

# Taking PRIDE in combatting addiction

Using NJEA's PRIDE in Public Education program, Region 17 in Morris County takes the lead in connecting local associations with community organizations to educate students and parents about substance abuse.

by David Yastremski, NJEA communications consultant

Heather Marsh, an administrative assistant in the NJEA UniServ Region 17 office, sits on the Municipal Alliance in Jefferson Township, Morris County, her hometown. Municipal Alliances are established by municipal ordinance and engage residents, local government and law enforcement officials, schools, nonprofit organizations, faith communities, parents, youth and other allies in efforts to prevent alcoholism and drug abuse in communities throughout New Jersey. They receive funding from the Governor's Council on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse, which was established in 1989.

In 2012, Marsh realized that NJEA members and the NJEA PRIDE in Public Education program could assist local alliances and organizations to develop programs that help students resist the lure of drugs, alcohol and tobacco. She approached John Williams, a Region 17 UniServ field representative, about ways that NJEA could help Jefferson Township develop and promote these important initiatives.

The result was the formation of JTEAM, the Jefferson Township Education Association and Municipal Organizations. Since 2012, JTEAM has built bridges between JTEA, the Jefferson Township Municipal Alliance Committee, the school district's parent-teacher associations and other community organizations to combat drug addiction. Through school and community events, a website ([www.jeffersonsteam.org](http://www.jeffersonsteam.org)) and social media outreach, JTEA members are educating their communities about how to recognize and manage substance abuse.

## Program expands

The success of JTEAM encouraged Marsh and Williams to expand the initiative to other alliances in Morris County. Marsh explains that while the Governor's Council on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse funds 28 separate alliances in Morris County, there are restrictions on how the funds can be spent.

"This creates a perfect opportunity for local associations to leverage PRIDE grants to enhance these alliances by offering edu-

cational giveaways, refreshments and other support," Marsh said.

Local association members also volunteer at the events, establishing a unified approach to address substance abuse among children.

"Many times we hear people blaming the schools for not doing enough to prevent substance abuse," Marsh continued. "By taking this approach, our members are rightfully seen part of the solution."

Since 2013, PRIDE grants totaling nearly \$49,000 have been allocated to 13 local associations to foster partnerships with local municipal alliances.

## Associations, community organizations co-sponsor events

The Hanover Township Education Association and the Hanover Park Regional Education Association hosted former Boston Celtic Chris Herren in February. Over the course of two days, Herren talked to parents, high school students and middle school students about his descent into drug abuse and his life as a recovering addict.

"Each audience received a presentation targeted specifically to them," said Karen Perry, secretary of the Hanover Township Substance Abuse Council. "This is important since our events involve a wide spectrum of the community. John and Heather have been wonderful in connecting the schools to our programs. It's great to see the teachers and school staff members there working with the committee and volunteers."

The Region 17 UniServ office has helped other locals bring similar programs to their communities during this school year.

- The Jefferson Township Education Association, the Education Association of Mount Olive and the Morris County Council of Education Associations worked with the Jefferson Township Municipal Alliance Committee and the Lake Hopatcong Elks on "Dinner with Doug." Doug Collier, a former federal Drug Enforcement Administration special agent, discussed how prescription drugs and heroin abuse are affecting suburban youth.



- Working with the Mountain Lakes and Boonton Township Municipal Alliances, the Mountain Lakes Education Association brought author Randy Nathan to speak with parents, coaches, and students on bullying concerns in sports and schools. MLEA provided copies of Nathan's book, *Bullying in Sports: The Injuries We Don't See*.
- Four-time World Series champion Darryl Strawberry spoke about his addiction struggles at Morris Knolls High School where the Rockaway Township, Morris Knolls, and Rockaway Borough education associations co-sponsored the event with the Rockaway Township Substance Abuse Alliance.
- With the Wharton Municipal Alliance, Wharton Education Association helped sponsor "Hidden in Plain Sight." At that event, a member of the Wharton Police Department shared tools and techniques for parents to help their children avoid drugs.
- Jefferson Township Education Association and the Jefferson Township Municipal Alliance presented "In Their Shoes," teen suicide prevention program.

### Entry point for association member engagement

"This is something that all members can be involved in: teachers, bus drivers, paraprofessionals, custodians, secretaries, nurses, food service staff, and guidance counselors," Marsh said, noting that many of the local association volunteers were early-career members who understand many of the issues that young people experience.

Williams added that the opportunity has helped members find a place for themselves in association activities.

"A member may not be able or ready to serve on a grievance committee or negotiations team, but all members have the opportunity to get involved with these events," Williams said.

Diane Mascolo, president of Hanover Township Education Association, discussed how the events can build bridges between local associations in Morris County.

"Working with the HPREA during the Chris Herren event, provided a nice opportunity for members to join together and contribute to the effort," Mascolo said. "Through the PRIDE grant, both locals signed up registrants while handing out books, T-shirts and wristbands. It allowed the attendees to leave with something concrete to continue the discussion at home with their children."

Kristine Wilsusen, community health educator for Jefferson Township, agrees, stressing the importance of resources.

"These programs are about sharing and pooling our resources to help with our common goal of education and awareness," Wilsusen said. "By providing resources, parents and students can share their information with others. We have caring parents and caring teachers working together. That's the beauty of this effort."

With the success of the various programs across the region, Marsh hopes to see other locals and regions take advantage of this civic engagement between members and their communities. They have presented their program at the NJEA Summer Leadership Conference where they have received a positive response from members throughout the state.

"Through PRIDE, these partnerships have the potential really make a difference for our students," Marsh said.

"PRIDE is part of what I do," Williams added. "It's a vital part of negotiating, of organizing, of reawakening our communities to how NJEA serves our students. It's the right thing to do." 🇺🇸

*David Yastremski is an NJEA communications consultant and an English teacher at Ridge High School in Bernards Township. He can be reached at [dyastremski@njea.org](mailto:dyastremski@njea.org). Heather Marsh can be reached at [hmarsh@njea.org](mailto:hmarsh@njea.org). John Williams can be reached at [jwilliams@njea.org](mailto:jwilliams@njea.org).*