

WHITEHALL-COPLAY PRESS

Champions of community lauded

Wednesday, January 29, 2020 by Samantha Anderson sanderson@tnonline.com in Local News

The Lehigh County Communities That Care, a joint effort of the Whitehall-Coplay and Catasauqua CTC groups, held its annual meeting Jan. 23 in the Zentz Community Center at Fellowship Community, Whitehall.

The theme for the event was “Prevention Coalitions + Prevention Science = Good Economic Sense.”

There were approximately 50 people in attendance at the meeting. Attendees included Whitehall-Coplay School District personnel; representatives from Lehigh County Drug and Alcohol, Center for Humanistic Change, Lehigh Valley Suicide Prevention Coalition and Lehigh County Probation; Lehigh County Commissioner Bob Elbich; Ellen Kern, as a representative of state Sen. Pat Browne, R-16th; Steve Strella, as a representative of state Rep. Zach Mako, R-183rd; and more.

The Catasauqua Area School District was represented by Amy Dymond-Jones, middle school guidance counselor, and Shelley Keffer, coordinator of student services.

Denise Continenza, CTC coordinator, discussed many of the highlights and advances the CTC and the WCSD have made, including the creation of several short videos aimed at students and parents on the dangers of underage drinking and social hosting, the continuation of the Botvin Life Skills Training in the schools and the addition of the program at the high school level and the formation of mental health partnerships to assist the students.

The CASD has a group called the Catasauqua Community Cares Program, which addresses food insecurity and more among the students. The district is also on its second year of working with Salisbury Behavioral Health to provide mental health support for students. CASD has two school resource officers and is also implementing the Botvin Life Skills Training program.

As part of the annual meeting, two Community Champion Awards were presented. WCSD Superintendent Dr. Lorie Hackett presented Michelle Khouri, district registrar and public relations, with the first award. Hackett noted Khouri is the first face families see when coming to the district and noted she makes a wonderful impression. Hackett lauded the amount of work Khouri does in the district, noting she goes above and beyond her duties.

The second award went to Lois Reed, business supervisor for CASD. She is also responsible for organizing and maintaining C3P. Keffer reported Reed is always finding new ways to expand the program and bring

necessary supplies to the students in the district. Reed was unable to attend the meeting but will be presented with her award at the next CASD school board meeting.

Damon Jones, a research associate from the Edna Bennett Pierce Prevention Research Center at Penn State University, was the featured speaker. His presentation, titled Prevention Science Makes Good Economic Sense, addressed the fiscal concerns often associated with implementing prevention programs.

According to his presentation, untreated problems are costly. For example, child mistreatment leads to increased health care costs, lost productivity, crime, increased education costs and more. According to a National Institute on Drug Abuse 2017 study, annual costs related to substance abuse were approximately \$724 billion.

Jones said it was a matter of the cost of prevention programs versus the cost of no intervention and simply reacting to the damage after it is done. He noted society pays for the costs of incarceration, criminal investigation, etc.

He reported the data shows increased efficiency in society frees up money to be used elsewhere.

“The earlier you invest, the greater the payoff,” he said.

In response to a question from the audience, Jones said he has had positive reactions and interest from state representatives who wanted to hear more about prevention science.

In her remarks, Continenza asked the audience for a moment of silence to honor two people who died in 2019. The first was the Rev. Mike Bodnyk, retired pastor of Faith Evangelical Lutheran Church. Bodnyk was a founding and active member of the CTC and offered space in the church for the group to hold its monthly meetings.

The second person was Carol Strohe, eighth-grade health and physical education teacher and a member of the Student Assistance Program at Whitehall-Coplay Middle School. She implemented the Life Skills training program for the students.

On each table at the event were chocolate coins. On each coin was a quote from a student about their reactions and what they learned from the program, in honor of Strohe and what she contributed to the students in the district.