

Community leaders help explain Choices

By Rick Maier

What do you remember from 8th grade?

Playing sports probably helped me survive the overwhelming changes my body and mind were undergoing in those early teen years.

I loved the freedom of earning my own spending money by working part-time at my Dad's business. School work often took a back seat to new adventures, and hanging out with the guys increasingly ended in some kind of mischief. Sandy Williamson transformed from some girl down the street to the most fascinating and beautiful empress in the world.

Full credit goes to my parents for providing the solid foundation that allowed me to live through this challenging period. They gave me enough rope to discover a wonderful new world and held me accountable for the outcome of my own decisions.

A lot has changed since the 1960's. Many children don't have appropriate home support and too many 8th graders fail to return for high school. So Bibb County is introducing "Choices", an exciting new program to help middle schoolers understand the relationship between their level of education and the career and life consequences they will experience.

"Choices" was developed by a Seattle firm and has been presented to millions of students throughout the country. Real world messages are delivered to students by caring, credible, positive adult role models from the community in two 50-minute classroom sessions. Volunteers receive some formal training, but are encouraged to add their own experiences and perspectives in presenting the prepared material.

I signed up for Mr. Treadwell's class at Weaver Middle School. Fellow Rotarians are facilitating classes at other middle schools in November and December.

The curriculum centers on several fun, dynamic exercises. In the "money management" exercise, a student volunteer plays the role of a teen who drops out of school to take a job paying \$7 an hour. The stack of play currency representing \$1,205 in monthly wages is quite thrilling at first, until other students representing vendors line up to collect taxes, rent, utilities, food and a number of other typical living costs. The worker runs out of money long before all the vendors are paid.

In the "timeline" exercise, two students slowly unroll a scroll marked for each year of an 85-year lifetime. We discuss how the several "inches" of time experienced from age 14 through high school will impact the many "feet" of time they will live as adults. What a vivid visual of the foundation these kids are establishing by their choices in school.

In the “career consequences” exercise, student volunteers are assigned roles as a high school dropout, a high school graduate and someone with post-secondary education. Cards representing various job opportunities from taxi driver to military service to veterinarian are offered to each student based on their level of education. The advantage of higher education becomes quite clear by the much taller stack of career choices for the better-educated graduates.

Not every 8th grader will understand how these two 50-minute classes might impact their lives, but if a light bulb goes on in the mind of one or two students in a class, it’s well worth the effort.

I think “Choices” is an outstanding program and I salute Bibb County schools and Central Georgia Tech Prep for making the investment.

The volunteers I talked with agree that the experience of being in the classroom will enrich our lives as well. I hope the “Choices” program becomes a permanent part of the curriculum and that more volunteers take advantage of the opportunity to participate.

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