



Students Commit to a Healthy Future

Against a cultural tide that tempts and taunts them, 40 teenagers took a pledge to delay sexual activity until marriage as Harmony House hosted its Second Annual Commitment Celebration.

Organized by Project *YES You Can!*, a program sponsored by Saint Michael's Medical Center in Newark, the federally funded initiative has been delivering individual health education coaching to young residents of Harmony House for two years. The program also provides the setting for SWAGGA – Show the World How Authentic Girls and Guys Act – a Friday afternoon club at Harmony House where adolescents meet and share their thoughts and address concerns such as peer pressure.

It was an excited crowd of parents, grandparents and other adults that filled two conference rooms to witness the commitment ceremony, which proved to be a special moment in the lives of these young people.

Guests were welcomed by Diane Young, administrator of Harmony House and the evening was emceed by Bernadette Vissani, Director of Project *YES You Can!*

One of the highlights of the evening occurred when several youth shared their thoughts before the group took their pledge to wait until marriage. Shane Jenkins, 17, called the “*YES You Can!*” program “one of the best influences in my life.”

“The day I chose abstinence was a life-changing moment for me,” she said.

Before students recited their pledge, they heard their parents and other trusted adults in their life make a pledge also – to be an ever present support and someone they can count on. That sentiment was effectively echoed in the song that capped off the evening -- *Lean on Me*. When the students publicly declared their intentions, they were gifted with silver rings to symbolize their decision.

“Abstinence is not an end in itself. It’s a tool to get to the future in the best condition possible,” program director Vissani told the students. “It’s the smart thing to practice on your way to adulthood.”

In addition to the teens who participated from Harmony House, youth and staff from schools and programs served by the project – Isaiah House in East Orange, Irvington High School, and McKinley School and Bethel Christian Academy in Newark- were also present. Also lending their support were Corinne Francis, vice president of Mission Integration at Saint Michael's, Arcelio Aponte from Mayor Cory Booker's office and former Miss New Jersey USA, Kaity Rodriguez.

For more information about Project *YES You Can!* contact Bernadette Vissani at 973.268.1477 or bvissani@smmcnj.org.

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