

House of Teens Focuses on Healthy Lifestyle, Leadership Skills

By [David Huck | Correspondent](#) at March 29, 2014 | 10:00 am | [Print](#)

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Trying to instill healthy eating and physical activity habits in teenagers can be a daunting task. But thanks to a five-year, \$250,000 grant from the federal Maternal Child Health Bureau and the American Academy of Pediatrics, the New Britain YWCA and a local community health center is helping to spread that message a little easier.

Since the beginning of March, 34 teenage girls from New Britain High School have been participating in a program that has been named “House of Teens.” In addition to learning about healthy lifestyles through group talks or one-on-one counseling, the program also focuses on giving the teens leadership skills, program coordinator Anna Rogers says.

While the students will earn partial physical education credit that will go towards their graduation requirements, students will also walk away from the program with a plethora of life-long knowledge they will gain from working with a range of professionals, from local doctors and dieticians to fitness instructors, Rogers said. Students will participate in activities such as keeping a food log, learning how to control diabetes, growing vegetables, and learning how control their weight through the use of the YWCA’s gym or by participating in group yoga or Zumba classes.

The program runs from 3 to 5 p.m. each weekday, though students are encouraged to workout on the weekends as well, as each student is given a free yearlong membership to the YWCA. The organization works with the guidance department at the high school to recruit students for the program.

This is the second time the YWCA is receiving the grant, which is only given out to about 10 different organizations each year. The YWCA first received the grant in 2007 and used it for similar goals of promoting health eating and fitness. The motto was, “Look good, feel good, do good,” according to Community Health Center special projects consultant Jayme Hannay. While students met with local doctors for advice, as the

program went on, Hannay noticed that the teenagers grew into their own “advocates for a healthy environment.”

“We found that teens were really natural activists,” she said. The students were given disposable cameras and told to photograph their surroundings, a concept known as “PhotoVoice.” Many of the students narrowed in on the closed pools in their neighborhoods, such as at Chesley or Washington parks, where there was litter and graffiti. The more than 500 photographs the students took gave leaders a unique perspective into how the teenagers view and interact with their surroundings.

“PhotoVoice lets them be researchers and it becomes important knowledge to give to the government, the mayor, and to translate it into ideas for change,” Hannay said.

Those students drafted a petition and presented it to the Common Council during the last mayor’s administration, though the pools remain closed. Their work, however, was cited in the American Journal of Preventive Medicine. Another group of students recently met with Mayor Erin Stewart and repeated their concerns about reopening the pools to have a place to work out.

The students also discussed their PhotoVoice projects with Stewart and talked about a variety of issues, from peer influences like drugs and alcohol to life stresses. And in an act of taking initiative, the teenagers asked the mayor to inquire about adding another bus route so students can have dinner at the high school and then be transported to the YWCA.

Students participating in the program during the last session had noticeable changes to their health, Hannay said. The YWCA was able to track students since they swiped their cards to enter the facility, while other vital information like body mass index was also monitored. The students left more motivated to exercise and learned about the importance of eating breakfast and choosing water over soda, for example. They also left feeling that they could advocate on behalf of their community and talk with others, such as family members, about making healthy choices, Hannay said.

With the recent renovations at the YWCA, students have been given a place they can feel comfortable receiving services. It’s also a home base for the teenagers that will be outfitted with furniture and decorations, a place for students to relieve stress and call their own, Rogers said.

Partnerships have grown since 2007 when the project first started. There are now more organizations working with the YWCA to offer activities and speakers for the teenagers. Even the mayor has decided to do a PhotoVoice project and photograph images of the city that she will share with the teenagers.

In past sessions, there were sometimes only three students showing up for activities, but interest has grown and now more than a dozen students are attending, Rogers said. In addition to their on-going work to reopen some community pools, the students are also interested in doing anti-bullying advocacy work, Rogers said.

On Thursday, April 24, the YWCA will host an open house from 3 to 5 p.m. for the public to learn about the different activities the teenagers are engaged in and their plans for the future.

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