

Youths learn 'survival' skills at conference

By Mike Latona
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — For what officially served as a day off from school, some Rochester-area teens got quite an education.

"Survival in the '90s" was the theme for the 12th annual Puerto Rican Youth Development Conference, held last Friday, Dec. 13, at St. John Fisher College, 3690 East Ave. The daylong event attracted 125 people, mostly Puerto Rican high school students from Rochester.

Most of the conference's activities involved youths splitting up into hour-long workshops addressing five subjects: conflict resolution, higher education, drug prevention, personal safety and study skills. The conference concluded with a discussion on teen pregnancy.

During the personal safety workshop, Rochester Police Officer Wanda Ortiz dealt with safety both in school and on the street.

Ortiz warned male participants



Social worker David Wright (right) demonstrates bad listening habits in a conversation with high school student David Morrison. The demonstration was part of a workshop on conflict resolution and took place during the 12th-annual Puerto Rican Youth Development Conference Dec. 13 at St. John Fisher College.



Jessica Carmona raises her hand in response to a question about boyfriend-girlfriend conflicts.

about "date rape," saying, "Men, if a girl's telling you 'no,' you need to pay attention to that. Don't think she's saying 'no' and means 'yes,'" Ortiz said.

A conflict workshop was conducted by David Wright, a social worker at Hillside Children's Center, 1183 Monroe Ave. Wright encouraged students to resolve disputes by expressing their feelings and listening to each other as well as serving as mediators in conflicts involving others.

The drug prevention workshop featured an impassioned talk by Persio Rodriguez, who used many examples of incidents he witnessed while living in New York City.

"I've seen pregnant women shoot up

(inject heroin) right in front of me," he said.

Rodriguez, a substance abuse counselor at Puerto Rican Youth Development, held his group spellbound as he talked about the perils of crack cocaine.

"When you're after more crack, you don't care about anybody. I knew of somebody who lived in my building who asked his mother for her welfare check so he could go out and buy more crack," Rodriguez said. "When she wouldn't give it to him, he hit her in the neck with a golf club and killed her. He passed out, and when he woke up he was in jail. They said, 'You killed your mother' and he couldn't believe it and started crying. He's still in jail."

Rodriguez also provided his Puerto Rican listeners with some interesting statistics, claiming that 51 percent of all Hispanic men die from cirrhosis of the liver, which is most commonly caused by alcohol abuse. Regarding AIDS, he said that an average of one Hispanic is diagnosed with acquired immune deficiency syndrome every two hours, and one dies from the disease every four hours.

Danny Rodriguez, no relation to Persio, is a 15-year-old sophomore at Marshall High School, 180 Ridgeway Ave. He found the drug-abuse workshop beneficial, saying it would make him less likely to try using drugs.

"It makes you think about what could happen," he said.

The workshops promoted frequent interaction between speakers and students. Ortiz liked the concept of breaking up into small groups.

"This tends to be a neutral ground where the kids can be themselves and not be pressured by their peers," she said. "I think they have tremendous value. If we can just get the kids to realize that they're responsible for their own actions and that they have a choice to make."

In addition to the emphasis on modern-day problems, the conference also encouraged students to look at their future and consider college.

J. Roberto Burgos, executive director of Puerto Rican Youth Development, told the entire gathering during the day's opening remarks, "This is an opportunity — grab it, take it, it's yours ... if you came here to have a good time then you probably will, but try to look beyond that, too."

For many youths, it was the first time they'd ever visited a college campus.

"This is a beautiful college. I'd like to go here someday," said Lillian Vargas, a 16-year-old sophomore at Franklin High School, 950 Norton St. She added that she just moved to Rochester last month from "a very bad neighborhood" in New York City.

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