



Johnnie McHenry (left), 15, Angel Shingler, 14, and Span Loake, 12, made pizza at Redemption Ministries in Southwest on a Thursday night. The church has joined with the D.C. Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy.

DISTRICT

Churches urge teen 'Faith' in abstinence

By Judith Person
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Fifteen-year-old Mercedes Shingler of Southeast knows well what the Bible says about sex.

"The Bible says you should wait till you are married," she said.

Mercedes is one of nine teenagers who gather at Redemption Ministries on South Capitol Street in Southwest each Thursday to take part in "Have Faith in Youth," a District-based program that aims to cut the city's teen pregnancy rate in half by next year.

The program is headed by the D.C. Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, a 5-year-old nonprofit that in 2000 concluded through a study that one in 12 D.C. girls will become pregnant from age 15 to 19.

As a result, the group turned to local churches for help.

"In many communities, the church is the only institution still standing," said Brenda Rhodes Miller, the group's executive director.

The group points out that D.C. neighborhoods have a church, a carryout and a liquor store on nearly every street corner, "but have you ever noticed which ones are open in

Religious leaders open doors with goal of reducing pregnancies



Mentor Thomas Tate talks with teens at Redemption Ministries. From left to right are Mark Morris, 17, Wayne Nesbit, 16, Jaquan Brown, 13, and Johnnie McHenry, 15.

the evening after school lets out?" the group asks in a flier distributed to churches.

So far, nine churches such as Redemption Ministries have agreed to open their doors one night a week for local teens to have a meal, find a mentor and have a "meaningful discussion about life goals."

The Rev. Ida King, pastor at Redemption Ministries, said the church needs to fill in when parents fail to teach their children about morality.

"You have to give them something that will stick: morals," Miss King said.

The program has been successful in letting teens know that they have a place to go after school.

"This group means a lot," said Mark Morris, 17, a senior at Ballou High School in Southeast. "It keeps me out of trouble." He said abstinence is the best message, "but it's not popular."

Mark was among those who gathered on a recent Thursday to make pizza and spend time with the friends he met through the group.

Some sat around a table in the church sanctuary giving each other

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manicures. Others kicked back in plastic chairs as they ate the homemade pizzas.

Wayne Nesbit, 16, knows that temptations are everywhere. He has known several teen girls who have had babies. One thing he learned from his group is that it's important to choose the right friends.

"It makes a difference," the Ballou sophomore said.

Jaquan Brown, 13, agreed.

"It is a small fraction of people in school that are positive," he said. "It is important to be surrounded by good things."

An eighth-grader at P.R. Harris Educational Center in Southeast, Jaquan is one of the youngest in the group. He said he knows two girls who are 14 and pregnant. He admitted that it's hard to be good sometimes.

D.C. Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy advocates abstinence and other birth-control measures.

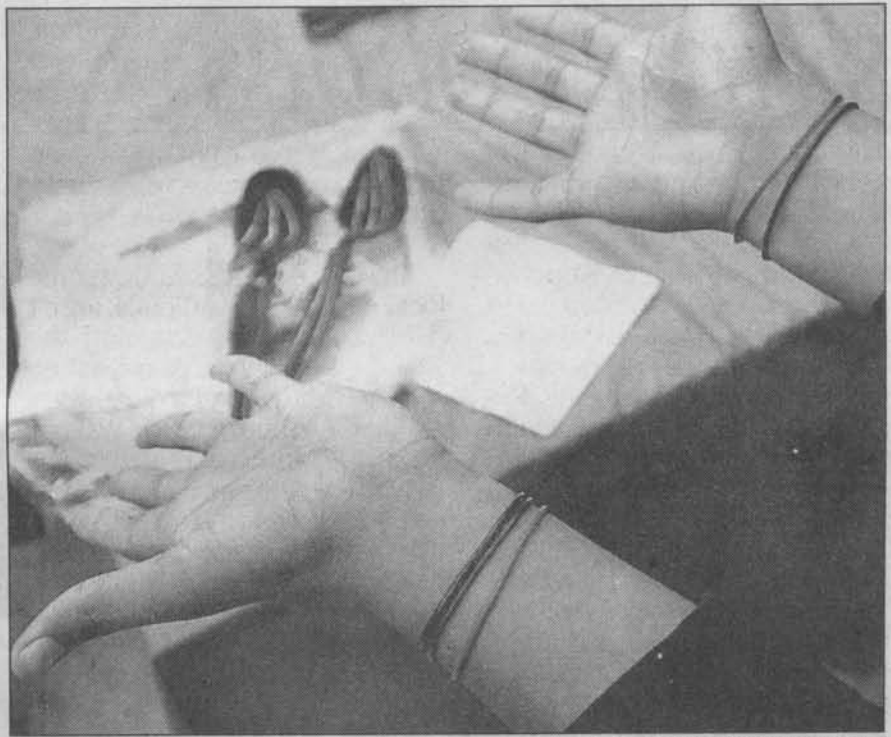
The group doesn't ask the churches to provide spiritual instruction about sexual intercourse. Its goal is simply to give teens a safe place to gather after school.

The campaign thinks it will take the help of every segment of the city — business leaders, parents, media, schools and government officials — to control the teen pregnancy rate. That is why the group runs six other programs to mobilize each group in the ways they can help.

"These groups can help," Wayne said. "But nothing takes the place of parents."

As for Mercedes, she's learning her lessons well.

"Safe sex is not a good message. Something can go wrong," she said. "If you wait until marriage, then it will be more special."



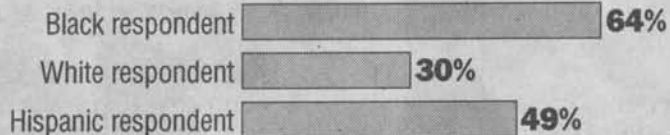
Jessica Tefft/The Washington Times

Wayne Nesbit, 16, was teased because of his "sex bracelets" at Redemption Ministries in Southwest. Breaking someone else's bracelet during a game of "Snaps" supposedly means the wearer owes anything from a kiss to sex, but some authorities say "sex bracelets" are an urban legend.

SURVEY RESULTS

The D.C. Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, a 5-year-old nonprofit, concluded in a 2000 study that one in 12 girls in the District will become pregnant between the ages of 15 and 19. For the study, the group surveyed 1,600 D.C. residents in 1999 who were age 11 and older. Here are their responses.

Youths who said they personally know a teen parent or a teen who is expecting a baby:



It is important that these groups be more involved in preventing teen pregnancy in the District:

Parents	91%	Local religious leaders	64%
Teens	82%	Professional male athletes	62%
Schools	78%	Professional female athletes	62%
Radio personalities on popular stations	66%	Political leaders	55%

Source: D.C. Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 2000