

The Post and Courier

Copyright © 1995 - 2011 Evening Post Publishing Co.

Program helps students see good in abstinence

Published on 02/28/98

BY Susan Hill Smith
The Post and Courier

LADSON - You would expect to see someone like Angie Richards, with her perky good looks, on the TV sitcom "Friends."

Instead, the 26-year-old stood at the front of a mobile classroom at Oakbrook Middle School, talking with more than 50 middle school girls at a meeting of Heritage Keepers. The new after-school club advocates abstinence, a message that appears to be gaining political clout across the country, and especially in South Carolina.

"What's a show on TV that promotes sex before marriage?" Richards asked as she started Lesson 9: Your Dream Husband.

The girls didn't have any trouble coming up answers.

"Melrose Place."

"90210."

"Party of Five."

Richards urged them not to follow the culture they see on those shows because it could stop them from finding success in their own lives.

"I had to make that same commitment to myself," said Richards, who is married and expecting her first baby, "to guard my eyes, to guard my heart, to guard my mind."

Richards works for Heritage Community Services, a nonprofit agency in North Charleston that is assisting teachers with an abstinence-based sex education curriculum at each of the middle and high schools in Dorchester School District 2 through a special state grant.

Heritage Community Services puts on character education programs for the Navy, the Dorchester County Sheriff's Office and Santee Cooper. Founder Anne Badgley also heads the Lowcountry Crisis Pregnancy Center.

Badgley sees a need to teach young people about responsibility, setting goals, self control and self respect. While the agency's sex ed classes touch on contraceptives, they encourage students to postpone sex until they marry.

The abstinence message carries over into the Heritage Keepers club - a pilot project at Oakbrook and Dubose middle schools this year. Heritage Community Services hopes to start similar clubs at other schools next year with help from federal money that will soon become available through the state for abstinence programs.

Seventh-grade teacher Roslin Fields said that Oakbrook Middle School was searching for a program like Heritage Keepers. She and her colleagues had no question that some of their students were sexually active.

The students wrote about it in their journal assignments and in notes the teachers intercepted. The students told their guidance counselors and, in some cases, got pregnant.

"The talk from the morning 'til they go to bed at night is boys, boys, boys," said Fields. "And there's more to life than just boys, boys, boys."

Staff members hand-picked a small group of girls to start the club that includes student leaders as well as girls who needed extra guidance. Soon, the faculty was overcome with requests to join and had to start a waiting list.

Eighth-grader Candice Harrison, 14, said she's happy to be one of the first members of Heritage Keepers. She thinks the group has a good message.

"I'm proud to say I'm a virgin," she said, "because that's a good thing."

Plans to start a Heritage Keepers for boys at Oakbrook are already under way.

The girls meet with Richards every two weeks for hourlong lessons that are followed up in separate sessions with women mentors who have been trained by Heritage Community Services.

Badgley, 49, said she looked for someone like Richards to lead the sessions because she knew the girls would relate to someone closer to their own age. "I think the fact that she is young and vibrant and attractive is important," she said.

Monday evening, the girls from Heritage Keepers will sing at Citadel Square Baptist Church in Charleston for abstinence advocate Gov. David Beasley who will be speaking to members of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Other activities have included trips to see "Serenade" and Charleston Southern University. This spring, the girls and their mentors will go on an overnight trip to the beach.

Lessons may include "Your Dream Husband," but Heritage Keepers encourages girls to be independent and to look forward to college and careers. Teachers say they have seen girls gain self-confidence through the group.

Parent Donnalea Slimm said she and her husband are glad the school is reinforcing what they are telling their eighth-grade daughter, Kristi, at home.

"This is something that's very positive, very encouraging, that builds her up," she said.

ED:Susan Hill Smith covers schools. Contact her at 745-5854 or shsmith@postandcourier.com

HERITAGE

From the song, "Just Like You," part of the Heritage Keepers Student Journal:

I want to be just like you. I want to do the things you do.

I want to say the things you say. Teach me Heritage today.

Come with me, we'll bring back what is good.

Take my hand, we'll walk the neighborhood.

We'll find the weak and make them strong.

We'll look around and try to right what's wrong.

INFORMATION

Interested in starting a Heritage Keepers club at your school or in being a mentor next year? Call 863-0508.