

Herren Project aims to give hope to those dealing with addiction

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Seaford High School students spent three days this summer training to be Botvin LifeSkills Training Peer Mentors to Seaford Middle School students for the upcoming school year.

Coastal Point • Submitted

More than 300 lives were lost to overdose in Delaware in 2017, according to the Centers for Disease Control. Delaware ranks ninth in the country in its overdose death rate.

"It's pandemic, really," said Lisa Coldiron, grant manager for the Sussex County Health Coalition, a non-profit organization whose mission is to "engage the entire community in collaborative family-focused effort to improve the health of children, youth and families in Sussex County."

The group is one of many trying to address the public health crisis in Delaware, and it will be hosting the Herren Project — a Project Purple Initiative, founded by former NBA basketball player Chris Herren, who himself once overdosed on heroin — which assists individuals and families struggling with addiction.

"He was talking to a group of high school students, and one young lady raised her hand and said, 'My friends and I are

sober.' He said you could hear the snickering in the crowd. He said he was so proud of her, that she had the confidence to do that, and she was wearing a purple T-shirt. That's what prompted him to form this Project Purple," explained Coldiron.

Herren himself will be visiting Sussex County on Tuesday, Sept. 11, to share his story with the community. The free event will be held at Crossroads Community Church in Georgetown at 7 p.m.

"He's made it his mission to empower young people to make wise decisions, to understand that they're OK just the way they are, help them feel good about themselves and to de-stigmatize addiction and recovery," said

Coldiron. “He’s been on the speaking circuit for a while now. We really felt it was important to get a big name to bring the awareness and create a buzz. We want this to be just the beginning.”

Having overdosed from heroin in 2008, and making it through a drug treatment program, Herren has now been sober for 10 years.

“He really wants to bring awareness to the dangers of prescription drugs. No one wakes up and says, ‘I’m going to be an addict today.’”

Coldiron said she hopes everyone in the community attends the free event, which will conclude with a brief question-and-answer session.

“I’m hoping we’ll have young children, families, students, older folks who would like to hear and have hope... because it’s a message of hope.”

Those who attend that evening will be able to visit a number of vendor tables, including Help Is Here Delaware — an online resource for those who are struggling with or know someone struggling with substance-use disorder.

“At the end of the program, we’re handing out purple bags, with a purple wristband and purple cupcake. Then it will be filled with information of where to go for help.”

Those who wish to support the event may make a donation to the Sussex County Health Coalition or sign up to be a volunteer that evening.

“There’s always a place for help,” said Coldiron.

On Sept. 12, Herren will speak to middle and high school students in the Seaford School District in private events that will be closed to the general public.

“He uses his celebrity to engage the students, but he does not say, ‘I’m here as a basketball player.’ He says, ‘I’m here as an addict in recovery. Let me tell you what happened to me. And, I want to give you hope,’” said Coldiron.

“The other thing I really love about him is his messaging really hits home in that there is nothing normal about accepting high school students drinking and smoking marijuana. We really have to change the messaging that that’s OK... For many students, it is a gateway. He empowers them to make wise decisions.”

Herren’s talk is being sponsored by Nanticoke Health Services, Beebe Healthcare, Bayhealth, SUN Behavioral Health, Highmark, AmeriHealth Caritas, DSAMH, Discover Bank and WBOC.

Coldiron said the Herren event is the kickoff for what the coalitions hopes will be a multi-year drug-awareness and -prevention campaign in the county and throughout the state.

“We also have two very unique programs we’re starting that are being looked at as possible national models,” she explained. “School-based mental health collaborative in four districts — Indian River, Cape Henlopen, Woodbridge and Seaford.

“With the help of our funders, we have brought trauma-informed care training for all of the teachers in those districts, suicide-prevention training for the teachers, and a cadre of therapists and counselors in the schools, so when a student comes to a teacher and says, ‘I’m depressed’ or if they’re acting out or if there’s an addiction issue...

“The wait used to be two months long. Now it’s down to two weeks because of this program. That is one piece of the puzzle.”

The second program is Botvin LifeSkills Training, an evidence-based substance abuse- and violence-prevention program used in schools and communities worldwide.

“It was started by a physician. They’ve had a tremendous success rate. It’s specifically for middle-school students. It’s not just around drug-prevention, but it’s also a leadership program. It’s life skills, its making wise choices. It’s acting from informed decisions and not impulse, how to handle anxiety — all of these things,” explained Coldiron.

“What we’re doing that’s uniquely different is we’ve taken Botvin trainers at the University of Delaware and trained in a three-day long retreat 11 selected Seaford High School students. Now that they’ve been trained, they’ll serve as peer trainers in the middle schools, under the direction of and in close touch with the Botvin trainers.”

While those who use the Botvin program do not normally use peer trainers, Coldiron said it looks like a promising pilot program.

“We’re just going on the knowledge that middle-schoolers will listen much quicker to a high school student than they will some of us,” she said. “We’re hoping that will bring another level of prevention help and give these students the ability to stop, think and make wise decisions on their own. You can see this is a huge, robust campaign.”

Coldiron emphasized that education is important but addressing the stigma associated with substance-use disorder is just as critical.

“Anytime you harbor secrets, it’s unhealthy. Children whose parents are addicts — they feel very alone, and they personally blame themselves. I think anytime we bring something out into the light and call it what it is, without judgement, recognizing this is impacting all folks — it crosses all socio-economic backgrounds... I think we can’t help but be successful then.”

Coldiron said she is also working to get Sussex County community members, business leaders and government bodies to join the Sussex Goes Purple movement, which “will engage the community and youth to stand up against substance abuse.”

“I’d love to see them all go purple. If the store owners would put up purple lights, if they turned fountains purple,” said Coldiron, noting that the coalition is piggybacking off of similar efforts in Talbot County, Md. “What we’re really hoping to do is make this a bi-state initiative. They even had their Dairy Queen make purple Blizzards. Kids were wearing purple in their hair.”

Coldiron said students on the Milford and Seaford high school field-hockey teams are planning to go purple on Sept. 18.

“They have a match off, and they’ll be wearing purple headbands.”

The more engagement in the campaign the better, said Coldiron, noting that working together can make the difference.

“I truly believe it is going to be this younger generation that is going to step up and say, ‘Enough.’ They’re going to do it by getting actively involved,” she added.

For more information about Sussex Goes Purple and the work of the Sussex Health Coalition, visit delawaregoespurple.org. Those looking to volunteer at the Chris Herren event may contact Coldiron at lcoldiron@pmgconsulting.net.

Anyone who is themselves or knows someone who is suffering from substance-use disorder can visit www.helpisherede.com for resources and programs offered throughout the state of Delaware.

By Maria Counts

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