Making an Impact on Pottstown Area Residents

TriCounty Health Partnership Encourages Coordination Between Community Members and Existing Resources to Make the Pottstown Area a Place Where People Want to Live, Work and Play


Those are just some of the words describing the Anti-Violence, Anti-Drug Youth Conference, held every year by the TriCounty Health Partnership (TCHP), a coalition of some 60 organizations in Montgomery, eastern Berks and northern Chester counties. The conference is part of TCHP’s Youth Task Force, which promotes health education to encourage good lifestyle choices.

For many Pottstown area educators, the youth conference is a unique opportunity to gather middle and high school students in an informal, no-holds-barred atmosphere. Last April’s conference attracted 270 students and educators from six area school districts. While there, the students made friends, shared personal stories, tackled tough issues like sexual abstinence, sobriety and nutrition, and came away with entirely new perspectives on life as a teenager.

“Anytime you take a kid out of his (normal) surroundings, you stand a better chance of having your message heard and understood,” said Kevin Downes, a science and reading teacher at Pottstown Middle School, who served as a chaperone and helper at the conference. “Many of the topics discussed become ‘broken records’ at home or in the regular school (environment).”

Dr. Gina Hove, principal at Pottsgrove Middle School, stressed the importance of offering topics that students are willing to discuss openly. One such topic, led by Hove, was titled “Analyzing Perspectives.” It addressed how and why students make certain decisions about themselves, their classmates and their social environments.
"I really enjoyed being with the kids and staying in tune with them," Hove said. "You’ve heard the old real-estate adage: location, location, location. Well, with kids, it’s connect, connect, connect."

"None of our kids are bad, but sometimes they make bad decisions," added Dan Tracy, assistant principal at Pottstown High School, who shuttled about 30 middle school students to and from the conference. "Students have an opportunity to choose what they want to participate in at the conference. They meet with different kids in the community and interact in a very positive setting."

The conference not only had an impact on the students, but also on the teachers. While attending last April’s conference, Downes observed how his fellow educators interact and "connect" with students. He picked up a few pointers in the process – pointers that will help him build relationships with his middle school students.

"In my line of work, you do not usually have the opportunity to see other professionals working their craft," Downes said. "The chance to work on my craft in this way is greatly appreciated."

In addition to Downes and his students, Pottstown Middle School sent a 20-person dance troupe to perform at the conference’s opening ceremony.

"I think our kids had a great day," said Principal Wayne Thomas. "They were very attentive and asked a lot of questions … It makes me feel good that there’s an organization like the TriCounty Health Partnership that helps kids be successful."

**Healthy Community Movement is Wide-Ranging**

Of course, the Anti-Violence, Anti-Drug Youth Conference isn’t the only program that comprises the TCHP’s Healthy Community Movement, an initiative that is positively impacting the healthy lifestyle choices of area residents. And it’s not the only program
that has recently benefited from a $24,843 grant from the Pottstown Area Health & Wellness Foundation, which promotes healthy living in the greater Pottstown area.

The Healthy Community Movement also features a low-income task force, which identifies and addresses issues pertinent to low-income residents; a domestic violence program, which provides violence prevention-education opportunities for families and youth; a program that educates people about protecting and preserving the area’s environment; and a dental clinic that offers reduced-cost oral care for the area’s working poor and their families. In addition, the Foundation’s grant provides administrative support for TCHP staff.

“The grant is helping make all of those programs possible, so we can make a positive impact throughout Pottstown and our surrounding communities,” said Patricia Eltz, TCHP’s coordinator.

**Dental Clinic is All Smiles**

The dental clinic is certainly making a positive impact – and in a relatively short period of time. The clinic was founded in 2002 with seed money from Delta Dental, The Health Alliance Charitable Foundation and United Concordia Company Inc.

Since its founding, the clinic has increased its annual income nearly 20-fold. More importantly, it has served 85 people, including 47 children, already this year. The children’s dental care was funded through a grant from the Montgomery County Health Department. As a general rule, the clinic does not provide free services. Fees are 60-70 percent below normal rates for people who are uninsured or underinsured.

In most cases, patients simply need routine preventive care. In others, they need restorative care, such as fillings, crowns and dentures, to get their mouths “back on track.” Dr. John Dubinski, a Pottstown dentist, does the preventive and restorative work, while Dr. Mark Cackovic is the coordinator of the clinic, located at Pottstown High School.
Cackovic, who retired from full-time dentistry 13 years ago, said he joined the clinic in February 2004 because “I enjoy dentistry and I knew I could make a difference.”

It’s people like Cackovic, the TCHP’s Eltz and area educators – among many others -- who are making a huge difference in the lives of Pottstown area residents. They’re listening to the challenges, hopes and dreams of teenagers. They’re educating families about domestic violence and ways to preserve the environment. And they’re providing low-cost dental care to those in need. They are the true heroes of Pottstown.

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The Pottstown Area Health & Wellness Foundation was formed in 2003 with the proceeds obtained from the sale of Pottstown Memorial Medical Center. The foundation’s mission is to promote healthy living for residents in the Pottstown area.

**Photo Captions**

AlcoholLineWalk – Local high school students learned about the effects of drug and alcohol use at the Anti-Violence, Anti-Drug Youth Conference held in April. Here, a student uses goggles to simulate the effect of alcohol use while walking a straight white line.

AdventureGame – A group of students participates in an Adventure Game at the Anti-Violence, Anti-Drug Youth Conference held in April. The game helped the students become more assertive, offer and accept feedback, trust others and develop problem-solving skills.

*Photos courtesy of the TriCounty Health Partnership.*