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Students learn how to help peers get healthy at MNU rally

BY DAVID SCOTT

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Three Olathe North High School students hope their participation in a teen wellness “PEP” rally at MidAmerica Nazarene University will help raise their peers’ health consciousness.

The event on Monday and Tuesday was sponsored by the Kansas Action for Healthy Kids, a national non-profit organization that addresses overweight, undernourished and sedentary issues facing area youth. The “PEP” rally, an acronym for Peers Encouraging Peers, included 70 students from 25 Kansas high schools. Kansas School for the Deaf was among the schools participating.

The rally offered activities focused on health and fitness activities, but more importantly it brought students together to brainstorm ways to promote healthier lifestyle issues among their peers. Because of the students’ participation, Olathe North is eligible for a \$500 grant, dedicated to developing and implementing of a school wellness plan. In September, the students will submit their ideas in an application and the grant will be awarded in October.

“The kids will come up with ideas of how to tell their peers about nutrition, or they can create a club with a sponsor,” said Wendy Scholten, a physical education teacher at Ridgeview Elementary School and treasurer of Kansas Action for Healthy Kids.

Kendra Marr, a senior, and Rolla Hansen, a junior, are both in the Olathe North’s sports medicine program. Marr, an aspiring doctor, hopes her participation in the two-day event will further her education in the medical field. Healthy living may require serious lifestyle changes for some people, for her it’s about making better decisions.

“I think everybody should be conscious of their health and body. People aren’t as conscious as the need to be,” she said. “The issue is teaching kids to eat (junk food) in moderation.”

The students do not see a specific problem at North, but have noticed fellow classmates veer toward tastier treats, such as pizza, candy and soda pop.

“It’s up to the students to decide on how they want to live their lives,” said Hansen.

Marr is well-equipped with simple tips that lead to a healthier life. Some of her tips for moderation include sharing a favorite junk food with a friend, or saving half for latter in the day. Instead of pepperoni on white crust, Marr suggests a “healthy pizza” made with wheat crust, low-fat cheese and vegetables. Now, after receiving a healthy eating cookbook at the rally, she has a new favorite—peanut butter and banana smoothie, which she praises for its high protein count.

Paul Shirley, former professional basketball player and Kansas resident, was the featured speaker for the rally. Shirley believes addressing health issues facing children takes a community effort. Although the rally is designed to empower high school students, these young leaders need support from their family, teachers and counselors.

“This is a big deal in our world today. We have a problem with obesity,” said Shirley. “If people can do it together and feel like they are part of a group, that mentality will become common place.”

The movement that will grow from this rally is much needed. According to Gayle Price, chairman of Kansas Action for Healthy Kids, kids born in 2001 are expected to have a shorter life expectancy than their parents, which she believes is an injustice.

“We know what we need to do. It’s about energy balance. We need to make sure our kids are active 60 minutes a day, and we need to provide them with healthy food choices,” Price said.