

Standing Against Violence

Maria, Carmel and Hales Franciscan Students Take Action

Maria High School senior theology students recently worked with two other Catholic high schools in the Archdiocese of Chicago and brought Southwest Side community organizers to the Maria campus for a Violence Awareness and Action Day.

Members of the Carmel Catholic High School (in Mundelein) Chicago History and Culture class and the Hales Franciscan High School Community Service Class met with members of the Maria High School Peer Ministry class at an anti-violence presentation led by the Southwest Organizing Project.

At the conference, approximately 65 students listened to presenters Jeff Bartow, executive director and lead organizer of SWOP; Elisha Hall, a SWOP organizer; and Rafi Peterson, a supervisor for the outreach organization CeaseFire, speak about their work with youth and street violence intervention.

After the presentations, the students engaged in feedback through both large and small group discussions.

Maria participant Jessica De Paz said, "Jeff Bartow emphasized the need for youth awareness and the importance of parental awareness. As young future leaders, we were able to discuss the issues in our differing neighborhoods and tried to find ways to minimize them."

The event's coordinators were teachers Judy Bumbul (Maria), Sharon Smogor (Carmel Catholic) and Sister Julia Walsh (Hales Franciscan).

Smogor said, "I met with Wendy (Lynn, president of Maria) and Judy (Bumbul) and we talked about getting our students together to listen to speakers from community groups and discuss some of the issues connected to violence.

"We (added) a prayer component and follow-up action or service project. Hales Franciscan joined in the program."

Carmel Catholic students brought back to their school the idea of a letter writing campaign.

They and Government class students wrote letters to the governor asking for state support for programs such as CeaseFire and SWOP.

They also met with club officers and the senior leadership team to ask for help in raising awareness and influencing public policy programs.

Maria participant Yulisa Sanchez said, "We learned about what SWOP and CeaseFire are doing to reduce violence. It was interesting to hear what other students thought about violence, especially street violence. It was good to hear how people are working toward helping teenagers stop the violence and stay in school instead of the streets."

Violence Awareness and Action Day was sponsored by the Constitutional Rights Foundation and the Annenberg Foundation as a Civic Action Project (CAP). It grew out of a CAP workshop that Smogor attended last summer.

Carmel participant Natalia Lamberti said, "I would never have thought that the violence that the urban youth faces affects me, but now I have seen firsthand how it does. There are students my age who have seen things that no one should ever have to witness."