

# Making connections

## Peer group program teaches students to give back

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06/16/2008

Students in Emerson High School's Peer Group Connection program are wrapping up their projects for the year. Peer Group Connection (PGC) is programming set by the Princeton Center to join the incoming and outgoing classes of high school together in positive social and community-oriented activity.

Both Union City high schools, Union Hill and Emerson, are using the program, and PGC will live on beyond the close of Emerson next year when the two schools become Union City High School and then officially combine in the new building on Kennedy Blvd. in 2009.

Emerson established its PGC three years ago, which means the students who were freshman when the program first started are juniors this year. They'll be mentors next year and their freshman will be Union High students.

Helping to guide this proactive buddy program as an advisor for PGC, Mark Lopes described the peer group as "a program that helps freshman transition into the high school with the help of upperclassmen."

Lopes explained that the program emphasizes study skills, peer pressure, time management, communication skills, and service to the community. He said the students came up with their own ideas about what to do and how to do it - the only role the advisors played was to pose the question, "Where can I help?"

### Building bridges

On May 28, the 12th and ninth graders presented the outcomes of their projects in the school library to their fellow students as a kind of science fair of peer and community relations. The teens went to homeless shelters, collected clothing, and presented the outcome of their projects.

Teachers who act as advisors have witnessed the effectiveness of PGC.

"It basically draws in kids to the school and has them buy in so they don't leave school, they don't drop out early, because the incidence of the drop-out rate is highest among freshman going into sophomore year," said Beverly Grady, a co-advisor for PGC. "So, if we 'attack' the freshman and get them tied into school with a senior, somebody that's closer to their level rather than having them being talked down to by an adult, they get to talk to somebody who's been through what they're going through."

Grady believes that the student-to-student connection forms bonds that keep them focused. Each week, the group meets and members find ways to reach their peers and the community.

"Studies find that a lot of the kids that transition into high school fall out the first year because they have no one to connect to and they end up with the wrong crowd, the wrong kids," Grady explained. "This is a way of keeping them in, centered, focused; it gets them to do the right thing with kids who've had the experience. They look up to these kids as brothers and sisters who will keep them on track and talk to them rather than at them."

The students presenting their projects agreed that the program has been rewarding on many levels.



A LITTLE HELP – The Peer Group Connection (PGC) program at Emerson High School allows seniors to act as mentors to freshman while each group provides some charitable service in the community. Christine Bautista, Efrain Pena, Ambar Gomez, and Ysenia Coronel collected cans and bottles for recycling to raise money for a local animal shelter.

Ryan Weatherford, a senior, is leaving behind a legacy when Emerson closes, “My whole family came here since my great-grandmother, and I’m going to be the last one,” but he’s passed on a legacy through the younger students who worked with his group in PGC this year. “The freshman learn off the seniors, and I call tell you that in my freshman year, that’s something that I would have needed.”

Christine Reyes, a senior, has become so involved with her freshman friends made in PGC that she intends to keep in touch with them after she graduates.

Freshman Kelsey Espinoza worked with seniors Jessica Campoverde and Marilyn Fernandez, and when he’s a senior, Kelsey wants to be a mentor in the program.

Even though he had doubts about PGC as a junior, senior Luis Luna is glad the program will continue beyond Emerson’s closing.

“I learned a lot in the program, I learned a lot about myself,” said Luna. “I was able to help out the freshman to become more open. I was more, I guess, social with them and more accepting. I didn’t judge ... I hope that I made an impact in their lives.”

### **Crossing into the community**

The PGC isn’t only about peers - they aim to reach fellow members of the community. The students learn to take an active role in making a difference in the world, starting with Hudson County.

Ryan Weatherford’s group baked for their local emergency services members, including police and EMTs (Emergency Medical Technicians). The group made signs for their cause, collected money for materials, and baked three chocolate cakes and two pies, which were then delivered to the police at 27th Street, and the North Hudson firefighters on 17th Street.

Luis Luna’s group decided to bake some cupcakes and cookies as well, specifically for the police department.

“They risk their lives every day for the society, and I think it’s a very encouraging job for students who want to give back to society,” said Luna.

Another group collected cans for the animal shelter in Hoboken, since their peers were animal lovers. They collected three bags of cans in all and raised \$20 for their donation.

Other groups raised money through a bake sale for the children’s ward and the new emergency room at Hoboken University Medical Center.

Kelsey Espinoza’s group brought clothes for boys and girls as well as toys for the homeless to the North Hudson Health Center. Kelsey made it to the shelter when it was pouring rain and transportation was tough. One of his senior leaders said that people at the school were still bringing in bags for their group’s donation effort.

Joan Lopez, a freshman, and Gonzalo Cortez, a senior peer leader, and the rest of their group collected \$5 from each freshman and made care kits, including shaving materials, for the homeless, which they delivered to the Jersey City Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Gonzalo recounted that upon delivery, a woman at the shelter thanked them for the gift bags saying, “You guys bringing this in is a big help for us.”

Gonzalo’s reaction to her gratitude was quite humble: “We just wanted to help out the community, because it’s something we don’t do that often.”

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