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## Parkdale's Youth Ambassadors educating community on issues such as teen smoking

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by Elahe Izadi | Staff Writer

A new program at Parkdale High School is working to prepare students not just for college and work, but also on how to organize educational campaigns on issues affecting their community.

The 23 students who signed up for the Youth Ambassadors program, which began at Parkdale in October 2009, are currently working on an anti-tobacco campaign to educate adults and youth on tobacco use and trends.

Toni Smith, executive director of the group that runs the program, Cheverly-based nonprofit In Reach, Inc., said the campaign provides a structure for the youth to learn how to run such a campaign.

"The most important thing is the realization of how powerful their voices are, individually and collectively," Smith said.

Students recently met with state legislatures in Annapolis on Jan. 21 to talk about teen smoking trends, and are preparing to present multimedia performances in March at William Wirt Middle School in Riverdale, Charles Carroll Middle School in New Carrollton and Parkdale High School in Riverdale.

The campaign is paid for through a grant from the Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, and Smith said the next campaign will focus on teen and dating violence, a topic the youth decided to focus on.

Tenth-grader Kristen Holbrook, 15, of Riverdale, said meeting with Del. Anne Healey (D-Dist. 22) of Hyattsville made her feel empowered "because we got to talk to someone who is kind of in charge."

Kristen said she initially joined the group in part because of the anti-tobacco campaign.

"My parents, they smoke, and a lot of my family members smoke, so I was doing this to get them to recognize what's going on and get them to maybe stop," Kristen said.



Christopher Anderson/The Gazette  
(From left) Toni Smith, executive director of In Reach, with 10th-graders Priscilla Ogwale, Kristen Holbrook and Elizabeth Nguyen, meet Jan. 21 with Dels. Anne Healey (D-Dist. 22) of Hyattsville and Tawanna P. Gaines (D-Dist. 22) of Berwyn Heights to discuss their anti-tobacco campaign in Annapolis.

When she began learning in the program about the effects of smoking and secondhand smoke, Kristen spoke to her father, who used to smoke two packs of cigarettes a day, and has since quit.

Kristen said she probably wouldn't have had that conversation before she began working on the anti-tobacco campaign.

"I didn't think it was as bad before," she said. "I didn't realize how bad the effect of it was, but then I realized."

Other students, such as 10th-grader Mechaela McCoy of Hyattsville, said they primarily joined to get help with applying to colleges.

Mechaela, 15, said she gets information on various colleges and scholarships during the group's bi-monthly meetings. It's helped her decide to want to attend University of Maryland, Eastern Shore.

"I can ask my family but I can't ask a lot of them because a lot of them didn't go to college," she said.

Smith said in addition to helping students with the college application and financial aid process, she is setting up field trips and interviews with professionals, such as nurses, as a way to broaden students' horizons and expose them to potential career paths.

"It's so they will understand that life has much more to offer and they have as much right to it as anybody else," she said.

E-mail Elahe Izadi at [eizadi@gazette.net](mailto:eizadi@gazette.net).

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