

Camp arms teens against substance abuse

By Rachel Gill
Citizen correspondent

Recently, 21 local teens learned how to say more than just no to drugs and alcohol.

Express Yourself is a weeklong dance, media literacy, and improvisational camp at Champlain Valley Union High School, for teens from Charlotte, Hinesburg, Shelburne, St. George and Williston. The camp is sponsored by Connecting Youth, a community-based organization dedicated to creating a safe and healthy environment for young people, which arms participants with specific alternatives to substance abuse.

"Scare tactics, lectures, and even dialogues are becoming increasingly less effective teaching methods for substance abuse education," said Dayna Scott, the coordinator for Connecting Youth and Express Yourself camp organizer. According to Scott, Express Yourself gives participants an opportunity to express themselves in a positive way.

"This in turn teaches them about prevention through the arts, grabbing their attention right from the start," Scott said.

According to Margo Austin, the Connecting Youth peer prevention educator, Express Yourself, now in its fifth year, offers three different focus groups to choose from: dance, improvisation, and media literacy.

"This camp provides a cool way to mix our message of prevention through a variety of artistic outlets," Austin said.

On Tuesday, day two of Express Yourself, participants had made their choices. For those who chose improvisation, that meant a week with Kym Moonie, director of Essex High School's theater department.

"When students are doing improvisation, their defenses are down and their ears are open," said



Citizen photo by Rachel Gill

Rob Williams explains how the media industry targets teens with tobacco and alcohol advertising at Express Yourself youth camp at Champlain Valley Union High School.

Moonie. "It also teaches them to be brave." According to Moonie, being brave is an important trait to learn as these teens try to stand up to the pressure of substance abuse.

One of these brave students was Nicole Provost, a seventh-grader from Williston.

"My favorite activity so far is World's Worst," Provost said. "In this game you have to act like the World's Worst babysitter, actor, pilot, or whatever you can think of."

Down the hall, in Room 206, Dr. Rob Williams, a professor of history and media studies at Champlain College, was doing some brainstorming. Williams, along with a group of more media-interested participants, was brainstorming ideas for what he calls Rants, short films featuring one 'cranky' actor ranting about a problem. Williams inspired participants by sharing how tobacco and alcohol industries use media to target them directly.

"These industries spend over \$16 billion a year to target teens," Williams said. "At that rate, teens are absorbing 3,000 messages a day."

The reason for all this brainstorming is that Williams will

have participants create their own Rants. In creating these short films, Williams says participants will learn how education works, how to have fun with media production, and how media both positively and negatively affects public health.

"I hope that these kids will leave with a greater appreciation of the media's power and how they can learn how to use it in a more positive way," Williams said.

One of Williams's favorite things to do with Rants produced by students is to share them.

"Distribution of these films is very important because it helps spread the message," Williams said. Williams distributes these films by publishing them on the Internet, airing them on local cable stations, and showing them at the movies. Williams says his favorite form of distribution is to rent out an entire movie theater, invite community members, and host a World Premier of all the short films.

"These premiers are a lot of fun because all of the film creators dressed up as if they were headed to the Oscars," Williams said.

Downstairs in the CVU cafeteria, nine girls were telling a story about secondhand smoke using a slightly different method of distribution dance. These girls were twisting, rolling, and dancing to the beat of Talib Kweli's song "Get By." All of these movements were part of a dance routine choreographed by their camp instructor, Beth Canty, who has been dancing for 25 years and is now in the Spielplatz Cabaret, and a dancer at the Urban Dance Complex in Williston.

"The dance we are learning today is about the trials people face every day and both the healthy and unhealthy vices they employ to cope," Canty explained. The girls were split into two groups: smokers and non-smokers.

"The nonsmokers move a lot more and are more open, while the smokers are closed and are more stationary," Canty said. One of the girls playing a nonsmoker was Charlotte seventh-grader Ashley Strong.

"This camp has turned dancing into a passion," said Strong. "Now I know that dancing is what I can choose instead of substance abuse."

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