

'They have excellent ideas and there isn't a dull moment...we have good conversations'



Photos by Richard Sayer

Hailee Ruff looks over Stephanie Rogers' poster during a meeting of the Stand Together students at Oil City High School. The club meets to discuss ways the students can bring awareness to the growing problem of mental health issues and substance abuse.

Standing together

Program at OCHS focuses on drug, mental health issues

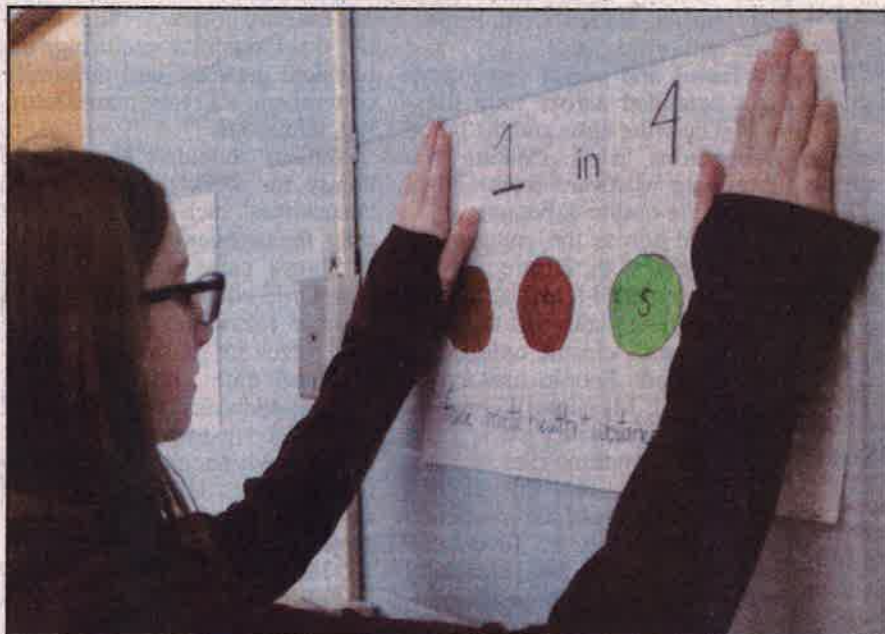
By KARA O'NEIL
Staff writer

Oil City High School students are raising awareness about mental health and substance abuse issues through the Stand Together initiative.

The program is promoting inclusion of peers who have a mental illness and/or substance abuse disorder and is encouraging adolescents to speak with a trusted adult when they are concerned about their own or a peer's mental health.

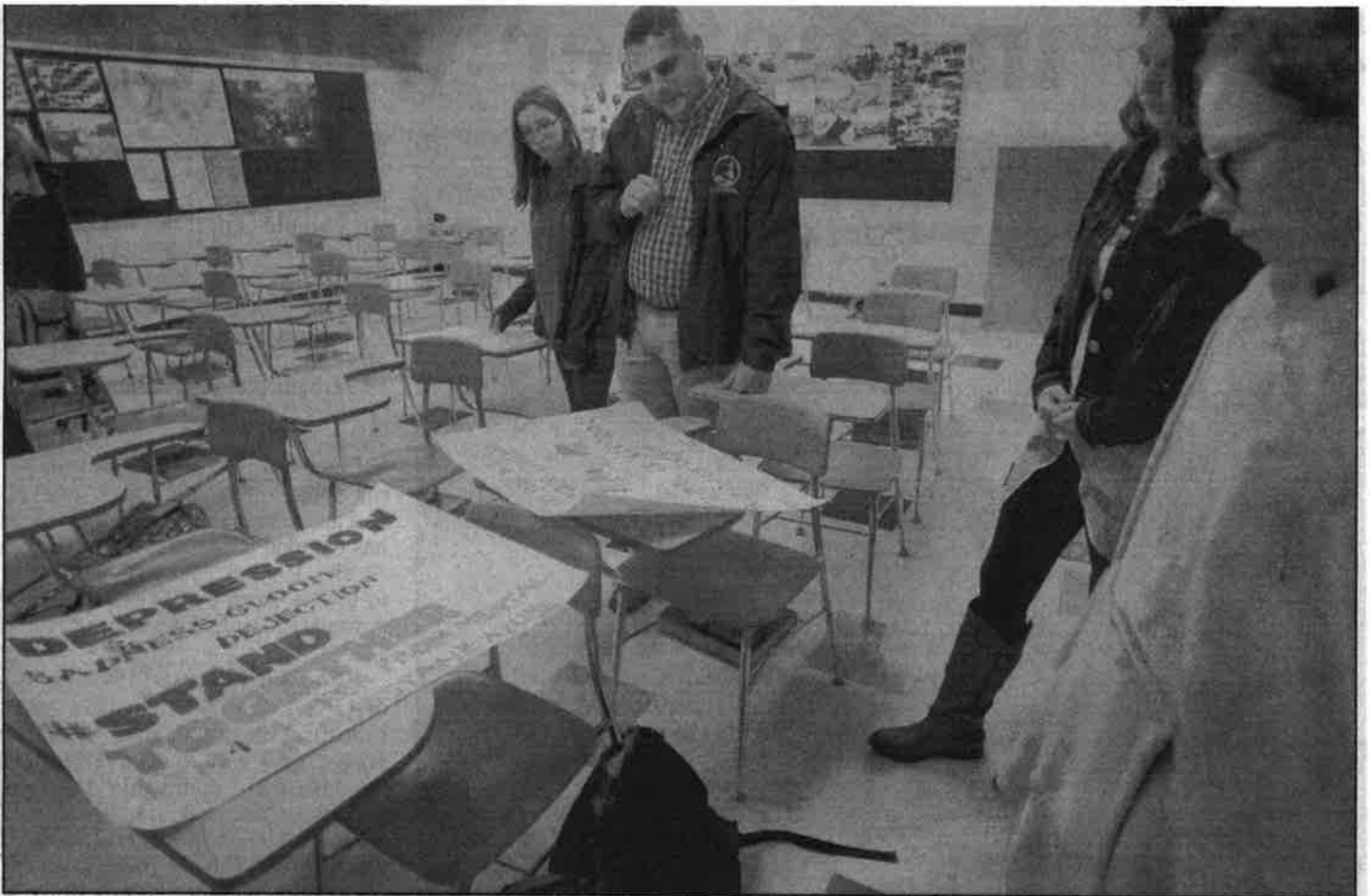
"I want to teach myself and others about mental health and substance abuse. I didn't know too much about it when I joined (Stand Together)," sophomore Chloe Chrispen said.

