



JESSIE FORAND, St. Albans Messenger

Kayla Messier, Cheyenne Knuth, Elizabeth Dupree, and Miranda Gillian, members of the New Youth Coalition. In front is Ebony Nyoni, Youth In Transition grant coordinator.

Young women find hope in sharing

YIT group's dream: a teen center

By JESSIE FORAND
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ST. ALBANS — Five young women spoke about their difficult pasts and overcoming hurdles Tuesday during the youth panel discussion portion of Youth Safety Community Awareness Day.

Re-establishment of a new teen center in St. Albans is a common goal shared by those who spoke and the coordinator who works with them. The hope is that others will unit to make that happen.

Kayla Messier, 15, Cheyenne Knuth, 16, Elizabeth Dupree, 18, Miranda Gillian, 17, and April Gutkopf, 20, shared their stories and answered questions from a small but interested audience at Northwestern Counseling and Support Services.

The young women represent-

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ed about one-third of the New Generation Youth Coalition, a teen supervisory group born from Youth In Transition.

Gutkopf said it was NCSS counselors who encouraged to take advantage of programs including Youth In Transition, a program for young people led by YIT grant coordinator Ebony Nyoni.

But later on Gutkopf again became involved with alcohol and fell out of the NCSS programming. After a rehab stint she returned and has benefited from working with YIT, she said.

She pointed to a troubled childhood as the beginning of her problems.

Gillian's mother and father weren't living together when her mom was seriously injured in a car accident. Her father took custody while her mom was treated in the hospital.

That period in her life proved to be a trying one, during which Gutkopf said she often felt abandoned.

Recently she moved out of the house in which she had been living in order to escape what she described as abuse. Neither her mother nor father was responsible for the physical mistreatment, but another close relative was, she said. Since early on, she turned to alcohol to cope -- something she had witnessed and loathed as a young child.

As of now, however, she has not drank in three months.

for Gutkopf. She doesn't think about drinking or harming herself. She considers YIT her second home and its members her family, she added.

Nyoni explained how hard it is for some young people to open up to strangers. However, she added, it can be great therapy. Emotions ran high as each took a turn talking about their lives, and Nyoni joined them in grabbing tissues to blot wet eyes.

Most of the girls' stories had a running theme of dealing with substance abuse -- their own or loved ones problems -- divorced parents, financial woes. They consider their time with Nyoni and the youth group, which meets once a week, as an escape from the reality they face.

"We're not a bunch of immature young kids that just go running around here and there. We live in a generation where we have a lot of responsibility. So with that, we are very independent, we have jobs at 16, and we save up our own money. We decide our own futures," Gutkopf explained.

She, for example wants to go on to college, and therefore must save money to make that possible.

The group usually serves 16 to 22 year olds, though a few 15 years may join as exceptions. Coming from the different area high schools, they usually meet once a week at Mimmo's restaurant in St. Albans, though they will be transitioning into the Vermont...

The group members hang out, play pool or just relax. For part of their time together they hold a group discussion.

Program members are planning a television show on local Channel 15. Elizabeth Malone of Northwest Access TV, has been helping them learn to work the cameras. It will be a variety show, with talk of music, sports, and more. A special segment, "My Own Worst Enemy," will take a look at drug and alcohol issues and self-harm.

The biggest hurdle facing the group is a lack of space to call its own. Members would love to see a youth center re-established in St. Albans as a safe place for young people rather than setting themselves up to make poor choices.

They are hoping for parents or concerned community members to link arms in such an effort, Nyoni, said.

A space in the community was found previously but it was too expensive. Surveys have shown interest from the community now the group just needs those willing to come forward and help out.

The previous youth center in St. Albans, Common Ground Teen Center, closed its in June of 2010. It, or others like it, had been a part of the community for 10 years. Although funding had been a problem, the center had \$6,000 in surplus funds when it was closed by the St. Albans City Council.