

## Third 'Stand Together' class is the largest group to participate

The Stand Together program sponsored by the Office of Behavioral Health (OBH) concluded May 6, with more than 150 students from seven schools attending a celebration at the Heinz History Center in the Strip District.

The students presented the projects they developed during "Stand Together" to promote dialogue about mental illness and substance use, reduce stigma toward peers and encourage youth with behavioral health challenges to seek help before problems become severe.

In its third year, "Stand Together" involved its largest number of students since its inception in 2013. The program came about under the guidance of a workgroup organized by OBH.

School officials, representatives of OBH, program funder Staunton Farm Foundation, Community Care Behavioral Health and people recovering from mental illness were among the attendees at this year's celebration. Michael Gruber, Systems Transformation Coordinator in OBH, emceed the event. He and OBH Deputy Director Denise Macerelli praised the students for their creative work and dedication to "Stand Together," noting that they will have had impact.

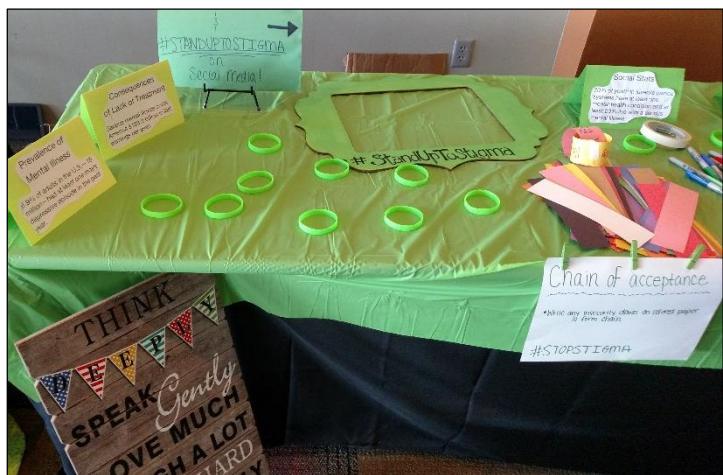
"Someone, somewhere, sometime will have their journey lessened because of what you have done with 'Stand Together,'" Denise told the students.

Participating school districts were Propel Braddock Hills High School; West Mifflin Area High and Middle Schools; Brentwood High School; Arsenal Middle School; and Steel Valley Middle and High Schools.

Before they undertook projects funded with mini-grants from Staunton Farm, "Stand Together" participants attended trainings, conducted by Stand Together Coordinator, Holly Turkovic, to explore meanings and myths about mental illness and substance use.



**Above**, from left, Glenn Ford, junior; adviser Lauren Rowe; Jaquayla Jenkins-Lawson, senior; and Jessica Halbleib, senior, participated in "Stand Together" at West Mifflin Area High School. They hold their recognition plaque and the 2015 Educator Award the 2015 Stand Together Team received from the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention's Pittsburgh chapter. Below, Steel Valley High School students' encouraged peers to take "Selfies with a Stranger."



Afterward, students distributed literature, offered peers the chance to take “Selfies with a Stranger” as ice breakers, and decorated classroom doors and lockers with the message that one out of four people will experience a mental illness or know someone with it. They held dances and “Break the Silence Days,” engaged social media to spread the anti-stigma message and had staff and students sign an anti-stigma pledge. Some attended “Mindful: Exploring Mental Health Through Art” at the Society for Contemporary Craft in the Strip District, an exhibit that had been supported in part by OBH.

The students also raised thousands of dollars with dances, races and bake sales to benefit nonprofits, including the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) and Sojourner House, which provides recovery services to mothers and their children.

“We can certainly end stigma with all the enthusiasm you have demonstrated,” Mike told this year’s participants in concluding remarks.

All told, nearly 400 students in Allegheny County schools have participated in “Stand Together” over its three-year existence. Plans are underway for another year, with the hope of expanding the number of participating schools.