

Taking STEPS towards the future of town

By ROB GLIDDEN
STAFF WRITER

School had just ended the day before, so getting students to sit down and discuss the next school year may have seemed like wishful thinking. Yet over two dozen students of various ages gathered at the YMCA to start working out upcoming activities for the Southington Town-Wide Effort to Promote Success (STEPS).

The group's leaders took the opportunity to announce the upcoming "STEPS" week, which will include a gathering at Camp Sloper on Sunday, September 20, followed by five days' worth of activities within the schools themselves.

"The goal is to get kids more involved in the community," said Southington High School teacher Dan Hart. "We would like to put together a core of youth leaders to work with us."

Some of the students who attended had gone to the first STEPS picnic in May or the Aqua Turf Club seminar last year. They were invited to "bring a friend" who had not gotten involved in the group yet. Those who had spent some time with STEPS were able to clearly articulate the project's mission.

"It's about the community coming together and trying to figure out ways to find success," said seventh grader Maryssa Romano.

A central part of STEPS is the concept of "developmental assets." The program evaluates a student's quality of life by measuring how many "assets" he or she has. These assets can be anything from involvement in youth activity groups to a safe school.

What emerged in the student discussions was that some of these assets are more complex than

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Kelly Berkmoes,
STEPS Coordinator

they appear at first. For example, the point was made that a "safe" school is not just a school with up-to-date security measures, but also an environment where kids don't have to fear being constantly picked on by their peers.

The leaders of STEPS feel that many of these assets can be enhanced by participation in the various youth-oriented activities in Southington.

"We don't want to create new programs," said STEPS Coordinator Kelly Berkmoes. "There are enough in town. We want to get kids involved with them."

The students split into groups to brainstorm on potential methods to spread the word about STEPS in ways that would grab the attention of the peers. Suggestions included Facebook pages, YouTube videos, posters, a

student-anchored news broadcast to air on local television, and a "Battle of the Bands."

The specifics of the week-long program are not yet set in stone, but the students involved remain fully committed to the success of STEPS.

"We want to make Southington a better place to grow up," said Theo Smigelski, who will be a senior at SHS this fall.

Miss CT: Kuziak takes home the crown

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University, where she majored in legal studies and minored in music. To win the crown, Kuziak competed in a private interview, on-stage interview, evening gown, talent, and lifestyle/fitness (swimsuits). Kuziak won the preliminary competition on Saturday for lifestyle and fitness. For her talent, Kuziak performed a tap dance routine to a Bette Midler song.

As the winner of the pageant, Kuziak receives an \$8,000 scholarship. She goes now to Las Vegas to compete for honors as Miss America.

Kuziak's platform as Miss Constitution is "Walking on Sunshine: The Healing Power of Music." During her onstage interview Friday night, she explained music has its therapeutic benefits. "I

have seen the proof myself," said Kuziak. She explained she recently was brought into a local hospital to sing for the patients in the pre-operative section of the hospital. The stress before an operation, she explained, often raises a patient's blood pressure. The hospital brought her in to help relieve that.

And the effort worked. "Research continues to prove (music's) healing qualities," she said.

Kuziak wasn't the only Southington woman or girl in the Miss Connecticut Scholarship pageant, although she was the only local to reach the semi-finals on Saturday night.

During her on-stage interview on the first night of preliminaries, Miss Southington Shannon Erickson, spoke about her platform, which is raising awareness of autism. As

she spoke to the reigning Miss Connecticut, Ashley Glenn, on Thursday night, Erickson spoke about some of the warning signs indicating a child may have autism.

Miss Fairfield County, Taylor Hira, of Southington, is touting volunteerism for her platform. During her on-stage interview at Friday night's preliminary competition, she was asked how she would encourage people to volunteer. Hira, a 2009 graduate of Southington High School, said she would tell people how important it is to volunteer. She also said she would tell them volunteering is a good way for people to learn about their communities.

In the Outstanding Teen competition, held concurrently with the Miss Connecticut pageant, Miss

Plantsville's Outstanding Teen Lynze Khan, a Southington High School student, spoke about the importance of reaching out to the elderly.

Miss Southington's Outstanding Teen Alyssa Blanchette, another SHS student, spoke about how she is organizing a book drive with Borders at the Westfield Shopping Center in Meriden. The books will be donated to the less fortunate, through Youth Services Departments in the community.

Caitlyn Flynn of Southington, who competed as Miss Greater Waterbury's Outstanding Teen and also is an SHS student, spoke about her platform, "Ready... Set... Read."

The new Miss Connecticut's Outstanding Teen is Acacia Courtney of Hamden.



MIKE CHAIKEN

Sharalynn Kuziak introduces herself on first night of prelims thursday.

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