

Straight talk with teens

Renowned former teacher discusses life issues with local students



HEALTH EDUCATOR -- Dr. Stephen Sroka, standing, speaks with students in Lynne Hunter's health class Thursday at Winfield High School. The students picture in the background are, from left, Bryan Halbert, Chris Deiter, Aaron Gill and Kaycie Goff. Sroka spent two days in Winfield talking with students, teachers, parents and community members. (Special to the Courier)

By **JUDITH ZACCARIA**

After spending two days talking with Winfield students almost non-stop, Stephen Sroka still had enough energy to talk with Winfield parents, teachers, staff, school board members and other interested adults for two and a half hours Thursday night.

Sroka, a health educator internationally known for writing the first educators' guide to HIV and AIDS and a member of the National Teachers Hall of Fame, praised much of what he saw in Winfield schools, then identified what he saw as problems here.

"You have a great community," Sroka said. "You walk in the schools and the kids are so respectful. There is such respect for education here," more than in other places he's been.

According to Sroka, school administrators are doing their job. He praised them both for their control of the schools and for their personal interactions with students. He also praised the support system students have – teachers, paraprofessionals, nurses, counselors, parents and friends. "I don't sense kids feel no one listens to them," Sroka said. "You can't afford to lose that system."

Parents and children

Sroka, himself a child of a one-parent family that lived in the Cleveland projects, said despite all the good he saw in Winfield, "Your kids are terribly at risk. Their awareness of sex and drugs is incredible."

Sroka led the group of about 40 adults in the same chant he teaches students: "My body. My choice. I'm not your toy. I am the power of one."

He exhorted parents to recognize the power they have over their children. According to recent

surveys, parents are still the strongest single influence in their children's lives, he said. And he chided parents for giving children too much control. "It's time for you as adults to take control."

A father of three teenagers himself, Sroka said, "The most important work we do is with our family."

The most important message we can give to children, he said, is that they are valuable no matter who they are, no matter what their circumstances.

He also emphasized a point very difficult for many adults to comprehend: "Our kids aren't like we were. Our kids' reference points are so much different from ours" in three critical areas: sex, drugs and violence.

Parents – even parents who came of age in the 1960s and '70s – cannot say "I was there" because "the consequences are different today," Sroka said.

Sexuality

Most youngsters have their first sexual experiences at home, the audience agreed with Sroka. "That's why it's so important for someone to be at home," he said. "Look, they're gonna have sex. Our job is to prolong the onset of behaviors as long as possible."

Sex is riskier than ever, he said. Some birth control pills make it easier for younger girls to get sexually transmitted diseases. Hepatitis, herpes and genital warts from the papilloma virus are epidemic, "with lifelong consequences," he said. "One in five people over the age of 12 have genital herpes. Eighty to 90 percent are women."

Girls' reputations still suffer more than boys' do when they become sexually active, Sroka said. Girls in both the high and middle schools agreed that one of the two most common derogatory terms they are called is "ho" – whore – whether they are virgins or sexually active.

Sroka indicted the media for using sex in advertising as their main selling tool. "Advertising is much more successful than teaching," he said. "They always have a clear, consistent message." Many illustrations displayed on an overhead projector reinforced his point.

Drugs

"We are a drug culture," Sroka said. "We're modeling behavior we're telling them not to do," placing the blame for youngsters' drug use squarely on adults. The most commonly abused drug is alcohol, he said, saying one in seven people is an alcoholic. Binging – having five or more drinks at a time – has become more common, he said, with girls trying to catch up with boys.

Despite one student's telling him marijuana is not a drug but a "God-given herb," Sroka said using marijuana is responsible for apathy and lack of motivation and upsets memory.

Locally Sroka said students revealed that a number of them use methamphetamines. Some are also using Ecstasy.

Tobacco, like alcohol is much more problematic than the more exotic drugs, Sroka said. It is so

addictive that some youngsters become addicted with one pack. He also reminded the audience that the number one killer of women in the U.S. is lung cancer.

“Kids don't scare,” he said. “For some kids, danger is a turn-on.” That's why quoting statistics and discussing the dangers of abusive behaviors often don't work when you're trying to dissuade them.

Kids do know the results of drug abuse in terms of disrupted home life, rape and other forms of sexual abuse and domestic violence, he said. “That's why some of you have kids in your homes all the time,” he said, as several parents nodded in agreement. “They're looking for a safe refuge.”

Suicide

One potentially lethal local problem Sroka identified is suicide. Students who are abused emotionally or physically, whether the abuse is deliberate or casual, often turn their violence inside, he said. Youngsters who abuse drugs, are undergoing a loss, isolated, have major changes in behavior, speak about suicide or are depressed need to be watched carefully and counseled to keep them from committing suicide. A number of children show their distress by self-abuse – mutilation and cutting.

“If you suspect (a youngster) is contemplating suicide,” take it seriously, Sroka said. “Initiate listening. Remove all guns, weapons and drugs. Don't leave the person alone. Seek professional help.”

Changing behaviors

Despite the seriousness of his presentation, Sroka suggested adults can do a lot to help youths protect themselves.

“To get to their head, you have to get to their heart,” he said.

“Sex, drugs and violence are cries for help.”

He encouraged parents to get their kids involved in sports, hobbies, art, music, part-time jobs, volunteer work, church youth groups.

Sroka suggested promoting the knowledge that most kids are doing well. He also gave some practical advice: Many children and teenagers need to get more sleep.

The basis of a child's strength lies in the “three Fs,” Sroka said: Family, friends and faith.

He encouraged everyone to remember that they have the power of one.

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