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Teen depression focus of program

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Severna Park High School broke new ground in April, confronting the troubling issue of teen depression and suicide, which has occasionally plagued the upscale community.

The guidance department presented STAR, short for Students Taking Action Responsibly, which ran for one week.

Guest speakers and faculty discussed warning signs of depression, described situations which could cause depression, and focused on prevention and treatment of the illness. Students met in small groups, as well as for assemblies.

Vicki Wuest, guidance department chairman, and school psychologist Alexandra Meyer worked with parents and faculty to provide the outreach. "I cannot thank the PTSO enough for all that they did," Mrs. Wuest said. "They were our sole financial support. We held two assemblies per speaker, so that all of our 1,850 students could hear the messages."

Ms. Meyer praised the community at large. "Woods Presbyterian Church and Severna Park United Methodist Church were very supportive, as were the parents and friends of our students," she said. "Area guidance counselors came to the school for small group discussions. It took months of planning and was well worth it."

Notified about a month before the program, parents attended evening programs held at the school as well as at Woods Memorial Presbyterian Church.

Brandi Care was a featured speaker at the first assembly. The Severna Park alumna's own depression led her to attempt suicide nearly 10

years ago.

Treated, and with a healthy zest for living, Ms. Care took her struggle public, and has appeared on national television programs, including "Dateline" and "Good Morning America."

"Luckily, I failed at suicide," she said. "I would have missed so much if I had died." Married and the mother of two, Ms. Care graduated from Virginia Tech, and works for the Marriott Corp. in Virginia.

She presented slides of her friends, family and children, college adventures and work. Depression cannot be ignored and requires lifelong monitoring, she said.

Ed Gerety, a prominent youth leadership trainer, gave a motivational talk based on the importance of mutual respect.

"He was funny, but made the point that you should treat everyone like family, because you don't know what kinds of problems people are dealing with in private," said Rachel Buxton, 14, a freshman.

Describing other parts of STAR, she said "We learned about the 'Nineline' number (1-800-999-9999) people can call if they feel desperate."

The school played lots of music all week from back in the 1960s to the present. Live music was provided by local bands Stockyard and Beat Kids.

Sophomore Matthew Ward, 15, said the STAR week provided important resources. "We learned how to get help, for ourselves, our friends or classmates," he said. "The speakers gave us numbers for hotlines, and taught us to recognize the warning signs of depression. They discussed finding trusted adults who will help."

Excessive sleeping or insomnia, mood swings, changes in appetite, withdrawing from society and loss of interest in favorite things, are

hallmarks of the illness. "The main thing to look for is an overall change in a person," Matthew said.

A student who requested anonymity revealed that STAR week made a personal difference. "It changed my mind. I admit it, I've thought of killing myself, from being been miserable at home," the student said. "It helped so much to hear other people describe the same thing. I felt so much better about everything from going to the talks. I know what to do now if I feel really bad or get scared."

"Students are often reluctant to tell anyone, even if a best friend is thinking of harming himself or herself," Ms. Meyer said. "We encouraged the students to get the help, to program the number of a trusted adult into their cell phone so they can get help, even in the middle of the night."

Mrs. Wuest said "During this week, we were all unified, which was just wonderful, to see everyone making connections. We plan to hold STAR weeks each year from now on, it was so encouraging."

RESOURCES AVAILABLE TO TEENS

Toll-free resources available 24/7 for depression or feelings of suicide:

- Neline: 1-800- 999-9999.
- Maryland Youth Hotline: 1-800-422-1009
- Student Safety Hotline: 1-877-676-9854. This hotline is open to people of all ages. It will alert the school to a concern.
- Anne Arundel County Crisis Response: 410-768-5522. This a 'warm line,' operated through the County Police Department. Trained personnel (not police) are sent to assist in crisis situations at home.
- Trusted Adults: Teens should program cell phones with the numbers for parents or adult family friend for use in an emergency.