

Peer Helpers Are There When Fellow Students Need To Talk

BY SUSAN USHER

When you need someone to talk to, where do you turn? For an increasing number of Brunswick County High School students the answer may be a fellow student.

Not just any student, not their best friend, but a peer helper with special skills.

"They are not counselors, they are listeners," says Judy Harris, a guidance counselor at West Brunswick High School. "They were trained to be good listeners."

North Brunswick High School in Leland started the peer helper program on a pilot basis last year. The results were encouraging and the program expanded this fall to all three high schools. Selected students completed a 20-hour workshop shortly after the start of school and are on the job.

Peer helpers give up one class period a day for the entire school year to be available to fellow students, working out of a room in the guidance area.

"It's a big responsibility, period," said Ms. Harris.

Recently, one hour of class credit was approved for program participants, reflecting what they already knew: while helping fellow students, peer helpers are themselves learning and maturing.

"It made me feel good about myself that I could help my friends," said Jennifer Horne of Ocean Isle. "It's built my own self-esteem."

At West Brunswick High, the STOP sign outside the guidance suite sums up the essence of the program. STOP is the acronym for "Students Trusting Other Peers."

At first students were slow in seeking out peer helpers; the volunteers had to prove themselves trustworthy and helpful. Though the peer helpers say it's been a challenge, maintaining confidentiality hasn't been a problem. A poster on the door bears this constant reminder that it's a top priority: "STOP—What is said here, What is heard here, Let it stay here."

Peer helpers are taking their responsibilities to fellow students seriously.

As a result, with time, more and more students are turning to them when they need to talk, to sort things out.

"I think it's easier for a student to talk to you than to an adult," said sophomore Tammy Roberson, a peer helper from the Holden Beach area. "It's like talking to a friend. They think you might understand better what they're going through."

Through peer helpers, the guidance office may be reaching a new group of students.

"The people who come in don't really think the counselors can relate to them," said Meg Small. "I think they might not have talked to anyone else."

Bertha Bell, West guidance counselor agrees. "Often a student feels more comfortable talking to someone their own age. They feel they can talk freer than with an adult. There's no perceived 'generation gap'."

At West Brunswick, at least one

peer helper is available every period throughout the day. After an initial interview the peer helper and student may meet three or four more times, up to 30 minutes at a time, as the student tries to work out a particular problem. At that point, if the peer helper has seen no change in the situation, it's time to refer the student to a guidance counselor.

"They refer to us and we refer to them," said Ms. Harris. "It works both ways."

Peer helpers walk a fine line.

Before, when a friend talked to them about a problem, it was OK to offer advice. As peer helpers, it's not OK, ever.

"You want to so bad because you're used to talking with your friends," said helper Meg Small of Shallotte, a senior. "But you can't. You'd be responsible if it went wrong."

She and other volunteers say they've learned it's better to steer close friends to other peer helpers, and they're learning not to make other students' problems their own.

Says Ms. Bell, "The students have been trained to listen and not take sides, and to ask the thought provoking questions that cause a student to come to grips with something. There's no 'If I were you, I would do this.' People have to draw their own conclusions."

The students who serve as peer helpers were selected by recommendation of both their peers and a committee of school faculty and staff. At the end of school last year, a survey asked students to list the fellow students with whom they felt most comfortable talking to. From that came a list of prospects that was reviewed and narrowed down by faculty members. Keeping in mind continuity of the program, the emphasis was on mostly sophomores and juniors, though a few seniors



STAFF PHOTOS BY SUSAN USHER

AMONG THE DOZEN peer helpers at West Brunswick High School are (from left) Jennifer Horne, Meg Small and Sally Schutte. They're trained to listen when a fellow student has a problem and needs to talk.



CONFIDENTIALITY HELPS. Peer helpers like Tammy Roberson (above) meet with students in private and may share their experiences only with a guidance counselor, not other students.

were accepted.

Of the group targeted, an even dozen responded to an invitation to sign up for training. West's group includes Becky McKeithan, Jana Perkins, Felishia Hill, Caroline Carlisle, Laurie Holmes, Jason Benton, Pam Detrie and Kristina Poulos, in addition to the four students interviewed.

In training they learned how to listen actively and practiced interview techniques that help students define their problems and explore possible solutions. They also learned ways of telling when a referral to someone else is appropriate or when a student is simply killing time, and how to deal with those situations.

In their talks with students, peer helpers mostly listen. When they do talk, it is usually to rephrase something a student has said, as in, "What I think I hear you saying..." or to ask a question that requires more than a yes or no answer: "What do you think your choices are? What do you think might happen if you chose that option?"

"We try to help the students resolve problem for themselves," said Ms. Harris.

Peer helpers work hard at remaining objective and always helpful. During the course of a day they may hear about a boyfriend-girlfriend problem, a student's difficulties with a teacher or class, or a student's own insecurities. While a particular concern might seem minor on the surface, said Sally Schutte, she concentrates on the student so as "to understand that to them their problem is real, that it's very important."

While offering students another option for and providing participants an opportunity for personal growth, the peer helper program also frees counselors to spend more time with those students who need it, say Ms. Harris and Ms. Bell.

Both support continuation of the program next year, but say some refinements will be made after this first year's experience.

"It's been a good program, but we see some things we need to do," said Ms. Bell.

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