

DOMESTIC ABUSE: How can we educate our peers about domestic violence and offer positive solutions?

School: Stetson Middle School

Grades: 6, 7 and 8

Curriculum connections: Speaking & Listening, Writing, Reading, Social Studies

Through the course of their project Celeste Rodriguez's class learned to recognize that they each had a role to play in helping stop the cycle of violence.

In the beginning months of the school year her students spent a lot of time in class discussing how they behaved towards one another and the inappropriate things they had seen at home and at school. Several students in the class were instigators of fights at Stetson, so Celeste was eager that they ground their exploration of abuse in their own interactions.

A community partner that was particularly helpful was Women in Transition (WIT). A representative from the organization came to the class and talked about the four types of abuse: physical, emotional, financial and sexual. When she asked the students to think of examples of each, everyone participated. She also described the cycle of violence and what makes a relationship healthy.

Her description of "The Clothesline Project," an annual WIT fundraising event, captured the students' attention. Women who have been abused hand decorate t-shirts with affirmative messages; the t-shirts are then sold in an annual auction. The students were excited to incorporate some aspect of this idea into their project.

The visit motivated the students to learn more through on-line research of teen dating violence.

As the service phase of their project began to kick in, Celeste asked her students to divide themselves into two groups: one to work on the t-shirts, another to develop the program they hoped to present at a spring school assembly. She asked the class to vote on "managers" for each of the two groups. Interestingly, two of the students selected were among the most challenging in terms of their behavior. Celeste believed the students would benefit from the opportunity to exercise their leadership in constructive ways – a premise that proved to be right.

"These are loud kids," said Celeste. "They are auditory learners. Through the project they learned the skills of how to listen to each other. We worked in small groups, so students could talk among themselves, work together. They like it and they're learned a lot in the process."