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Darien Teens Tell Board of Selectmen About What They Get Out of the Depot Youth Center

Author : David Gurliacci

Categories : [Darien Depot](#), [Teens](#)

Tagged as : [Board of Selectmen 2018](#), [Darien High School 2018-2019](#), [Girls Night Out](#), [Girls Night Out 2018-2019](#), [Respect Works](#), [RespectWorks](#), [RespectWorks 2018-2019](#), [Students Against Destructive Decisions](#), [Students Against Destructive Decisions 2018-2019](#)

Date : December 5, 2018

Learning the signs that someone might be suicidal, talking about problems (or anything) at Girls Night Out meetings, helping educate other teenagers about safety through the Students Against Destructive Decisions group, learning about mental illness, substance abuse, distracted driving, teen relationship violence.

Those were the topics that nine Darien teenagers have been learning about at the Depot Youth Center, they told the Board of Selectmen at a recent meeting.

During budget deliberations early this year, members of the Board of Selectmen said they thought it would

be a good idea to hear more from the Depot and what services it provides to students. At the meeting on Monday, Nov. 26, Janice Marzano, the Depot's executive director for programming, was present, but she let the girls speak for themselves.

For some reason, every single one of the speakers were girls. One of the speakers said that about 10 freshmen are among the boys that have recently been showing up for Depot events.

"At the Depot our mission is to unite the community through student-run events, as well as educate students and parents about common problems students and parents face in order to prepare them for college and early adulthood," said Kaitlyn Olvany, a Darien High School junior. She's been a member of the governing board since her freshman year and this year' she's vice president of community outreach.

Kit Arrix, also a junior at DHS and a vice president for events, said she and Kaitlyn "work together to basically just plan events for the town, and get even the elementary kids involved, and the younger kids so the Depot becomes kind of the place they can go after school to do homework or, pretty much, hang with their friends.

"Coming up this December, we have the annual wrap-up. Parents [...] are invited to drop off Christmas presents and then we wrap those presents [...] and they can pick them up at any time."

SADD

Several teens from Students Against Destructive Decisions at DHS spoke:

"This past year we have been educating our members on issues that are commonly overlooked in our school, such as depression, anxiety, addiction and the general safety of our students [involving problems] such as distracted driving," Sage Gupta, a junior.

"We have listened to numerous speakers who have talked about their experiences and lessons that they have learned along the way. I feel that listening to the problems that some people struggle with first-hand has definitely given us more knowledge about issues which are often ignored."

With what they've learned, Gupta said, the group wants to keep the rest of the town informed.

"This year we would like to focus on mental health issues that many students at the high school face, such as anxiety and depression, said Sophia Brenner, a junior and one of the presidents of SADD. "We will continue to inform students of the dangers that can come with drug and alcohol use, but we believe it is more important to discuss the mental illnesses that are often overlooked by parents and teachers. [...]"

"We have also been welcoming speakers to talk about their experience with suicide," Brenner said. The speakers talked about "some of the ways we can help prevent it on our own [...]" "They also informed us of

some of the warning signs of suicide or the lack of warning signs."

Charlotte Keane, also a junior, told the board: "SADD has given me so many opportunities to discuss [with] teenagers in our town, as well as gain others' perspectives on topics like distracted driving and drugs. [At] my first meeting at SADD, we had a speaker who taught me way more about mental health than I'd ever learned in any classes at school. [...]"

"Some of the speakers who have come have discussed personal topics such as relationship abuse, suicide and even things that we struggle with every day, like screen addiction. [...] A lot of us learned how much it affects our health and everyday life."

Rhea Bhat, a freshman member of SADD, talked about her own experience as a victim of a distracted driver (see separate article, [here](#)).

RespectWorks

Katie Elders and Emma Cavoli, both seniors, are co-presidents of RespectWorks. The two described what the group does:

"RespectWorks is a student driven group mentored by the Darien Domestic Abuse Council," Cavoli said. Elders added, "Our goal is to bring more awareness to domestic violence, especially in teenage situations."

"And to do so, we hold meetings with activities, such as guest speakers, informative movie documentary showings and brainstorm sessions about raising awareness for a cause," Cavoli said. Police have come to meetings, talked to the group and given tremendous support to it, she said.

Girls Night Out (GNO)

"Girls Night Out meets every other Monday for two hours," Maggie Doran, a senior, told the board. "We sit; we have dinner — usually pizza — and we talk about anything and everything."

"We talk about things from stress to — last week we had a speaker come in and talk about gender identity — to mental health and boys in school and parking tickets, and just everyday sort of things."

"Girls Night Out offers this wonderful experience for girls — freshmen to seniors, whether you're a student athlete or more of an academic or you're more of an artist — to just sit down and talk with anybody about everything and just sort of figure out your problems in a safe space without judgment. [...]"

"[It] allows you to sort of problem-solve everything [...] which is really great stress relief, especially for a girl in high school."

Reaction from Selectmen

Selectmen had a number of questions that the girls answered:

Selectman Susan Marks asked how the selectmen might help the Depot. Sitting in on a meeting there "and just sharing your thoughts" would be helpful, Katie Elders said. Sage Gupta said that the students are trying to get school administrators to set a date for a safety fair later in the school year and asked for selectmen's help. Stevenson said she'd pass on that concern to school district officials.

Selectman Pamela Sparkman said selectmen could suggest to the Parks & Recreation Department that Depot members be allowed to set up an information table at some Park & Rec events. Students said they liked that idea.

First Selectman Jayme Stevenson asked how the Depot compares with the high school in bringing up various topics. "I just want to get a sense of whether the schools are touching on these same topics, like suicide and mental health, domestic violence, etc.," she said.

"We do have forums and discussions in school, but I would say they're more presentations than discussions," Katie Elders replied. "I think we're kind of being talked at instead of talked to, and I think maybe a more two-sided [two-way] response to these topics would be beneficial, because I think they are tackled in a kind of more informal way at the Depot, where it's relaxed, and you feel comfortable to talk."

Some students are so busy with other activities that they can't always go go a Depot discussion, she said. "I think just to be at the school and kind of make that into a kind of safer space [to talk] like the Depot [...] That would be really beneficial for the whole community."