

Area youth discuss future of Upper Bucks

By Toni Becker
Of The Free Press

Having a safe drug-free place to hang out, interacting with more teenagers in the area and reaching out to the community are some of the things a group of teenagers from Upper Bucks County would like to see happen.

"There's no place that we can go to hang out that we won't get in trouble for," Quakertown Community High School student Tammie Downing said, during a group discussion at the first annual Upper Bucks Youth Summit.

The summit, held May 2, at the James Michener Library, Quakertown, drew approximately 65 students from the

Quakertown Community, Palisades Area and Pennridge school districts.

Sponsored by the Upper Bucks Healthy Communities, Healthy Youth Coalition (HCHY) - which is made up of representatives from all three school districts and works to guide youth and develop opportunities and safe choices through implementation of the "40 Developmental Assets" - the summit featured workshops, a keynote speaker and a chance for teens to brainstorm in separate groups on what they would like to see happen in Upper Bucks County.

"I thought it was a really good experience," Pennridge

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Community Mobilizer Lee Rush listens to the thoughts of Cayla Catino (standing), along with other teenagers present, during the first Upper Bucks Youth Summit, May

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sophomore Kristin Ford said. "I really liked talking to other students who like to get involved."

Ford was not alone. Many of the students expressed interest in interacting with teenagers from other schools in settings similar to the summit.

Making it an annual event is one of the goals of the coalition and HCHY Community Mobilizer Lee Rush.

"It's really to get more young people involved," Rush said, of the summit.

Before attending the summit, Ford said she had never heard of HCHY. Making Pennridge students more aware of the program is something her group said they'd like to see happen, as well as to see students represented more by the school board.

The open discussion allowed students the chance to freely express themselves and work together to come up with common ideas.

Those ideas, Rush said, could be possibilities. The biggest challenge, he told the group, is engaging young people.

"We don't see you as prob-

lems," he said, adding that many people constantly criticize the young generation. "We see you as more positive than the culture sees you at large."

The summit was also inspiring to the youth in other ways.

Most of the students involved in the summit wore blank keys around their necks and wrists.

"Your future is what you make of it," chair of the Upper Bucks HCHY and Quakertown Community High School guidance counselor Ray Fox said, in reference to the blank key.

The blank keys, were in conjunction with the keynote speech by Reverend Jimmy Rivera.

His speech became a topic discussed by many of the teenagers throughout the rest of the day, and was also used as an example when discussing some of the items they'd like to see in the area.

For Quakertown sophomore Tiyana Quattlebaum, Rivera's speech was her favorite event of the day, adding that his courage was empowering.

According to Palisades Promise (Palisades chapter of HCHY) Chair Ann Wong, in his speech, Rivera discussed his

childhood, his struggle with drug addiction and how he was able to turn his life around, earn a college degree and eventually become a reverend.

"The blank key is what you make of it," Wong said, adding that Rivera's speech was filled with courage and empowerment and that he was able to reach out to the students. "He mixed a powerful message with humor."

The fiscal agent of HCHY is justCommunity Inc., a non-profit organization in Quakertown that provides consultation, education and training services founded by Rush.

Upcoming events in conjunction with HCHY are an alcohol and tobacco presentation by the Bucks County Commission on Alcohol and Drug Advocacy on May 9, and a community asset awareness evening on May 20, where the "40 Developmental Assets" will be discussed.

Both events will occur at 7 p.m. at Palisades High School, Kintnersville.

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