

GUN VIOLENCE: How can we help make our community aware of the harmful effects of gun violence?

School: William McKinley School

Grades: 7, 8 and 9

Curriculum connections: Speaking & Listening, Reading, Writing, Using Technology & Media, Math

When Scott Charles, from Temple University Hospital's Cradle to Grave program, asked the students in Susan Comitalo's 8th grade students how many of them had witnessed someone shot or killed, most of the hands went up.

It didn't take the class long to arrive at consensus on the topic for their service-learning project. Gun violence was their unanimous choice.

When Scott visited the class he showed them a Power Point presentation with graphs indicating the areas of the city with the highest homicide rates. The students noticed that their Kensington neighborhood ranked among the top most violent areas. Their desire to affect positive change powered their learning for the remainder of the year.

In response to the promotion of a fall poetry contest for kids at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Susan's students prepared poems expressing personal experiences of loss connected with gun violence. Several attended the event, which was sponsored by Physicians for Social Responsibility.

The students also met Joe Davis, a paraplegic and victim of a gunshot wound who now works for Magee Rehabilitation Hospital's Think First program. They were moved by his presentation and motivated by his affirmation of their research.

Susan's class of 37 included 10 students with special needs. Early in the process she decided to let her students drive the direction of their service response: an insight that paid off. All of her students actively participated in the planning of their service, which included the creation of a DVD that reflected their research findings; raising money for Mothers in Charge and the Fallen Heroes Fund, to benefit the family members of slain police officers; and organizing a walk for peace at the end of the school year.

"Telemundo," a Latino cable TV station, covered their walk for peace, which involved all 300 members of the student body at their school.

At the end of the year they proudly displayed their DVD at NID's Shout Out celebration and at the School District of Philadelphia's Exhibition of Learning.