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COMMUNITY SPIRIT

For nonprofit, teen talks are within reach

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by Laura C. Jackson

Despite their know-it-all expressions, unapproachable attitudes and frustrating behavior, today's teenagers actually want guidance from adults, according to Hyattsville resident Toni Smith.

"Teenagers think adults don't like them," said Smith, founder of In Reach, a nonprofit for adolescents. "They don't understand why adults—even their own parents—won't talk to them or answer their questions. One teen said, 'I already know what my friends think. I need adults' advice.'"

Fortunately, Smith is willing to venture where most adults fear to tread. Through her organization, now located in its own space in Riverdale Park, she's developed a Youth Leadership Council for students at Northwestern High School in Hyattsville. Students between the ages of 14 and 18 organize projects to develop career goals and help peers plan for the future through the council.

In April, for example, youth council members planned three forums that focused on life after high school, relationships and violence. The teens organized the workshops, found the speakers, created handouts and completed other tasks. In Reach helped the students locate space for the events and paid for the lunches that accompanied each workshop.

"I was so proud of them," Smith said. "Their sessions were better than some events planned by adults."

The workshop on life after high school was especially important, Smith said, because local teens aren't getting enough information on what happens after 12th grade.

"We have to start reaching out to young people while they're in ninth grade," Smith said. "Our students also need more exposure. They need to see lives that are different from their own, both inside and outside the county."

As part of the Northwestern project, participants have attended sessions on how to get jobs at NASA and have visited various work places to get a close-up look at careers.

"You might say you want to be a doctor, but have you ever seen what one does?" Smith asked. "If you want to be an architect, you need to visit a firm."



Bryan Haynes/The Gazette

Toni Smith is the founder of In Reach, a nonprofit organization that responds to the unmet developmental and academic needs of adolescents and teens in Prince George's County.

In Reach offers a separate program on Saturdays to help boost girls' self-esteem.

"Girls change a lot between the sixth and eighth grades, and they turn inward," Smith said.

Even though people might perceive that African-American girls are strong and outspoken, she added, they too suffer from issues related to self-awareness, how they look, media perceptions and more. Smith uses communication, ice-breaking events, speakers and other projects to encourage program participants.

"I let them know that they're wonderful just the way they are," she said. Smith, who developed In Reach in 1999, said she always knew she would launch a nonprofit.

"Most of the organizations I've worked with have served young people," she said.

Her initial goal was to use high school students to tutor elementary school students.

"High school students are the most underutilized resource in the county," she said. "Most adults find them unapproachable. Young people who have strong leadership skills will find a way to succeed, but most teens need to connect with the right adult."

That's why more adults need to step outside of their comfort zones and develop a nonjudgmental, listening attitude, she said.

"You've got to be ready," Smith said. "You'll be tempted to say, 'You're only 16 years old, and you're doing that?'"

Parents who have trouble discussing sensitive topics can use TV or other aids to launch a conversation. "I grew up in a family of women who talked all the time," Smith said. "No subject went without a long explanation."

She brings that same attitude to her relationship with her 17-year-old daughter. Smith is also raising an 11-year-old sibling.

"I knew I couldn't talk to teens and give out information without starting in my own home," she said. "I let my daughter know that I'm interested in helping her be the best person she can be, even if I don't agree with who that person is."

Smith noted that on average, Maryland teenagers spend 4.8 percent of their time with parents and 2 percent of their time with other adults.

"As adults, we work a lot, and I think we find other things more interesting than our kids," she said.

"Other parents aren't ready to confront issues such as sex. I tell teens that if they keep trying, their parents will open up. Teens might act like they're grown, but they need us."

Toni Smith
How she's making a difference: Smith is the founder of In Reach, a Riverdale Park nonprofit that responds to the unmet developmental and academic needs of adolescents and older youth in Prince George's County. Call 301-277-2791 or visit www.inreachinc.org.

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