

Student Letters Offer Grief and Gratitude for NOPE Task Force Presentations

By Leon Fooksman

As soon as the police officers, judges and parents began speaking in schools on the dangers of using drugs, a stream of emotional letters flowed into the office of Narcotics Overdose Prevention and Education Task Force (NOPE), which organized the talks.

“It scared me,” a student wrote following a presentation. “We need to hear everything.”

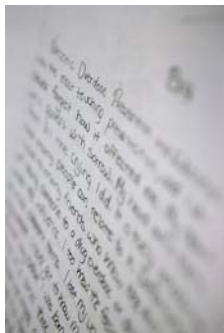
“I will not become a picture on the wall,” another student wrote.

“I truly understand how bad drugs are and the consequences,” a different student wrote.



In all, more than 1,000 -- mostly unsolicited -- letters have filled a stack of notebook binders since 2004 when NOPE started the blunt and personal presentations at middle and high schools and colleges across Florida, Indiana and California.

The initial, unexpected outpouring of grief and gratitude in the letters made NOPE organizers in Palm Beach County, Florida want to learn more about the impact their programs have on shaping the attitudes and behaviors of youths in using illicit and prescription drugs. So they teamed up with researchers from Lynn University in Boca Raton, Fla. for a comprehensive study aimed at assessing the programs and helping NOPE expand to new locales.



“We can hope we are making an impact with these presentations, but these letters truly tell us what impact we are having,” said Debra Ainbinder, a psychology associated professor and graduate program director at Lynn University and a member of NOPE.

For more than a year, Ainbinder and her team of faculty and graduate students have coded letters and searched for common themes. They have gone through close to half the letters so far, and noticed a range of similar reactions from the students. To gather more information, the researchers and NOPE supporters will be going into schools before the presentations in Palm Beach County to test students on their attitudes and knowledge toward drugs.

The nearly hour-long presentations feature police officers explaining the grim task of making death notifications to distraught families, judges describing a typical addict’s constant shuffle in and out of jails and court houses, and parents who lost children to drugs sharing their suffering. Many talks end with students turning to counselors for help, either for themselves or someone they know. Teachers often devote the remainder of the school day to further discussion and encouraging students to write letters to NOPE.

NOPE's student presentations aim to convey three messages: the combination of alcohol and drugs can be deadly; using drugs one time can kill you; and making calls to authorities can save lives. Last year, nearly 35,000 students and parents heard the presentations.

"They are getting it," said Hovi Shroff, a graduate student. "The presentation's message is coming across."

If the research continues to show that the programs are helpful, the organization hopes to use the data to apply for grants to expand its reach into new schools and colleges, said Gary Martin, a detective and psychotherapist specializing in overdose deaths and a member of NOPE.

According to the letters, some students were "shocked" by the presentations, while others learned "one try can be your last." Some could not get enough of the speakers, saying they "held my attention." Many more expressed grief, and said they knew people who had died or suffered from drug overdoses. Most were grateful to family members who spoke for reliving "their tragedy for our safety."



The responses sometimes differed depending on socio-economic backgrounds of students, Shroff said. Students from wealthy communities, for instance, were at times less interested in the programs, possibly because their schools have the resources to constantly bombard them with anti-drug messages, she said.

As Lynn University researchers provide more findings, NOPE will continue honing its presentations for maximum impact.

"We want to make sure the program makes a difference," Shroff said.

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