

Special students star-struck by 'Corky's' visit

By DIANE C. LORE
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"He's here. He's actually here," one student whispered. Seconds later, the chant went out from the 300 or so adoring fans.

"Corky, Corky, Corky; Chris, Chris, Chris," they cheered, as television actor Chris Burke made his way through the crowd of students in the auditorium of the Hungerford School, the Richmond Occupational Training Center in Clifton.

The students, some in wheelchairs, and others with various disabilities, welcomed the 24-year-old actor as one of their own. Burke, who has Down's syndrome, is one of the stars of the ABC television show "Life Goes On."

"Today they don't see themselves as anyone different. Like anyone else they're just greeting one of their favorite actors," said Principal Mary MacIntyre.

"Oooh. He's so cute and sexy," giggled Ricsanne Billane, as the crowd surrounded Burke for autographs and photographs, and he graciously obliged.

Burke then distributed class rings to most of the 34 seniors who will be graduating on Friday. A few were unable to attend because they had already been placed in jobs and were working.

As each senior was called, Burke carefully placed the garnet-stone ring on an outstretched finger and shook hands. When it

was Samantha Rothman's turn, she turned a beet red as Burke whispered "How about a kiss?" and proceeded to bend down and give her a friendly kiss and hug in her wheelchair.

The students presented Burke with a plaque inscribed with a "Thank you" for "being both an inspiration and a role model, not just for people with disabilities, but for all young people."

The affable actor answered a half dozen questions about himself and the television show.

He works 12 hours a day on the set, he explained. "I don't act. I act like myself."

He said his character, Corky, is a nickname for Charles, and that he has "great respect" for his co-star Patti Lupone, who plays his mother on the show. "She's a wonderful person, and she has a great sense of humor — she has to, to put up with me," Burke said.

To a question about sports figures, Burke said he was a big fan of the Mets and basketball star Isiah Thompson of the Detroit Pistons.

"Do I have a girl friend? — all you girls out there are my girl friends," Burke said, laughing loudly.

"Actually, my best friend is my mom," he said, as some of the mothers in the audience, who had come for the ring day ceremony, dabbed at tears in their eyes.

After the ceremony, several of the parents surrounded Burke's father, Frank, a retired Police Department inspector who accompanies his son on most of his appearances.

"You're an inspiration to me as a parent," said Ann Baker. Mrs. Baker's son, Peter, who is brain damaged, is being graduated from the school and just started a job at Bayley Seton Hospital.

"Would you ever have dreamed your son would be where he is today?" Mrs. Baker asked the elder Burke.

When Chris, the youngest of four children, was born with Down's syndrome, the family was approached about institutionalizing their son, Burke said. "But we really didn't have a decision to make. He was our baby, and we took him home and we loved him.

"What you see here today is the product of our love and a lot of hard work," the actor's father said.

Burke's visit came about as a result of a longstanding friendship with Terry Egan, who came to the Hungerford School in March as an assistant principal. Egan gave Burke his first job, as an elevator operator in the Manhattan school for the disabled where Egan was

then teaching.

The excitement over Burke's visit yesterday almost overshadowed another visitor to the school. Prior to Burke's arrival, Elin Howe, state commissioner of the Office for Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities, made a brief visit to speak to parents. She took a tour of the classrooms.

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