience has enabled Guastafarro to make many new friends in Shortsville. In fact, he recently went as Eddinger's date to the Red Jacket junior prom, which was dedicated to the three class members who were killed.

Guastafarro's strong Christian values are reflected in the college he has chosen. A National Honor Society member who ranks near the top 10 percent of his class, Guastafarro will attend Houghton

College, a Wesleyan institution located in Allegany County, this coming fall. He plans on majoring in math, science or voice, and he'll also play soccer.

While his future appears to be a busy one, Guastafarro knows that the events of early 1993 will stick with him for a long time to come.

"When you hit such an experience in your life, it changes how you think and feel. It's hard to explain," he remarked. "These were three people in a tight school who died, and I have friends who experienced (the grief). I know what they feel now."

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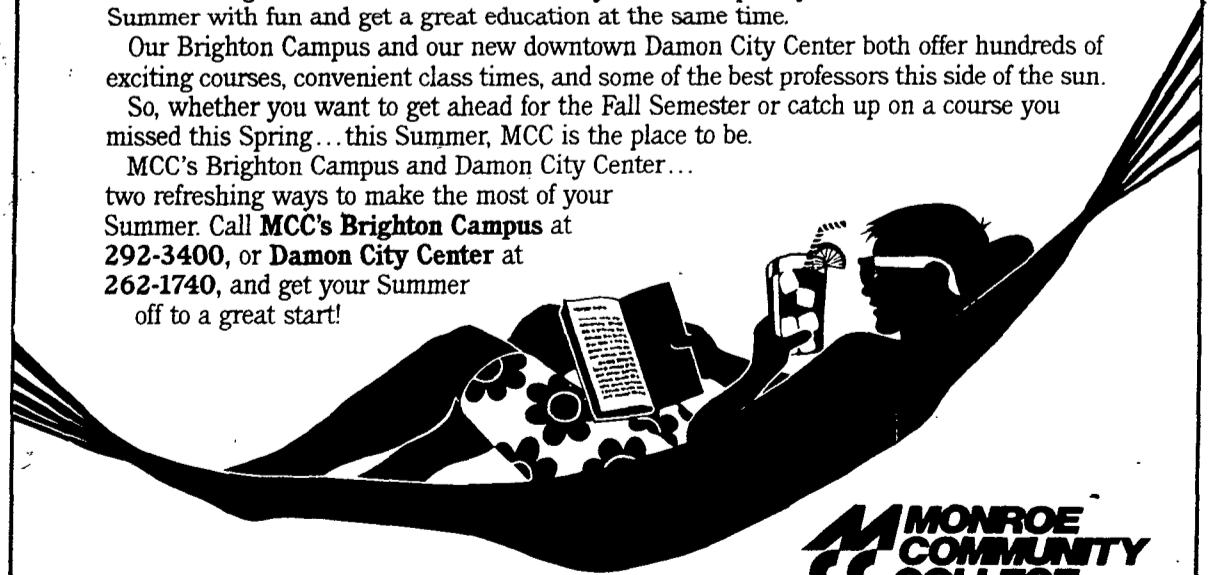
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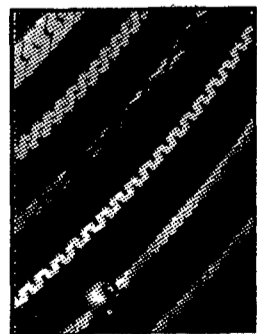
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