

New Jersey Herald

Summit 'empowers kids to make difference'



Photo by Daniel Freel/New Jersey Herald - Area middle school students compete in a dance-off during the Sussex County Taking Flight to Change Middle School Summit at Sparta High School Friday.

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By Lori Comstock New Jersey Herald

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SPARTA -- If one stood outside the auditorium at Sparta High School for most of Friday morning, the sound of laughter and cheer could be heard echoing down the hallways.

But alongside the dancing and giggles was a serious message, one presented to more than 1,000 people, including more than 850 middle and high school students: Be fearless, choose kindness.

That was the motto for the 17th annual Sussex County Taking Flight to Change middle school summit, an event held by the Center for Prevention and Counseling to "empower kids to make a difference," according to Center Executive Director Becky Carlson.

As in years past, the event brings together a team of sixth-, seventh- and eighth-graders in all public, parochial and private Sussex County middle schools -- along with 85 high school mentors -- for a day filled with speakers, performances and activities to strengthen the climate in each school.

"We have each team develop an action plan that they will take back to their school," Carlson said.

With high school mentors assigned to each team, the hope was that the younger students would feel empowered enough to share their experience with their peers at their respective schools.

The ultimate goal, Carlson said, is to prevent bullying and promote caring schools.

While Keith Hawkins, an international motivational speaker, began his speech with multiple quips, he ended with a personal story that left the audience silent

Hawkins, who said he grew up in a tough part of Los Angeles with a struggling single parent and an abusive stepfather, recalled the day he was told his brother, Johnny Hawkins, was diagnosed with spinal meningitis and how, at the young age of 16, his brother "had never had anything positive in his life."

He said his brother was arrested for stealing cars and robbing an insurance building because he "hung out with other people who had nothing going on in their life."

Stating that he felt it important to "get super serious about life," Hawkins said his purpose for telling the story was to share how vital it is for students to "get involved in something positive" and to "lead a good life."

After asking the high school mentors to stand, Hawkins told the middle school students, "If you don't know what to do, look at these high school students who are doing things in their life. ... I guarantee it is going to give you a sense of hope."

Sussex County Prosecutor Francis Koch told the students that they could be "part of a new generation where kindness defeats hatred."

He urged the students to set an example that being kind should be the new "norm."

The day, sponsored by Visions Federal Credit Union and FirstEnergy Corporation, also included team-building exercises, icebreaker questions, and anti-bullying skits and videos from various schools.

The Camden Sophisticated Sisters, a nonprofit drill team led by founder Tawanda Jones, performed a dance routine. The group of roughly 20, all from Camden, considered one of the poorest cities in the nation, serves as a positive outlet for the girls.

While the city of Camden had a high school graduation rate of only 49 percent in 2010, according to reports by the Camden City School District, the students on the drill team have a 100 percent graduation rate since its inception 28 years ago, according to news reports.

Performances included a rendition of "You Will Be Found" from the musical "Dear Evan Hansen," sung by Sussex County Technical School junior Izabella Nowicki, and a rendition of Rachel Platten's "Fight Song" by Sussex County Charter School eighth-grader Brianna Meyer.

With technical difficulties plaguing Meyer's song, the audience showed an act of kindness by clapping along to the song to help aid her along.

Stillwater and Franklin elementary schools and Hardyston, Sussex and Sparta middle schools prepared skits, and the Sparta High School band and chorus performed USA for Africa's "We are the World."

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