Junior Jenna Fischli said her favorite part of the group is the diversity of the participants.



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Ellie Smith hangs her poster in the hallway at Oil City High School.



By Richard Sayer

Dan Gruver with Venango County Human Services looks over posters created by the Stand Together students at Oil City High School.

► Together

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"In this group there are people who wouldn't normally come together. We have people who are musically talented and athletes. There are so many cliques in high school," Fischli said.

The high school is partnering with Venango County Human Services on the initiative, and adviser Kevin Vogan said the program, which began in January, is off to a good start.

"There is a lot more enthusiasm than I expected," said Vogan, who is a social studies teacher at the high school. "They have excellent ideas and there isn't a dull moment. We have good conversations," Vogan added.

Dan Gruver from Venango County Human Services agreed.

"The kids are really engaged. We have 10 students and they are in 110%," Gruver said. "I can't wait to see how things go next year. These kids are recruiting each other," Gruver added.

Fischli said the students are getting all ready for next year, and she hopes to see the participation number double.

"This kind of thing gives me goose bumps. Seeing students taking initiative and asking 'how can I contribute and help?'" Gruver said.

Gruver added that Vogan has done a great job getting the program off the ground, and he said taking on a new project like this can be a challenge.

Last month, the 10 students and Vogan participated in two days of training through the Stand Together initiative about mental health and substance abuse issues.

"We learned about definitions and diagnosis at the training," Chrispen said.

The group also played ice breaker games, got to know each other and had the opportunity to become more comfortable speaking in front of a small group, Chrispen added.

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Dan Gruve

Venango County Human Services

"It was really fun. The games helped each of us understand that we were not the only person like this," Chrispen said.

Student leaders are choosing from a variety of projects and will implement their project with Vogan's guidance. Participating schools are eligible to receive \$1,000 to put toward their projects.

At this point, the group has made and hung posters around the school that pertain to mental health and substance abuse awareness.

The group also has an Instagram account, and inspiring quotes and pictures of students around the school are being posted with the goal of brightening their day, Fischli said.

"Social media can have a negative impact," Fischli added. She said there is pressure on girls to have a "perfect Instagram girl body" and to compare themselves with seemingly perfect lives of others.

Fischli added that when the Stand Together posts come up on her Instagram feed she sees "a little happiness."

The group has also sent out a survey to all high school students about mental health and substance abuse.

Vogan said the next step is to settle on a "big project."

One idea being considered is making an oil derrick out of construction paper and putting it in the window of the cafeteria. By the derrick would be different colored sticky notes representing mental health and substance abuse issues.

Students could anonymously take a sticky note and stick it on the window to look like oil coming out of the derrick.

Fischli said the derrick with the notes would show students they are not alone in their struggles.

Participants will attend a ceremony at Heinz History Center in Pittsburgh at the end of the school year. Each group will present its project in a fair-style setting.

Chrispen and Fischli said being part of Stand Together has made them more aware of how words can affect others, especially those with mental health issues.

"If someone is being excited and someone else calls them crazy, you don't know if someone who is actually crazy heard that and will be afraid to come forward about their issues because they think they will be ridiculed for it," Chrispen said.

Fischli agreed, saying "you never know who hears your words. I noticed with my own vocabulary it has affected how I use words like 'crazy.' Some people aren't bothered by it but not everyone is that strong."

On average, one in four people are affected by mental health or substance abuse, Fischli said.

"I pass people in the hall and know that some of them struggle," she said. "It's important for people to know they're not alone and that it is OK to struggle with mental health and substance abuse," she added.

The girls both pinpointed bullying as a cause of struggles among their peers. "Bullying starts a lot of other fires," Chrispen said.

Chrispen also said "a lot of kids are in denial about struggling with substance abuse. They think they are too young to get addicted, they're not adults."

"People say marijuana isn't addictive but it is a gateway drug," Fischli said. "It can lead to using harder drugs that could end their life. I think that is terrifying. If someone overdoses it's not just about them...their family and friends grieve," Fischli added.

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