

# She found purpose and shares it with teens



The founder and current executive director for Teens With a Purpose, Deirdre Love, left, and event coordinator, Paige Robinson, check the event schedule during the forum at Lake Taylor High School in Norfolk, Va. Saturday, Dec. 12, 2009. (Hyunsoo Leo Kim | The Virginian-Pilot)

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*By Jaedda Armstrong*

“We’re going to cover a real touchy subject that a lot of people don’t like to take on, but we like to challenge you,” said Deirdre Love as she stared out into the crowd of more than 200 teens on a recent Saturday afternoon. “Dating abuse and violence.”

Sitting in the audience, this topic hit 17-year-old Dakita Perry close to home. A relative had been in an abusive relationship for years. Perry never understood why it took her so long to leave.

Then, Perry joined Love’s organization, Teens With a Purpose, or TWP. It’s a group of Hampton Roads youth who promote healthy thinking, positive actions and self-respect.

“I instantly fell in love with the group,” said Perry, a junior at Booker T. Washington High School in Norfolk. “They teach you positive ways to deal with real-life situations.”

During the five-hour forum that day, TWP offered inspirational speeches, games, music and personal stories about dating violence. Perry learned that fear can prevent a person from leaving an abusive relationship.

She also discovered the signs to watch out for in a relationship: jealousy, flaring tempers and pressure to have sex. Her education came from Love and the group she now calls her second family.

Love started TWP in 1996 after her cousin died of an AIDS-related illness.

“When he died, I felt like I needed to do something,” she said Love.

She decided the group’s mission would be youth empowerment with a primary focus on AIDS prevention.

“If they are informed of the dangers of unprotected sex and gang violence early on, there can be more room for protection and prevention,” said Love, a 50-something mother of three who lives in Chesapeake.

The group started out as a youth ministry funded through Love’s church, the Basilica of St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception in Norfolk. They would visit other churches in the community and attend small community events.

The more they were out in the community, the more local teenagers wanted to participate, Love said.

In 2008, the group partnered with Access AIDS Care under a state-funded grant, and became the non-profit organization Teens With a Purpose – The Youth Movement.

Love recently quit her job at Stihl Inc. after more than 22 years to work full-time on TWP.

“Lunch breaks, evenings, weekends. I would be on the phone either securing a room rental for our meetings or answering e-mails,” said Love. “It literally became a part of my everyday life. I had to make more time for it.”

Mansi Master, program coordinator at Access, works with Love on a weekly basis.

“She really took a leap of faith and that shows you that she’s really committed,” said Master. “That sums her up right there; I don’t know too many people who would do that.”

Today, Love works with organizations such as the National Minority AIDS Coalition, the Urban League of Hampton Roads and the Boys and Girls Club of Hampton Roads putting on programs and raising money.

She likes to get teens involved in the programs from the start. Last year, they helped plan and implement the 2009 Dropout Prevention Summit in Norfolk.

They mix it up with role-playing, skits, spoken word and music, said Love. One of her favorite skits is The Dating Game where the girls each present themselves as a sexually transmitted disease and try to get one of the boys to “pick” them. Though it’s entertaining, said Love, the message is always serious.

“I really think that they are the trendsetters, that are going to change HIV and violence statistics,” Love said about the teens she mentors. “The time is coming soon when the cool thing is not going to be having random sex with people. It’s just going to take enough of them to plant the seed and say, ‘That’s not what we’re doing!’ ”

Perry calls Love her second mom.

When she won Miss Nursing Club at school last year, Perry’s mother was unable to help her get ready for her ceremony. Love stepped in and brought Perry a dress, shoes and got her hair done.

“She made sure that I looked pretty,” said Perry who calls Love “Mama D.” “I’ve never had someone put that much time and effort in me until that day.”

Love said she’s repaid by watching her teens “morph into the butterflies that they are.”

One of the original members of the group, Marcus Calabrese, is now a publicist. Another, Abiosseh Davis, is pursuing a career related to AIDS prevention.

Love wants to expand TWP beyond Hampton Roads. She envisions kids everywhere saying “Abstinence is the new cool.”

For now, she’s grateful that she is able to help teens make positive decisions.

“I feel like people are depending on me,” she said. “I can’t let them down.”

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