



Upper Pittsgrove Township School guidance counselor Mary Jane Smith leads a question and answer mixer at the Peer to Peer Marches On event. Approximately 225 students and their adult mentors from middle schools across southern New Jersey gathered at the Centerton Country Club in Pittsgrove Monday to explore issues of diversity, tolerance and safety in their schools and communities.

Students learn to be peer leaders

By **THERESA KATALINAS**
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PITTSBROVE TWP. — Eighth-grader Nicole DiVaccaro got an education in the dangers of substance abuse during Monday's visit to Centerton Country Club here.

DiVaccaro, of Upper Pittsgrove School, was one of 225 South Jersey middle school students who gathered at the country club for the third annual New Jersey Peer to Peer Marches On event.

Aside from meeting a multitude of students from nine other schools, DiVaccaro said she gained a wealth of knowledge from watching peers act out skits and play mock quiz shows.

"I learned different ideas about saying no," DiVaccaro said. "I didn't know most of the stuff about what smoking could do to you."

Margo Ross, New Jersey Peer to Peer director, said students will use the information to perform "cross-aged teaching" with younger peers, primarily in fourth through sixth grades.

Ross said Monday's event was one of several teaching workshops geared to supply peer leaders with tools to instruct fellow students on such issues as tobacco and alcohol abuse and diversity.

She said the program has grown tremendously over the last three years and now includes 130 of about 600 middle schools in the state.

Ross said the peer mediation program has lasting effects on all students involved and has served to lower alcohol and tobacco use.

"They believe they can make a difference," Ross said of the peer leaders. "Their behavior and attitudes have changed as a result of the program."

Mary Jane Smith, Upper Pittsgrove Township School counselor, said she serves as a peer mentor for 11 students.

Smith said while changes can't be made overnight, the program definitely works for the betterment of all students.

"The younger kids love to have them come into their classrooms," Smith said. "They do expect you to answer to a higher calling."

Ashley Martin, an eighth-grade peer leader from Bunker Hill Middle School in Washington Township, said multi-school gatherings offer more diverse perspectives on drug abuse teaching approaches.

While Martin said each student responds differently to her classroom interaction, she said helping others is her objective.

"Some of the kids blow it off," Martin said. "Some of them take it seriously."