



FEH Joins West High School Students' Character Building Campaign

SIoux CITY – A group of West High School students is gaining community backing as they lead a school-adopted initiative that rewards student achievement, provides peer mentoring and lifts public perception of the school.

“Get Green,” the multifaceted effort coined after the school’s color, was started by West High students last March to invigorate school pride both on and off campus. The initiative was sparked by incidents following a wrestling match that included a student assaulting a police officer.

“Their first intention was to talk to students about making a change to their school, and how to make the community see the good things about West,” said Teresa Wolff, executive director of the Siouxland Habitat for Humanity and board member for Siouxland Cares. Both programs empower individuals to make positive life changes.

Wolff, whose daughter Merci Wolff and fellow WHS student Emily Sullivan, were among students starting “Get Green,” said the prime motivation was to shift public attention from the “2 percent of students that get into trouble to the 98 percent that are positive students who get good grades.”

“We met with the students in March and we talked about cultural changes. We talked about respect and responsibilities, and what students’ responsibilities are to their school,” she said. “They wanted to know how they could make other students understand.”

With the help of Siouxland Cares, the student group adopted the “Character Counts” program used by Forbes 500 employers to gauge job applicants based on trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring and citizenship. Those six criteria formed the foundation of the “Get Green” efforts at WHS.

While WHS students were organizing “Get Green,” school administrators were working to implement a reward-based, accomplishment-based environment at the school.

“Rather than a punishment based approach, attention is placed on those students that are doing right,” Teresa Wolff said. “Students earned privileges such as extended lunch, unsupervised study halls and free admission to some school events.”

“Get Green” students also sought parental and administrative guidance for implementing a program that includes improvements to the school campus.

“Their goal is to do an entire year that focuses on cultural and emotional atmosphere at their school. Environment has a lot to do with it,” Teresa Wolff said. “One of the young men in the group asked us to go into the parking lot and look at the school. We literally walked from the parking lot and through the school. We were shown

the school from the perspective of the student. Hedges need trimming, the entrance needed repainting and the inside of the building was very ‘institutional.’ That’s the word the students used. It wasn’t very inviting.”

As part of the solution, students also sought a new Student Commons where upperclass students earning Privilege Passes could gather unsupervised throughout the school day.

WHS principal Jim Vanderloo encouraged the students to present a design concept for converting a lower level locker area of the school to the new commons. Students worked with Tami Mullenix, Toi Sullivan and Justin Meyer, design staff at FEH Associates.

FEH donated its design services in creating a floor plan and a colored, 3D animated rendering of the proposed commons. The design uses six pillars within the commons space to state the Character Count virtues - trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring and citizenship.

The 3D animation is part of a presentation that “Get Green” students and Vanderloo take into the community as part of a fund-raising effort.

“So far, they’ve made 18 Powerpoint presentations,” Teresa Wolff said. “They have received positive response from every place they visited.”

Students have already raised \$26,000 toward a goal of \$38,000 in funding, donated supplies and contributed services. Along with donations that include \$5,000 from the Siouxland Chamber of Commerce, contributions include landscaping, new front entrance signage, wireless access, donated carpet and furniture.

Teresa Wolff said the physical improvements at the school are part of a bigger program. Started in Fall 2007, “Get Green” students begin a freshman mentoring program to create stability against peer pressure.

“Students on the right path will support freshman in making good choices their first year,” she said.

Throughout the school year, Sioux City photographer Katie Jo Ruhland of Photography by KJ will take black and white photos of students in everyday school activities. The photos will be part of large displays throughout the school added for aesthetic and emotional impact.

Teresa Wolff said she would like to see the program presented to the National Teachers Association as a model project for other schools.

“This is something that could be duplicated in other communities,” she said. “It teaches students that they have the power to make a change. If they want to change something they have to take it upon themselves to do that.”