

West Fresno youth conference puts focus on teen health, opportunities

By Carmen George



Paul Copeland, organizer of the West Fresno Youth Health Conference, talks to a group of young men on Friday, Feb. 6, 2015, in southwest Fresno. CARMEN GEORGE — THE FRESNO BEE

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In a southwest Fresno workshop aimed at curbing physical and emotional abuse, a group of teenage girls started with something less intimidating: self esteem.

They listened to panelists and shared stories about the topic Friday morning inside Fresno Westside Seventh-day Adventist Church during one of several workshops at the West Fresno Youth Health Conference. More than 250 students, most of them black, from seven middle schools and high schools in Fresno and Madera counties attended the conference that was held in honor of Black History Month.

“We do have challenges,” said Pastor Earl Canson Jr. after listening to young women inside his church talk about challenges they face. “These ladies are being attacked every day by pimps to prostitute on the street when they are coming home from school.



“To see them in tears sharing — it let me know that we have a lot to do as mentoring parents and mentoring adults to encourage these young men and women to take a different path than the one that is so easily available to them.”

Event organizer Paul Copeland, executive director and founder of Helping Our Own Destiny (H.O.O.D), has been promoting safer and healthier options for youth since he started the conference in 1997. On Friday, he helped facilitate discussions about preventing abuse and sexually transmitted diseases, eating healthy foods, opportunities after high school, and “sheroes” — women heroes.

Keynote speaker Curtis Tarver, assistant state conservationist for the U.S. Department of Agriculture based in Fresno, encouraged teens to consider jobs in agriculture. His department will be working with H.O.O.D to create demonstration agriculture plots on the church property that youngsters will plant and care for. Community leaders involved in the project hope some crops will be planted this spring.

Will Scott Jr., president of the African American Farmers of California, said that less than half a percent of the state’s 80,000 farmers are black. He said part of the reason for that is blacks once weren’t allowed to own land and because many black youth still associate working in the fields with slavery.

The 73-year-old farmer from Raisin City, just south of Fresno, hopes that perception keeps changing. Said Scott, “They don’t have the baggage I have.”

Scott wants more people to have access to healthy local produce and said it starts with educating youth about the value of nutrition.

“We are what we eat, you know. ... Their body is a temple. God gave it to them, and they have a responsibility to take care of it.” Because they don’t have healthy eating habits, Scott said, young people are getting diseases traditionally only seen in older people.

Copeland said the youth conference is about “strengthening your village.”

“Through strengthening your village, it puts you on a fair playing field with other villages and we can work together as communities. But if we walk away from our children, who do we expect to raise them? ... They are raising themselves, and you see what happens with that.”

A group of teenage boys gathered in a circle during the conference to talk about issues they face in their communities. During the conversation, an older community member, Fresno State student Cameron Hilaire, 28, got up and talked candidly with the boys about college.

“Raise your hand, how many of y’all want to go to college? ... In college, you guys can pick your own classes — you guys know that? ... That’s college. They put the responsibility in your hands, that’s what makes college so fun.”

He went on: You can schedule classes for whatever days you want, and you don’t have to wake up at 8 a.m. if you don’t want to.

Eyes lit up.

Daja Caldwell, a 17-year-old student at Washington Union High School, appreciated the way community members talked to her and other students.

“I think it’s good for people to open up to their friends and talk and have someone to go to,” she said. “Because sometimes, there’s nowhere to go.”

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