

New NOPE Chapter Targets Hard-To-Reach Teens

St. Lucie County in central Florida started the chapter in March to fight the rising drug overdose rate. School presentations are intended to educate youths about using drugs.

By Leon Fooksman

Lawrence Richardson was stunned at what he saw across the room.

Faces of chatty teenagers were giving way to silent gazes as a police officer showed a bag used to store bodies of young people who die from drugs. Before long, many were sniffing and quietly crying as a mother who lost her son to a drug overdose described her pain.



Richardson, a school resource deputy in St. Lucie County, Fla., was watching a Narcotic Overdose Prevention & Education (NOPE) Task Force presentation hit a deep, emotional nerve for many hard-to-reach high school students who had seen too much of what the world can dish out.

“The expressions on their faces really got to me,” he said. “I’ve been in law enforcement for 20 years and it was the first time I saw a presentation like that.”

That presentation in the central coastal Florida community inspired Richardson and his colleagues at St. Lucie County Sheriff’s Office to form a NOPE Task Force chapter to enable students across their region to benefit from these talks.

“We need to get into the schools and have kids understand the dangers of drugs and alcohol,” Richardson said. “We need to open their eyes.”

The new chapter, which started in March, intends to keep the nation’s prescription drug abuse epidemic from edging closer to the Treasure Coast, a four-county region including St. Lucie, where 116 accidental overdoses were reported in 2009, up from 112 in 2008.

“Marijuana has always been with us, but the problems associated with prescription pills are becoming more and more evident,” Richardson said.



NOPE's hour-long presentations bring police officers, counselors and grieving parents into schools, colleges and community centers. More than 150,000 students and parents have heard the presentations in recent years in Florida, California and Indiana. NOPE has nine chapters.

The volunteers tell life-changing stories and use props like body bags, urns and enlarged photos of teenagers who died of drugs. They educate students about the dangers of using drugs -- even once -- and leave them fearful of trying the latest fad among teenagers: getting high off mixing prescription pills with alcohol and other drugs.

"We are doing the best we can with law enforcement, but we need a stronger educational component to fight off drugs," Richardson said.



St. Lucie County organizers also want students to learn the importance of calling the authorities (911) if they see their friends overdosing. Among the signs of overdosing are snoring deeply, turning blue and not breathing.

"Kids have to get over the feeling that they are snitches," Richardson said.

He began thinking of forming a NOPE chapter in St. Lucie County some three years ago after seeing a NOPE brochure and later watching the group's presentation. As the drug problem became more apparent in his community, support grew at his school and at the Sheriff's Office to fight back with NOPE presentations across the region.

Three presentations are planned in May, and many more will be added to the curriculum next school year.

"This is a program that's really needed here," Richardson said.

If you value NOPE Task Force's commitment to preventing drug overdoses, please consider a voluntary payment to support the organization. Donate at www.nopetaskforce.org/donations.asp

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