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Battling teen date violence

Local high schoolers write, direct and produce films to educate peers about its dangers

By PAULA F. KELLEY, Special to The News Journal

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Most 16-year-old girls willingly wouldn't forfeit a Friday night for something educational let alone because their mother suggested it. But Brianna Witherspoon did. Instead of chilling out for the evening after a hard week at school, the Pencader Charter student opted to listen to her peers talk about teen dating violence.

Earlier that day, Pamela Witherspoon received an e-mail about the event. Although Brianna was not dating, the program presented as a good opportunity to talk about it. Pamela called her daughter right after school. Without argument, Brianna hopped on the bus and met her mother in Wilmington.

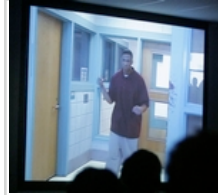
"I learned a lot myself," said Pamela Witherspoon at the end of the evening. "It was an eye-opener and a good experience."

The Witherspoons were two of about 100 people who attended the launching of the Delaware Public Awareness Campaign, "Listen Up!: Messages from Teens" at the Shipyard Shops on Wilmington's Riverfront on Oct. 5. The program had two missions: to show several public service announcements written, filmed, edited and produced by local high school students about teen dating violence, and to unveil a Web site (www.safeandrespectful.org) that was created by Delaware's Domestic Violence and Victim's Right Task Force Prevention Subcommittee.

"One of the most effective teaching strategies that delivers a truly powerful and long-lasting message is peers teaching peers," said Christine Miller, the Red Clay Consolidated School District Safe and Drug Free Schools program manager. "This project is an example of our high

school students using their creativity and their humor to address an issue that concerns today's teenagers. Sometimes high school students lack the skills and knowledge to identify the signs or the seriousness of the situation. The messages tell it like it is and send up red flags so dating violence can be prevented or at the very least handled properly if it does occur."

Even though a convivial atmosphere filled the Hearts and Minds Film screening room -- with entertainment from Delaware Teen Idol Finalists, with other local talent and with food -- Noel Duckworth, training and prevention coordinator for the Delaware Coalition Against Domestic Violence, reported some sobering statistics to the crowd about this growing epidemic. One in five female teens reports being physically or sexually abused in a relationship. One in three teens knows someone who has been hit, hurt or slapped, she said.



An audience views the premiere of local, student-created public service announcement films about teen date violence at the Riverfront Shipyard Shops Oct. 5 in Wilmington. [\(Buy photo\)](#)

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From left: Sunny Jones, Kathy Harris, Kara Dent and Elise Vanderkley were among the high school student filmmakers who created federally funded public service announcements about teen dating violence. [\(Buy photo\)](#)

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Parents, teens and others chuckle during a film that uses humor to address the not-so-funny subject of dating abuse. [\(Buy photo\)](#)

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Scott Michels, of the Media Matters Program with Jewish Family Services of Delaware, introduced the students' videos. [\(Buy photo\)](#)

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National studies reported by the Journal of American Medical Association and the U.S. Department of Justice Bureau of Justice Statistics about dating violence indicate that teens and young adults are at a greater risk than older adults for becoming victims, especially females, ages 16 to 24.

The public service announcements used a variety of methods to convey the warning signs of abuse and what components are needed for a healthy relationship, Duckworth said.

Mount Pleasant High School students used a humorous approach to the subject in their film, utilizing two space robots played by Katie Bittner and Michael Dunlap, both 18, and both recent graduates. Their responses of "access denied" and "access granted" to one robot's request to touch the other's buttons elicited laughter and a round of applause.

"You should respect other's wishes and boundaries and be able to say that," said Dunlap of their message.

Mount Pleasant students filmed their announcement in a television production and multimedia class during their senior year. The Dickinson High School after-school club, Teens Talking About Relationships, created two videos, while Cab Calloway High School students produced their message as part of a voluntary after-school project.

The Cab Calloway group's announcement drew on a familiar topic -- text messaging.

"It hit an emotional cord with all of us," said 15-year-old Cab Calloway junior Sunny Jones, who starred in the film.

Elise Vanderkley, a Cab Calloway senior, found the experience empowering and hoped their announcement would do the same for others. That feeling of having done something good for their community, she said, left them with the energy to change the world.

Brianna Witherspoon has not been an abuse victim, but she knows people who have been hounded by dating partners with constant text messages demanding to know where they were, whom they were with and what they were doing.

"The text messaging really hit home," Brianna said. "I can see how it happens and can identify with it."

The campaign was funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Scott Michels, of the Media Matters Program with Jewish Family Services of Delaware, taught the novice filmmakers basic camera technique, media literacy and digital video editing in a four-unit program. Students created their announcement from start to finish, Michels said, and they got a feel for directing, technical work and editing. These project videos were among the best to emerge from the program, Michels said.

Several announcements will also be shown at movie theaters in New Castle County.

FYI

The new Web site, www.safeandrespectful.org, has pages for teens, parents and teachers that encourage all to learn about how attitudes, behaviors and beliefs can lead to healthy relationships.



Student art work on violence in teen dating was displayed. [\(Buy photo\)](#)

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Anyone in immediate personal danger in a domestic violence situation is urged to call 911.

Otherwise, for help:

In New Castle County, call 762-6100.

In northern Kent County, call: 678-3886.

In Kent and Sussex counties, call (302) 422-8058.

Spanish-speaking: 745-9874



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