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YOUTHS TO PROMOTE HAPPY LIFESTYLES AND RESPONSIBLE BEHAVIOR

By *REBECCA MYERS CUTCHINS, STAFF WRITER* April 2, 1997 Publication: *Virginian-Pilot, The (Norfolk, VA)* Page: B6 Word Count: 557

A group of Portsmouth adolescents soon will plaster local billboards with positive messages to their peers. The youths also will star in their own radio and TV public service announcements, perform in a live theater production and write their own newspaper editorials in a media blitz that will focus on making good choices.

The campaign, developed to curb juvenile delinquency in Portsmouth, is being funded by a \$13,738 federal grant to the city through the state's Department of Criminal Justice Services.

“This is all about promoting behaviors that create happy lifestyles and responsible citizens,” Carol Pratt told a group of middle and high school students who met to start the project.

Pratt, manager of the city's government access channel, helped the city apply for the grant.

“We're really going to go all out over the next six months to make an impression to show that

our good behaviors can lead to success," she said.

The public service announcements, which will be produced by the students, will be pitched to local newspapers, and TV and radio stations, Pratt said.

In addition, an art contest will be held, with the goal of having student artwork put on billboards. Also, for those who enjoy acting, a play will be staged.

About two dozen young people, ages 11 to 19, met last week in a conference room at the Children's Museum of Virginia to brainstorm ideas for the messages they want to send. Students represented youth groups from recreation centers, churches, the PRIDE program and Youth Against Drugs, to name just a few.

James A. Temple Jr., who works with Pratt at WGOV-TV, got the session started with a discussion of several risk factors faced by children today, such as adolescent pregnancy, child abuse and disciplinary problems.

“One of the stipulations of this grant is that you, the youth, are to have the greatest say-so as to how this campaign should work,” Temple said.

In discussing another risk factor - high dropout rates - students pinpointed reasons ranging from indifference to drug addiction.

“Students are losing the purpose of going to school,” Marquis Wescott said. “It’s more like a fashion show now.”

After concluding the brainstorming session, students worked on a common slogan that could be used to tie together the five media projects.

Je’aimé Powell, 18, a senior at I.C. Norcom, suggested using “It’s Your Choice,” and Larry Thomas, 19, a member of the Portsmouth Police Explorer program, offered “It’s Time For A Change.”

Other proposals included “Confidence is the Road to Success,” “You’ve Got the Opportunity to Make It Happen,” and “Rediscovering Hope.” The students will vote on their favorite slogan at a later date.

At the end of the meeting, students signed up for the communications project on which they most wanted to work.

“I really love drawing, so I wanted to try to do something with art,” said Yen Nguyen, 16, a sophomore at Woodrow Wilson High School. “But I also chose drama to help me be able to stand up in front of an audience.”

Latrese Carter, 16, who takes junior- and senior-level classes at Wilson, chose drama and video.

“I've been acting for a long time,” Carter said, “and I picked video because I like to talk a lot.”

The campaign will culminate in the fall with a “Back To School Youth Summit,” when all of the media projects will be showcased.

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