

## **Youth conference helps empower students to become leaders**

By Shannon Milliken

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From drugs to MySpace, today's youth can experience bullying and peer pressure like never before. But about 150 Kings County middle school students got lessons on Thursday in dealing with such problems, when they attended the eighth annual Youth Development Conference.

The students, along with representatives from Kings County Office of Education, Corcoran High School, the California Health Collaborative, the Youth Leadership Institute and Westcare's YMAX program, gathered at the Hanford Civic Auditorium for a variety of interactive workshops.

The goal of the annual conference is to help the students gain strength and to empower them to become leaders through a better understanding of others at home and at school. The workshops covered topics including choices, diversity, friends, MySpace, drugs, service, support, violence, expectations and acceptance.

The conference was organized by Erma Urias, family and youth development coordinator for Kings County Office of Education, but she lets students take the leadership role at the conference.

The middle school students selected to attend the conference are leaders on their respective campuses, and the expectation is that they will take what they learned on Thursday and spread it across their campuses, as well as the campuses of elementary feeder schools.

The focus of the conference is training "teens as teachers". Urias said the students will better remember what they learned at the conference if they present it to others.

Students from Corcoran High's student voice club shared their own experiences and the need to challenge the culture of their environment.

Veronica Rojas, the 17-year-old president of the student voice club, said she hoped her club's presentation helped conference attendees to be motivated to overcome any obstacles in their lives. As an English learner, Rojas has faced a language barrier throughout her youth, and she shared her personal challenges with the middle school students.

Rojas overcame her challenge and she is planning to attend Fresno State after she graduates.

"If you tell yourself you can do it you can really do it," Rojas said. "I hope students today learned never to give up. If you never give up, that's when you find success."

Connie Armerding, student advocate at Woodrow Wilson Junior High School, brought 23 eighth

grade students to the conference. She said she wanted those students to learn about "ownership over their own lives and choices and confidence to stand up to pressure." She said the students she brought will use what they learned on Thursday in continued training and interaction with other students through the rest of the school year.

Mason Rivera, an eighth grade student from John F. Kennedy Junior High School, said he learned at the conference not to use drugs or alcohol because "bad things could happen." He also learned about peer pressure. One component that made an impression on Rivera was a video about a girl killed in a drunk driving accident.

Rivera said he will remember what he learned on Thursday, share it with other students and apply it to his own life.

Janet Perez, an eighth grade student of Woodrow Wilson, said she learned about the subtle ways in which peer pressure can appear, as well as the strategic planning used by sexual predators. She said Thursday's conference was important "so we can know the dangers to us."

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