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Arts-based youth program has antismoking message

The WORD Center offers arts classes and encourages youngsters to have a positive influence on their community.

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BY KAREN A. DAVIS
Journal Staff Writer

PROVIDENCE -- Think teens are fearless, unaffected and apathetic about their future?

Apparently you haven't heard the WORD.

Coordinators of a youth-based, arts-inspired, antitobacco program aim to soon change that.

The Rhode Island Department of Health's Tobacco Control Program and Mayor David N. Cicilline will hold an open house tomorrow to celebrate the opening of the WORD Center at 807 Broad St., Suite 106.

The event -- to be held from 5:30 to 8 p.m. -- will feature creative dance, spoken word, hip-hop and Native American dance performances by youth groups. It will also include displays of original artwork by teens that worked with partner agencies, such as AS220.

The purpose of the event is to promote the center by showcasing visual examples of what WORD represents, said Marianela Dougal, coordinator of the Tobacco Control Program.

WORD is a statewide youth empowerment movement committed to social change, including fighting smoking, Dougal said.

The WORD movement is driven by the use performing and visual arts, according to Pablo Alvarez, a teacher and community organizer for the program.

Since the center opened two months ago, coordinators have begun offering free classes to people ages 14 to 22. After the first three seven-week classes -- in spoken word, Caribbean dance and interior design -- conclude next month, another round of classes will begin, Alvarez said.

The program's community-based center is designed to encourage youths to make a "positive impact on their environment," Alvarez said.

Chief among the concerns is the impact that smoking continues to have on their communities, officials said.

The Atlanta-based Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that 80 percent of adult smokers began smoking before age 18. Every day, nearly 4,000 young people under 18 try their first cigarette.

And 6.4 million of today's children will die prematurely because they started smoking as adolescents,

according to the CDC Web site.

In Rhode Island, adolescent smoking has decreased, Dougal said.

A 2001 survey of youth risk behavior found that 35 percent of high school-age youth admitted smoking in 1997, compared to 25 percent in 2001.

The WORD Center is financed by the American Legacy Foundation through a grant to the state health department's Tobacco Control Program.

The center was created through a collaboration among the Initiatives for Human Development, AS220, John Hope Settlement House, Woonsocket Task Force on Substance Abuse, Progreso Latino, Chariho-TriTown Task Force, Looking Glass Theater, East Providence Substance Abuse Prevention Task Force, South Providence Neighborhood Ministries and the Pawtucket Substance Abuse Prevention Task Force.

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