

Youth organization promotes abstinence

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It's tough being a teenager. They face all kinds of peer pressure from premarital sex to drugs and violence.

But one organization is aiming to turn the tables on the challenges teens face today -- by using that pressure to lead them in the right direction.

Kiamsha Youth Empowerment Organization is a group of young men and women that participate in activities that promote abstinence from sex, drugs and violence.

"[Kiamsha] steers them away from the negative things, but it also teaches them to deal with it," said 22-year-old Ranada Johnson, co-director of the youth group.

Kiamsha, which is based in Mitchellville, began in 1992 as a program at Hunter Memorial AME Church in Suitland for Prince George's County high school students.

Johnson, a graduate of Largo High School, along with Co-director Tiffany Clarke, a graduate of Suitland High School, are alumnae of the organization and now volunteer with the group.

"Kiamsha" means "that which awakens me" in Swahili. The organization uses that philosophy to "awaken" youth to positive choices and opportunities.

The group organizes a yearly conference and invites youth from all over the county to participate in interactive workshops on topics such as freedom of expression, family and social relationships, and diversity.

Creative components of the program, like the Pathways of Freedom Performance Ensemble and the Freedom Youth Singers, allow students of all ages to relay their message through song, dance and theater.

"It gives me a chance to express my talents for a cause," said 16-year-old Flowers High School student Japera Croom.

She has been involved with the theater and choir components since she was 7 years old and was eager to join Kiamsha once she was in high school.

"Your friends get to see you do all kinds of things and you get to give them knowledge they won't listen to from anyone else," Croom said.

Ersky Freeman, director of the theatrical productions, said performances are an entertaining way to get the teens involved in alternatives to sex, drugs and violence.

They have released a 12-track CD called "Path to the Rainbow of Love." All songs on the album are dedicated to their mission of abstinence.

Currently, the students are preparing for the next annual conference that will be held at Bowie State University in April.