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Teens show they care

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GURNEE— Young adults in the community are changing the way their peers perceive sexual assault. These teens are part of the group Youth Allies C.A.R.E. of the Zacharias Sexual Abuse Center.

"Sexual abuse is not just when someone does something physical; it's also calling others bad names and actions like pulling a bra strap," said Margot Ocampo, a 16-year-old member of Youth Allies C.A.R.E.

This is the message that the group tries to spread onto the community through their work with the center.

Youth Allies C.A.R.E. began as Real Kids Care with local girl scouts and sixth graders as members. Over the last two years, they have evolved into the youth leadership group they are today.

"They are very bright young people. We're very fortunate to have them," said Jane Hunter, director of community education and advisor of the group at the Zacharias Center.

Hunter said that the teens thought that dropping the 'Kids' from their former title and replacing it with Allies instead would be a more powerful name for the group. The acronym C.A.R.E. stands for Creating A Rape Free Environment.

"The group brings the opportunity for youth to connect with other youth and have discussions about sexual harassment," Hunter said. "They are models in regards to social justice."

The group meets for about two hours every other Saturday at the center, which is on Old Grand Avenue in Gurnee. And one of the main objectives that the group focuses on is how to raise awareness and funds for the center.

"We usually do things for open houses," said Giselle Martinez who joined the group almost one year ago.

Last year, Youth Allies C.A.R.E. organized a bowling party at Bertrand Bowling in Waukegan and raised \$1,200.

Martinez said that the group also puts on skits and discusses scenarios of situations of sexual harassment. "In every meeting we find out new things," Martinez said.

The teens try to share the information they learn at their meetings with their classmates and friends.

"I know people who have been victims of sexual abuse and I like to tell everyone about what we do here," said 16-year-old Erika Nunez.

Nunez has recently been named co-chair of the group and says her parents were hesitant about letting her join the group at first. But now they are very proud of her and the work that she does as a member.

There are about 25 members in Youth Allies C.A.R.E. from different local high schools. The group is open to any teen between the ages of 14 to 17. For more information on Youth Allies C.A.R.E., contact Jane Hunter at 847-244-1187.

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Teens who are part of Youth Allies C.A.R.E. enjoy some time together. The group meets for about two hours every other Saturday at the center, which is on Old Grand Avenue in Gurnee. And one of the main objectives that the group focuses on is how to raise awareness and funds for the center. (Photo provided)