Actor Sorvino wows students

One night, Paul Sorvino looked into the mirror and discovered the “death ray look.” After that, things fell into place.

By KEN ROSS
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HOLYOKE - How does a self-described “pussy cat” portray a cold-blooded mob boss? That was the dilemma facing Paul Sorvino after Martin Scorsese cast him to play the mob patriarch Paul Cioro in the 1990 movie “Goodfellas.” Sorvino didn’t know what to do at first, the 69-year-old actor told a group of Holyoke students Monday. That’s why he initially asked his agent to get him out of the movie.

But like the mob, Sorvino’s agent told him you don’t say no to Scorsese. So Sorvino got to work on playing a man who can be sweet one second, then order a mob hit the next.

He thought about the character constantly. At dinner, at the supermarket. Nothing worked.

Then one night, Sorvino was getting ready for bed. He looked in the bathroom mirror. He didn’t recognize himself. “I had this kind of death ray look,” Sorvino said.

That was it. That was the key to playing this character, Sorvino said.

Sorvino talked about the look as he sat on the stage at Holyoke High School surrounded by a group of students. Then he gave the look. Instantly, his face changed. His eyes narrowed, face tightened. Sorvino became Cioro. Then the look vanished.

And Sorvino was back, enthraling students with more stories during a riveting, 90-minute talk.

“I thought he was awesome,” ninth-grader Aixa N. Pinero, 16, said. “He has a lot of personality.”

Sorvino’s visit to the school’s Connections after-school program was arranged by the Massachusetts International Festival for the Arts, which brought Sorvino to the area for a reading of a new play with Sorvino’s Academy Award-winning daughter, Mira. He also taught an acting class Monday at Mount Holyoke College in South Hadley.

“I thought it was a wonderful experience,” said Eileen D. Cavanaugh, director of the Connections program.

Sorvino talked about a wide range of subjects. He talked about acting. The Brooklyn-born, opera-trained artist and actor also talked about accents, asthma, the Mona Lisa, Leonard Bernstein, villains, auditioning, advertising and living life to its fullest.

Asked why he acts, Sorvino said, “We do it because there’s a force in us and we want to see what we are.”

“It’s a very hard discipline,” Sorvino added. Then he turned his talk toward acting. He talked about a famous young actor he worked with who initially parted at night during the filming of a movie. Then Sorvino sat the actor down.

“You have to have discipline,” Sorvino recalled telling the actor.

Then he talked about what a rare gift every job, even every day is in our lives.

“Take advantage and use your time to learn and to play,” Sorvino said. “Give it the honor it deserves.”

Whether it’s playing a mob boss or talking to a group of spellbound students.