

Wednesday, Mar. 19, 2008

# Put 'U' in a community that cares about kids

By Kimberly Cassidy

- For the CDT

At some point, every parent, grandparent, or caring adult role model has watched the news or heard depressing statistics about teen violence, pregnancy, academic failure, school dropout and delinquency. Our hearts have been tugged by fears of sexually transmitted diseases, bomb threats, suicides and child predators.



Perhaps you have also felt powerless to nurture character development in the face of media and technology influences that counter the hopes and values you hold for the youth you care about. Today, you are encouraged to reclaim that hope and realize the simple ways in which you can be a part of a powerful and uniting force for change.

You are an important part of Centre County and have the power to help local youth grow into healthy, caring and responsible young adults. As a catalyst for collective responsibility, the Communities That Care process is active in Bald Eagle, Bellefonte, Penns Valley and Philipsburg-Osceola through Centre County Communities That Care, and in State College through Care Partnership: Centre Region Communities That Care.

This process embraces the belief that relationships between children and their primary caregiver(s) is essential, and that neighbors, education, law enforcement, health and human service organizations, government institutions, and the larger community also have very important roles to play in promoting youth development.

Based on a national model but operating as a community-based system, the Communities That Care process assumes a proactive approach to preventing unhealthy behaviors and fostering strong, supportive communities. Data is collected from students in sixth, eighth, 10th and 12th

grade every other year to guide collaborative outreach efforts, implement proven programming, and secure funds to mobilize around identified risks and needs.

In Centre County, the following risk factors have been identified: transition and mobility; low neighborhood attachment; sensation-seeking; low school commitment; favorable parental attitudes towards alcohol, tobacco and other drug use; and antisocial behavior, family management and peer pressure. Seven research-based programs and a multitude of community-driven programs are being implemented locally to promote protective factors and address these risks. Yet, it is you, coupled with the unity of the greater community, that can realize a shared goal of supporting our children, our families and each other.

Happy Valley is a unique region that, as any Nittany Lions fan can attest to, knows how to rally and unify around its passions. Imagine the impact if local youth were the focus of such energy. Each member of the community can create a culture of caring that shows love, sets limits, and provides youth with the tools they need to develop a positive identity and to succeed.

Every day, every member of the community has the ability to:

- Communicate healthy beliefs and clear standards for behavior to local youth
- Build strong attached relationships with sons, daughters, grandchildren, neighbors or any other youth in need of mentoring
- Help youth become vested in positive activities afforded by school, service organizations, work opportunities, and sport and enrichment organizations
- Share your knowledge and expertise. Provide youth with skills and opportunities for meaningful involvement in their schools, families and communities
- Recognize youth for positive behavior and effort
- Nurture the individual characteristics, dreams, and goals of the youth in your life

This weekly column series will share practical ways in which you can reduce the risks identified for local youth and promote protective factors. We welcome you as a reader and as a partner in promoting a healthy future for the youth you know personally and the youth you will touch as an integral part of the CTC process in your community.

*Kimberly Cassidy is the Community Mobilizer for Centre County Communities That Care®. This weekly column, published on Wednesdays, is a collaboration of Centre County Communities That Care® serving Bald Eagle Area, Bellefonte Area, Penns Valley Area and Philipsburg-Osceola Area school districts, and Care Partnership: Centre Region Communities That Care® serving the State College Area School District.*