

## **Teens Promote Peaceful Dating**

By Aline Weiller

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March 14, 2012 (Weston, CT ) -- Weston hosted its very own “Dancing With the Stars” on Friday, February 10th -- the “stars” being youth from Teen PeaceWorks, a group consisting of local teenagers aimed at ending dating violence. The teen organization is the brainchild of the non-profit, Domestic Violence Crisis Center (DVCC), located in Norwalk and Stamford. In recognition of National Teen Dating Violence Awareness and Prevention Month (February), Teen PeaceWorks held a Dance-a-thon with WHS Student Government to raise money for safe houses and educational programs at the DVCC. Participants were sponsored and collected funds in accordance with their dance time on the floor. In addition, high school volunteers work on an ongoing basis with the Weston Domestic Violence Task Force, established in 2006, whose motto calls for “Peace At Home.”

Domestic violence can affect anyone despite their gender, socio-economic background, or age. Experts agree it is highly underreported. Given this reality, both the town’s adult and teen groups share the mission “to raise awareness and educate our community about domestic abuse in order to reduce its occurrence.” Each October (National Domestic Violence Awareness Month), purple ribbons are tied to trees near town center, reminders that Westonites, too, have suffered such abuse. Town statistics show about twenty domestic violence calls are made to police annually. Weston’s Task Force is currently chaired by Marcia Hamelin and hosts informational forums and speakers in Weston and neighboring communities. The Task Force Steering Committee has ten members, but other individuals can be put on an e-mail list, should they want to be kept abreast of related matters. To be added to this distribution, e-mail Marcia Hamelin at [marcia.hamelin@gmail.com](mailto:marcia.hamelin@gmail.com).

Led by teenage co-presidents, Kaylie Bucaro and Jessica Riley, Weston’s Teen PeaceWorks highlights warning signs of relationship abuse and provides resources, not services, to peers. Formed in 2008, Teen PeaceWorks is twenty-five members strong, but welcomes others’ involvement at specific events, such as the Dance-a-thon. “I am so proud of the students’ involvement in the Teen PeaceWorks Program of the DVCC. Their work has brought forth an awareness of the importance of understanding that domestic violence is real and that it has a terrible effect on families, said Lisa Wolak, Weston High School Principal. “We were thrilled to

be able to host the Dance-a-thon at Weston High School. Empowering teens to bring ideas forward for the good of the community is part of our school's core beliefs." Ms. Bucaro and Ms. Riley were recently featured on the February 19th edition of Channel 2 News, CBS-NY to discuss teen dating abuse and their local efforts.

The organization's next fund-raiser is the Weston High School Talent Show, sponsored once again in conjunction with WHS Student Government, and slated for Thursday, May 24th at 6:30 p.m. Participants will display a mural with message "Hands Are Not for Hurting" and sport "STOP Teen Dating Violence" t-shirts while they perform. Net proceeds from the Talent Show will also be donated to DVCC, and possibly a second charity. Additional details will be posted in the high school's "T" hallway and inquiries can be sent to [westonteenpeaceworks@yahoo.com](mailto:westonteenpeaceworks@yahoo.com).

Fund-raising efforts aside, Teen PeaceWorks aims to make teens aware of relationship abuse. The warning signs of dating violence are many and may include: Checking your cell phone or e-mail without permission, constant put downs, extreme jealousy or insecurity, an explosive temper, isolating you from family or friends, making false accusations, mood swings, physical violence, possessiveness, and ordering you around. "Abusive behaviors for teens can range from excessive calling and texting to controlling a person's friendships. Physical behaviors such as pushing, shoving or pressure for sex, may also come into play. In all cases, the root of the problem is the desire of one partner to control the other -- the behavior can vary, but the bottom line remains the same," said Marcia Hamelin, a Teen PeaceWorks advisor. "I believe everyone has the basic right to live with dignity and free from fear in their personal relationships," Hamelin added.

The DVCC periodically sends Teen PeaceWorks counselors to Weston schools to provide age-appropriate lessons on anger management and healthy relationships. In turn, Teen PeaceWorks distributes information on how to recognize abuse and where to get help. Should friends suspect dating violence, they can voice their concerns and urge the abused friend to seek help from a trusted adult. "Dating is really hard, especially as a teen. Your relationship shouldn't make you feel worse about yourself, and you shouldn't feel like you're isolated from your friends and family. If you do, it's worth bringing up with someone you trust," said Kaylie Bucaro. Too often, the abused person feels isolated, unwilling or unable to reach out for help. In

this case, the youth may want to confide in Meghan Skelton, the Weston High School and Middle School social worker, a professional trained in regard to these issues.

Speaking to a respected and trusted adult is vital, especially in potentially dangerous situations. If you are in an unhealthy relationship, tell an adult -- be it a parent, family member, adult friend, confidential school counselor, or even your doctor. Of course, in violent situations, call 911. The DVCC serves Stamford, Norwalk, Westport, Darien, New Canaan, Wilton and Weston. Teens and adults can also call the DVCC's confidential, 24/7 Hotline at 888.774.2900, the office at 203.588.9100, or visit [www.dvccct.org](http://www.dvccct.org) for more information.

“Helping young people understand they need and have the right to safety in their personal relationships is the beginning of the solution,” said Ms. Hamelin. For more information regarding The Domestic Violence Task Force or Teen Peaceworks, visit [www.WestonDomesticViolenceTaskForce.org](http://www.WestonDomesticViolenceTaskForce.org). To become involved in either group, contact Marcia Hamelin, Task Force chair, at [marcia.hamelin@gmail.com](mailto:marcia.hamelin@gmail.com) or Juri Garone, Task Force media liaison at [jurigarone@yahoo.com](mailto:jurigarone@yahoo.com).