

THE UNION CITY REPORTER

*A publication of the Hudson Reporter
Nine Weekly Newspapers Serving Hudson County*

Volume 12, Number 49

Sunday, February 1, 2009

Students Mentoring Students UC program receives grant, expands

By Amanda Staab, Report staff writer

A peer mentoring program yielding positive results at Union City High School South Campus will be expanded next year, thanks to a recent \$400,000 grant from the AT&T Foundation.

In the Peer Group Connection (PGC) program, seniors act as mentors for freshmen, guiding them through their first year in high school with open discussion and group activities. Teachers do advise the seniors, but the seniors are solely responsible for preparing and conducting each weekly session.

“They cover topics such as time management, making good decisions, staying out of gangs, staying off of drugs, and not drinking, and it is done through various activities,” said George Morales, an advisor who was instrumental in bringing the program to the high school four years ago.

PGC was created by the Princeton Center for Leadership Training, an independent, non-profit organization dedicated to student programs that promote collaborative problem solving skills. The program started at Union City High School South Campus with 16 mentors, and now the group includes 37 mentors and 240 freshmen. It has also branched to the north campus, with 120 freshmen participating.

With the grant, the program will be made available to every freshman. Training will also be provided for more advisors and mentors who want to get involved. The group will also be able to schedule more events for teachers not in the program as well as parents.



LEARNING TO BE LEADERS – Seniors in the Peer Group Connection program at Union City High School South Campus get the opportunity – and the responsibility – of guiding freshmen through the first year in high school. Last week, they got together to discuss the program’s success.

Keeping kids in school

The school district was selected to receive the grant based on the program's success at the high school, said Morales. Two years ago, Rutgers University conducted a study of the Union City program and found that the kids who took part in PGC had a greater chance of staying in school, getting better grades, and keeping out of trouble.

“The program was designed for kids who couldn't find a place when they came to high school and feel alone,” said advisor Beverly Grady. “It was designed for them to link in and stay involved with school.” She added that the highest dropout rate for a high school student is between freshman and sophomore years, and that this issue is exactly what the program targets.

Mentors said they work hard to establish trust and an environment in which freshmen feel comfortable enough to come forward with their personal problems.



BIG GROUP – At Union City High School South Campus, five teacher advisors, 37 senior mentors, and 240 freshmen take part in the Peer Group Connection program. In the photo, in the back row from the left, are advisor Beverly Grady, advisor George Morales, mentor Carlos Arias, advisor Christina Butka-Lopes, and mentor Edwin Campos, and in the front from the left, are mentor Grecia Rosales, mentor Edward Mauricio, mentor Kelly Carvajal, mentor Jackeline Cisneros, and mentor Jeannette Carvajal.

“They see that we are not these perfect students after all.”

– *Edward Mauricio*

Senior Edward Mauricio said that the mentors do this by sharing their own stories with the freshmen.

“They see that we are not these perfect students after all,” he said, “and they feel more comfortable opening up and letting us know the things they go through. They see how we went through similar things, and they notice that maybe those are things that they can overcome. They can become successful students. They can achieve certain goals.”

The seniors said the freshmen come to them with a variety of problems, mostly family issues and bad grades.

“They tell you their personal problems, and it makes you feel good because you feel like they trust you,” said Jeannette Carvajal. “You build a bond with your freshmen.”

Helps seniors shape up, too

Some mentors said they had a hard time starting high school but by participating in the program as freshmen and later on as seniors really helped them. They said being a mentor has kept them in check, as mentors are held to a high standard.

“They have to sign a contract at the beginning of the year to be role models inside and outside of school,” said Morales. He added that if the seniors slip up, they have to tell the freshmen. Being late to school, cutting class, and drinking or smoking can get a senior kicked out of the program.

“This program encourages maturity at an age when most people think they are not mature enough,” said advisor Mark Lopes. “To go in front of kids who are younger than you, your peers, and lead them takes courage and maturity.”

Mentors said the program has helped them grow.

“I think it gives us a chance to make ourselves better as people,” said senior Edwin Campos. “It has taught me a lot of stuff. It has taught me to open up a bit more and be more comfortable with people.”

Another mentor, Grecia Rosales, said: “You learn how to approach different situations in different ways. You learn how to speak to somebody and confront them in a nicer way. You learn a lot. You grow as a person.”