

# Speaker shares insight after horrific experience

By Ben Carpenter

[bcarpenter@sjnewsco.com](mailto:bcarpenter@sjnewsco.com)

MANNINGTON TWP. — A man can be stripped of his sight, but it is far more challenging to rob him of his vision.



Staff photo by Britney Lillya

**Blind Motivational Speaker and Martial Artist Robert J. Ott recalls the violent crime that caused him to lose his sight in 1990 during an assembly at the Salem County Vocational Technical School in Mannington Township Thursday morning.**

On Thursday, students from the Salem County Vocational Technical High School kicked off the statewide Violence and Vandalism Awareness Week, which officially begins Monday. To start, blind motivational speaker and martial artist Robert J. Ott explained the trials that he faced over the past two decades.

Ott, a native of South Jersey, lost his sight in 1990 as the result of a violent attack. In the following 17 years after the incident, Ott rehabilitated, started a food business and began inspiring groups across the country.

"A lot of people believe that seeing is believing. I teach that believing is seeing, you always have the capability," said Ott.

Ott had a promising career at a young age, but all that suddenly changed.

"At 21, I accomplished much," Ott said. "I started a (martial arts) studio, which was successful. One evening, I went out with a good friend for cocktails."

According to Ott, 38, his life changed that night in a bar fight. Ott explained that after the fight, provoked by a drunk group, he was standing up — only to see a man pointing a gun.

(See SPEAK, Page A-7)

## Speak: Blind man optimistic

(Continued from Page A-1)

"After the fight was over, I noticed a door crack open and a man put a gun to my head and pulled the trigger," said Ott.

Ott was rushed to Cooper Hospital/University Medical Center in Camden that night. There, doctors told his mother that her son would soon die.

"My mother was home explaining to my grandmother that her grandson was going to die. The phone started to ring ... she let it ring 10 times before picking up," said Ott. "The nurse said we have good news. I was going to live."

Ott would soon, thanks to members of the medical staff at Cooper, regain his physical abilities — except for one.

"As I began to recover, I noticed I couldn't see. I asked my mother, 'Am I blind?'" said Ott. "She looked at me and said, 'You are blind.' I cried and I cried."

According to Ott, even the best ophthalmologists

and neurosurgeons were unable to help him regain his sight.

He began attending the school for the blind in Chester, Pa. But Ott sought to continue his life and not just learn to deal with his disability.

"I realized that I may be blind, but I am still Robert J. Ott," he said. "I left with two duffle bags and \$500."

Ott found a new life calling in the food industry and a new life in Washington State.

Now, Ott is CEO of Certain Victory Food Services, one of the leading contractors of food services for the military in that state. Over 400 people work under Ott and in the past 10 years, 32 have been blind.

Along with giving motivational speeches, Ott also teaches self-defense techniques.

For the Vo-tech students, a speech about being blind opened their eyes to overcoming challenges.

"I didn't know at all what to think before I got

here," said 12th-grade student Domenic Merendino. "I thought it was pretty amazing. It could happen to anyone."

Principal Jennifer Helder explained that the event was the perfect way to open the Violence and Vandalism Awareness Week.

"This is teaching the students that there are violent situations that occur," she said. "They are able to learn how he (Ott) was able to turn his (misfortune) into a positive reality."

For more information about Certain Victory and Ott, visit [www.certain-victory.com](http://www.certain-victory.com).