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Play chronicles struggle against eating disorders

By James J. Gillis
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NEWPORT — Ellen is a teenage girl with an eating disorder.

She can trace it to age 10, when she dropped a few pounds and her dad stopped calling her “Ellie Belly.”

That triggered excessive workouts and obsessive calorie counting.

When a neighbor tells her she looks “healthy,” Ellen hits the ground and performs pushups. Her parents are encouraged when she starts eating, only to find she’s graduated from anorexia nervosa to bulimia.

Ants invade a storage room where Ellen stashes snacks for binge eating, and the house’s drain pipes often are clogged with her thrown-up food.

Ellen is fictitious — a character portrayed by New York actress Megan Hart. But the circumstances of the play, written by Cathy Plourde and performed throughout the country, rings true with young women and some men.

On Wednesday, Hart brought

Ellen to Salve Regina University before an auditorium full of students.

Hart told Ellen’s story through several characters: Ellen herself, her mother, her best friend and Ms. Negative Thoughts, a character so evil she boasts about people she’s sent to

the grave such as a woman who died from kidney failure and a yo-yo dieter felled by a heart attack.

“It’s not about food,” Ellen says at one point. “But that’s the only thing I can control. My life is

totally out of control.”

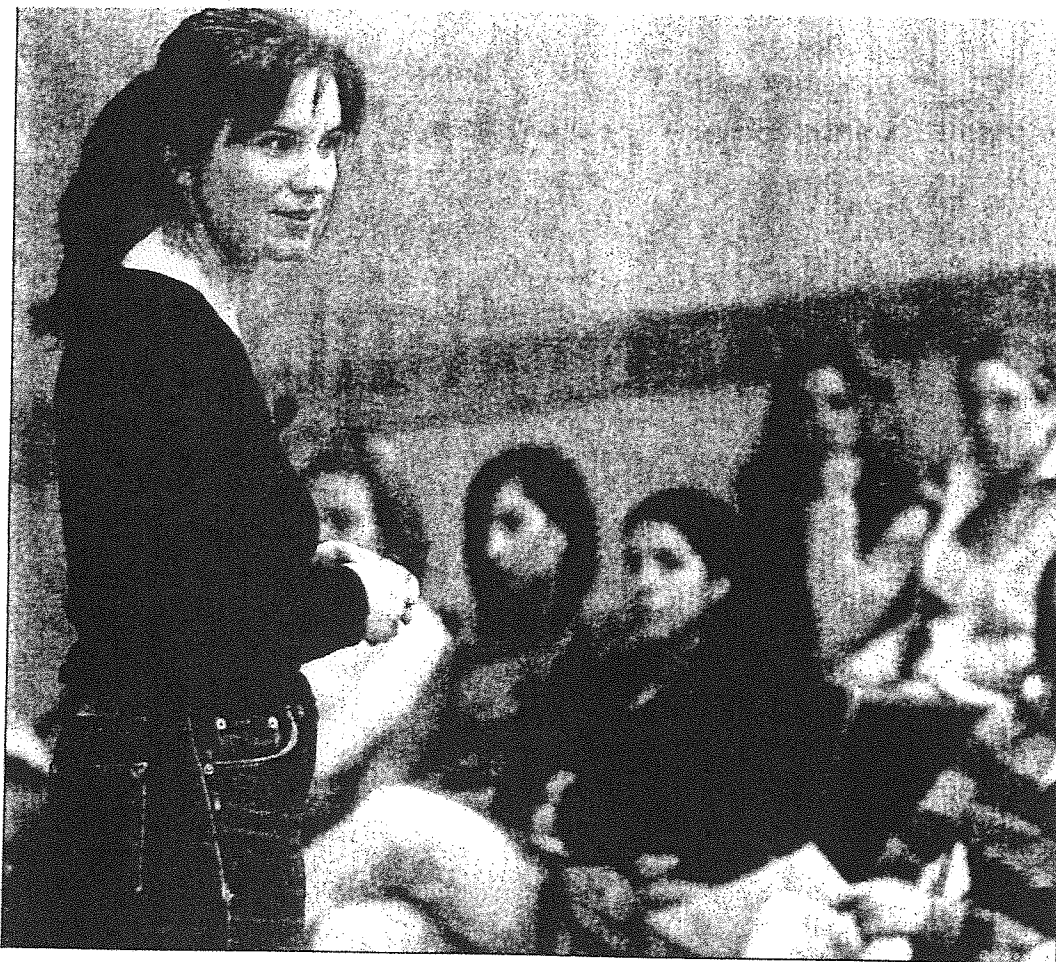
As her story continues, friends notice Ellen’s physical decline. “I wish I could walk through life and not feel like some contagious disease by people who used to be my friends,” Ellen tells the audience.

At 25, Hart is not much older than some of the Salve Regina students. A New Jersey native and Brown University graduate, she said Ellen’s story is a composite of playwright Plourde’s research into young women with eating disorders.

**‘It’s not about food.
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ACTRESS MEGAN HART

as ‘Ellen,’ a young woman who
struggles with bulimia and anorexia



David Hansen ♦ Daily News staff

Actress Megan Hart performs a one-woman play about eating disorders Wednesday at O'Hare Auditorium on the Salve Regina University campus in Newport.

Disorder

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The play is unresolved in the end, but we hear Ellen's friend say Ellen is in the hospital and there is reason for hope. "I think I got through to her maybe just a little," her friend says.

A panel discussion followed the play. Taking part were Bonnie Fischer, a physician's assistant at Salve Regina, Jocelyn Sherman, a dietitian at Butler Hospital in Providence, and Emily Riley, a senior education major at Salve Regina.

Riley discussed her own battles with an eating disorder that

started during her freshman year and plagued her through her junior year. She is now in recovery.

"I played field hockey here at Salve but then I only wanted to work out by myself and count calories," said Riley, from Fairhaven, Mass.

Riley said she grew up in a loving family, one that stressed inner beauty and support. But after leaving home for college, she grew obsessed with food.

"That could've been my life up there," she said of the play.

Riley said her illness has taken a significant toll on her life: "I've lost friends and lost the trust of my family. That's not easy to win back."

HELP A LOVED ONE

The National Eating Disorders Association offers tips on what to say to friends and family members suffering from eating disorders:

- ♦ Set a time to talk.
- ♦ Communicate your concerns.
- ♦ Ask your friend/family member to explore concerns with a doctor or counselor.
- ♦ Avoid conflicts or a battle of wills.
- ♦ Avoid placing blame, shame or guilt.
- ♦ Avoid giving simple solutions.
- ♦ Express continued support.