

Metropolitan

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 16, 2001

The Washington Times

REGION

Abstinence billboards get service award

By Cheryl Wetzstein
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

A Baltimore advertising executive who helped create the billboard campaign, "Virgin. Teach your kids it's not a dirty word," was one of five local "conversation changers" honored yesterday for their efforts to reduce teen pregnancy.

Hal Donofrio and his Campaign for Our Children Inc., uses "positive advocacy" to influence teens about sex, love and values, said Amanda Deaver, board member of the D.C. Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, which gave the awards.

Two programs — the Latin American Youth Center in Northwest and the Parent Peer Educators program of the Redemption Ministry in Southeast, led by the Rev. Anthony Motley — were honored by the D.C. campaign.

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Also honored were Fern Johnson-Clarke, who tracks teen pregnancy as part of her job as chief of research at the District's State Center for Health Statistics, and Barbara Strother, a veteran social worker in the D.C. Family Services Administration who counsels teen welfare mothers.

The five were singled out for their efforts to "change the conversation" about teen pregnancy, D.C. campaign leaders said at the ceremony, which was held in The Washington Post's community room.

"For too long, discussions about teen pregnancy prevention have gotten bogged down in battles over abstinence versus contraception," said Joyce Ladner, a scholar at the Brookings Institution and chairman of the D.C. Campaign's board of directors.

"While those are, in fact, the only two ways to prevent pregnancy, it is vital for adults to understand that prevention is really about three things: motivation, motivation and motivation," she said.

One of the things that motivates young people to avoid pregnancy, added Miss Ladner, is "the presence of a caring and consistent adult" in their lives.

"Teen pregnancy has been a major problem here — one that's devastating in itself and also at the root of so many other societal ills affecting our city," said Katharine Graham, past Washington Post chairman and board member of the D.C. campaign.

"While the numbers are beginning to slow down, this is no time to stop working on the issue," she said.

The District long has had the nation's highest teen birth rates, but the numbers have been dropping in recent years.

In 1997, there were 152.1 births per 1,000 teens, ages 15 to 19. That number fell to 122.7 births per 1,000 teens in 1998.

Yesterday, Mrs. Johnson-Clarke said that soon-to-be released data show that the D.C. birth rate has fallen again, to about 115.2 births per 1,000 teens.

Also attending yesterday's event were D.C. Council member Sandra Allen, Ward 8; Vicki Sant of the Summit Fund of Washington; and James Wagoner, president of Advocates for Youth.