

Upper Bucks teens help teens avoid drugs

"The only thing that stops kids from killing themselves is support. The key is the relationships. We'll help young people create a circle of adults and peers to create a small village around them."

LEE RUSH, community activist

Students also use survey to show it's normal not to drink.

By Genevieve Marshall
Of The Morning Call

The students at Pennridge High School who drink are not the norm, but Andrea Guevara sees why it's hard to believe that not everyone drinks alcohol at parties.

The sophomore from Telford is on her high school's student council and part of a "street team" of 20 students trying to spread the word that it actually is normal not to drink, despite the pervasive attitude that everyone is doing it.

The Upper Bucks Communities Healthy Youth Coalition surveyed almost 3,000 middle and high school students from Pennridge, Palisades and Quakertown Community school districts in 2005 and 2006. Eighth-, 10th- and 12th-graders answered 156 questions designed to uncover their attitudes and behaviors related to sex and alcohol, drug and tobacco use.

Two out of three area teens have not had a drink in the past 30 days, according to the results of the survey, which were compiled into the 2006 Student Support Card and presented Monday at the James Michener Library in Quakertown.

At Pennridge, Guevara has helped hand out neon green buttons and T-shirts with slogans like: "OMG! Zoutta3" and "Zoutta3 don't drink!" At first the juniors and seniors made fun of it. They made their own "anti-Zoutta3" buttons, she said.

"It's like they didn't believe it," Guevara said. "But it's true. It seems like everyone around you is drinking, but really it's just a certain group of kids."

The first Upper Bucks Support Card gives a concentrated picture of what risks teenagers in the community face, compared with much larger national and state surveys, said community activist Lee Rush.

"We wanted to find out what risks were unique to our area," said Rush, executive director of justCommunity, the coordinating agency for the youth coalition.

Students were surveyed between 2002 and 2004, and a

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new group was given the questionnaire in 2005 and 2006. Each round of surveys cost about \$12,000, funded through a variety of federal, state and local grants, Rush said.

The latest results showed a marked 44 percent decrease in recent tobacco use among eighth-graders. Alcohol use decreased by 5 percent among 10th-graders and tobacco use was down 15 percent among 12th-graders.

"We're pushing the positive," Rush said.

But he acknowledges that the "Zoutta3" motto can be viewed another way: One in three students has had a drink in the past 30 days.

The Support Card also showed that on average, the same students had their first drink before their 13th birthdays.

Tobacco, alcohol, marijuana and inhalant use in Upper Bucks remains above national averages for high school students, and inhalant use for eighth-graders is 20 percent above the national average.

Also disturbing, he noted: Eleven percent of local youth have made at least one suicide attempt in their lifetime.

"The only thing that stops kids from killing themselves is support," Rush said. "The key is the relationships. We'll help young people create a circle of adults and peers to create a small village around them."

Jack Claypoole of the national Drug-Free Communities Program, announced a \$75,000 grant to help prevent youth drug use in Upper Bucks.

"There is no one-size-fits-all approach to prevent drug use," Claypoole said. "We're not here to tell you how to do it. We're here to help you get it done, and step one is mobilizing the community."

The Upper Bucks coalition has focused its efforts on promoting messages from teenagers to other teenagers.

Mike Dalton, a Pennridge High School senior, showed a public service announcement he helped create last year.

The PSA, which aired on local television stations, features a manic man trying to sell methamphetamines for their weight-loss properties, followed by teenagers showing pictures of the wasted faces and decaying teeth of drug users.

"The best way to get the message out to kids is to have kids create it," Dalton said.

Ross Peterson, a Pennridge junior, said he thinks the "Zoutta3" message also will resonate with his classmates because students created it.

"We're promoting good behavior and modeling it for younger students," Peterson said. "It's not hard to stay away from drugs and alcohol. I can say no — they can, too."



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