CHS drug abstinence program gains momentum

Chris Balusik

Darius Harris waits for the results of her drug test with Linda Doles, school health services, Wednesday at Chillicothe High School. More than 100 juniors and seniors are participating in a Keys to Success program that is new to the high school. (Photo: Jess Grimm/Chillicothe Gazette)

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CHILLICOTHE - Leo Woods had no trouble stepping up to take a voluntary drug test Wednesday as part of Chillicothe High School's new Keys to Success program. He's seen what he doesn't want to become.

"My surroundings around where I live is all full of drugs — meth, coke, marijuana — I'm surrounded by that," he said. "You see it in the streets and you look at yourself and say, 'I don't want to be like that when I grow up.' I'm trying to play sports in college and I don't want that to affect my future at all."

Fellow senior Daries Harris, for whom the drug issue hits even closer to home as she helps her parents with their recovery from addiction, agrees.

"I have (been pressured by peers to take drugs)," she said. "One of the main things that keeps me going is I don't want to sacrifice my sports, my education, what I have going for me in the future, for the one moment I may be being pressured by somebody to do drugs."

Theirs are just two of the 103 stories CHS juniors and seniors brought with them to the high school gym Wednesday morning as they got the chance to look at the new Dodge Dart that will go to one of them at the end of the school year and disappeared one-by-one into locker rooms to take the drug test that may land them the car or other incentives.

Keys to Success is in its inaugural year, having emerged after 1966 Chillicothe graduate Gary Von Kennel saw from his home in Virginia the way Chillicothe was being portrayed in the national media with regard to drugs and the investigation into several missing women. He got in touch with school officials and offered almost $40,000 over three years in seed money to start what would eventually become Keys to Success.

The program offers high school juniors and seniors the opportunity to participate, but does not make participation mandatory. Those who submit to voluntary drug testing, maintain a grade point average of at least 1.75 and stay out of trouble will be entered at the end of the year in a drawing to win the car supplied by the Herrnstein family of dealerships or one of several other incentive prizes still being gathered.

"It gives us the opportunity to stand up for ourselves, do something for ourselves for a positive reason," said Harris, who as a teen ambassador for the 5 Minutes for Life program speaks at D.A.R.E. graduations in the district. "We can say no to drugs because we want to, not because we're being forced to."

School resource and D.A.R.E. officer Julie Preston and Debbie Bettendorf, who was asked to play a key role in forming the new program after her involvement in the school's Performance Plus program, recently spent time in Washington D.C. giving U.S. Rep. Steve Stivers a rundown on what Keys to Success is all about and presenting a petition with close to 600 signatures from such organizations as Adena Health System, city council, the police and sheriff's offices and Glatfelter touting its importance. The meeting was
set up through Von Kennel's brother-in-law, and Bettendorf said she was impressed with how seriously Stivers took the presentation and the problem involving drugs across the state.

"He literally acted as if we were the only people he was going to see all day," she said, adding that he told them he would be interested in coming to Chillicothe in a public show of support for the program in hopes of raising awareness of its possibilities across the state.

Preston said she's seen firsthand how the program is making kids think about their choices and consequences not only within the confines of the school day, but when they are at parties and other non-school functions as well.

"With the heroin epidemic as we have it now, I think it's important that kids have incentives like that because kids are so impressionable and I think if we give them incentives like that, that will give them more reason to not utilize those substances," Preston said.

Von Kennel, who has had a successful career in marketing and advertising, said the program is not a cure-all to society's ills, but it is about that moment in a student's life when he's faced with a crucial decision about drugs and uses the program as an excuse to escape that choice successfully. He'd like to see it expand to the county schools, but noted that it's going to take the efforts of several individuals in order to make that happen.

"I think that this is the beginning, and I think it's up to the people who live in Chillicothe now and to people who have wonderful memories of Chillicothe like I do to say enough of this whining and crying or complaining, we've got to stop this," Von Kennel said. "Chillicothe has an issue, let's fix it."