

Stand Together gains local, national recognition

There was much to celebrate at the 2017 Stand Together Project Presentation and Recognition event.

Stand Together is an Allegheny County Department of Human Services (DHS) Office of Behavioral Health (OBH) anti-stigma initiative that trains, inspires, and equips middle and high school youth to act against stigma toward peers with mental or substance use disorders. On May 10, more than 250 Stand Together participants from Propel Braddock Hills High School, Steel Valley Middle School, Arsenal Middle School, Carlynton High School, Environmental Charter School, West Mifflin Area Middle School, Steel Valley High School and West Mifflin Area High School gathered at the Heinz History Center to discuss projects they conducted to reduce mental health stigma in their respective schools. Projects included a life-sized board game where players moved forward for positive actions (such as being a supportive friend) and moved backward for negative actions (such as ignoring signs of depression), a Kindness Kafé where students “paid” with kind words, and a Safe Haven project where professionally trained students and teachers made themselves available to help with mental health crises. Each team received a plaque honoring their hard work and their dedication to ending stigma toward mental and substance use disorders.

During the event, emcee Michael Bartley of Steeltown Entertainment announced the premiere date for “Standing Together: Help and Hope,” a special Reel Teens episode. The show, which aired May 27 at 9 am on Fox 53, featured Stand Together team members from Propel Braddock Hills as they shared their thought bubble, an interactive 8ft by 10ft bubble that students could enter to write their thoughts and feelings. This Reel Teens episode was the first of its kind for the show.

Event attendees were also excited to learn that Stand Together was recently honored with a National Association of Counties (NACo) 2017 Achievement Award. In addition to receiving the award, Stand Together was voted Best in Category for its “exceptional results and unique innovations.” Stand Together’s selection as Best in Category means that the program is considered among 100 of the best innovations in county government nationwide.

“We knew that Stand Together was a life-changing program when we created it four years ago, and we are thrilled that it is now gaining momentum and being recognized by outside groups,” said Mike Gruber, system transformation coordinator and Stand Together program director. “Next year, we have plans to expand to 15 schools, meaning even more youth will learn about mental health and how to support peers with mental or substance use disorders. We look forward to continuing to change perspectives – and lives – of local youth.”