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05/13/2006

Peabody students write winning essays

By Julie Buchanan , Staff Writer

PETERSBURG - Five eighth-graders at Peabody Middle School were awarded yesterday as the winners of a teen pregnancy prevention essay-writing contest sponsored by the Youth Leadership Council of the United Way of Greater Richmond and Petersburg.

Grace Nelson placed first with an essay that praised abstinence as the way to avoid unwanted pregnancy.

Gianna Huballah placed second, and Laretta Howard, Eric Magruder and Aaron Thompson tied for third place.

The contest was part of an effort by the Crater Health District and District 19 to get Petersburg youth thinking about the consequences of early and unprotected sex, said Mattlyn Debrick, a nurse supervisor with the Crater Health District.

Petersburg ranks No. 1 in the state for its number of teen pregnancies, according to a 2004 study by the Virginia Department of Health.

"Even though the numbers are coming down, we still have a lot of education to do for our youth," Debrick said. "We hope the essay contest will make them think. If their peers read their essays, that would also help them make healthy choices."

Students that participated in the contest are in Jennifer Francis' eighth-grade English class. The class reported to the auditorium yesterday for a brief awards ceremony to learn who won.

"We want our youth to have healthy relationships," Debrick told the students. "We want you to be able to make good choices in life, finish high school and achieve your dream job."

Debrick and District 19 prevention specialist Pamela McDaniel judged the essays.

They said they hope the next contest has more participants.

Francis said she was notified about the contest and thought her students would be up for it.

"I have a strong group of writers, and they always want a challenge," she said.

The contest winners received Wal-Mart gift cards.

May is recognized as Teen Pregnancy Prevention Month across the country.

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