

NWH's President's Junior Leadership Council Sets its Sights on Addressing Anxiety in Students

By Janine Crowley Haynes

Northern Westchester Hospital's President's Junior Leadership Council is celebrating its 10-year anniversary. The Council consists of 48 students from various high schools including Horace Greeley, Byram Hills, Pleasantville, Fox Lane, Somers, John Jay and Yorktown, to name a few.

NWH Director of Community Health Education & Outreach Maria Simonetti oversees the Council along with Amy Rosenfeld, RD. They have been conducting the program for ten years and have watched student participation grow from eight students to an impressive 48.



Maria Simonetti, Director NWH Community Health Education & Outreach, with Program Coordinator, Amy Rosenfeld, RD.

Each year, the Council decides on a public health project, like underage drinking, smoking, body image, nutrition, etc., targeting peers via social marketing campaigns. The projects are designed to grab the attention of their peers and are jam-packed with vital information.

With the *Be Smart Not Sorry* campaign, the Council created at-a-glance fold-up cards that fit easily into a wallet, addressing alcohol, alcohol poisoning, and what to do "when things go awry." Another campaign targeted smoking with a shockingly graphic handout showing the toxic ingredients in cigarettes.

This year's campaign targets anxiety. The students on the Council work in groups and pitch creative ways to construct an effective campaign to address the anxiety issue all too common in young people. The Council just decided



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that the overall campaign tagline will be: *There is a World Outside...Branch Out*. The Council's main concern is dismantling the stigma and helping young people to not feel so alone while encouraging them to seek support.

It's of no surprise that students in Westchester face a heavy workload that can cause stress and anxiety. Students have enormous pressures placed on them not just to get good grades, but also to join clubs, take music lessons, be athletes, and volunteer time without having much downtime. They also struggle with social pressures from peers.

For the anxiety project, the Council intends to reach out not only to the students but to act as liaisons and meet with school administrators, teachers, and PTAs to enlighten and communicate the overwhelming issue of anxiety plaguing many students, and to possibly effect change.

In June, all 48 students of the leadership Council came together for their end-of-school-year meeting. However, they will also be working over the summer months on the new campaign. By October, they will be ready to unveil its latest project targeting anxiety. The students will come up with creative ideas for the collective project.

One idea comes from Greeley senior Chloe Krugel and sister and sophomore at Greeley Alexa Krugel. They will be submitting an application to

form a club at Greeley. "When 'I' is replaced with 'We,' even illness becomes wellness. So, we were thinking the club could be called Mental Wellness," says Chloe. Although the plan is in its infancy, raising awareness and dismantling the stigma surrounding mental health issues is a top priority.

The club will also focus on implementing ways of dealing with stress and anxiety by encouraging healthy habits and behaviors possibly through yoga, breathing exercises, pet therapy, etc. They would also like to organize a walk for mental wellness.

Another idea the Council is exploring is handing out adult coloring books. There are studies that show when one is feeling anxiety, a distraction can be quite effective in lessening the immediate feelings of anxiety. Another thought is to create a poster and/or handouts addressing anxiety targeting the shame and stigma.

The anxiety project is, no doubt, ambitious and complicated and will be tackled from different angles. At the end-of-year meeting, all 48 students went around the room and introduced themselves and stated what being a member of the NWH President's Junior Leadership Council means to them personally. Aside from the overwhelming gratefulness to the Director Maria Simonetti and Program Coordinator Amy Rosenfeld, RD, the students expressed feeling more connected to the community and realize the importance of giving back.

Learning the skills of collaborating with students from other high schools gives them an advantage and has given them a sense of making an impact to create positive change. Finding a common bond and taking a pulse on what issues need to be addressed amongst their peers is a worthwhile experience going forward.

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