

Photo courtesy of MFD.

project staying alive

MFD AIMS TO EXTINGUISH ANGER IN PRETEENS

BY AMY LAUER

Rhythmic dance music and squeals of delight emanate from Dana Finne's sixth-grade classroom at Oliver Wendell Holmes Elementary School. Finne's students bounce around the classroom holding pulse sticks to monitor their heart rates. When the music dies down, they record the results on worksheets before settling at their desks to measure their heart rates once again.

The class is participating in their final session of Project Staying Alive, a joint venture between Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) and the Milwaukee Fire Department (MFD). Children's Hospital of Wisconsin and Project Ujima also support the program. Project Staying Alive focuses on teaching anger management and conflict resolution to sixth-grade students.

Project Staying Alive is modeled after another successful partnership program between MPS and MFD called the

"Our main goal with Project Staying Alive is to reduce violent injury in the city."

—MFD Lt. Steven Riegg, director of Project Staying Alive

Survive Alive program, an educational fire safety program that began in 1992. That program is run from the Survive Alive House—a house specially designed to simulate a realistic fire experience. Survive Alive's target audiences are second and fifth graders, and to date, more than 200,000 students have participated.

"Once Survive Alive got started, we saw a reduction in fire deaths," said MFD Lt. Steven Riegg, director of Project Staying Alive. "But we were seeing an increase in violent crimes, such as shootings and stabbings. Our main goal with Project Staying Alive is to reduce violent injury in the city."

Project Staying Alive began in 2007 and is believed to be the only program of its kind nationwide, Riegg said. It consists of five 90-minute sessions taught by teachers and trained fire department personnel. While it's still a relatively new program, the fire department and school district are hoping for 500 sixth graders to complete the program by the end of 2008, 1,000 students by the end of 2009, and an additional

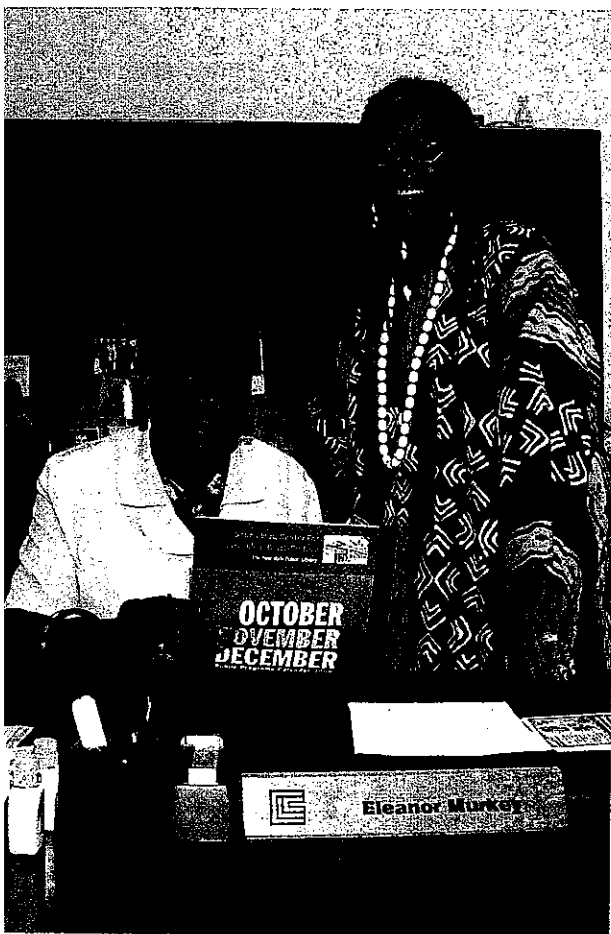
CONTINUED ON PAGE 42

Eleanor Murkey

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 35

participated in civil rights marches, she felt the need to overcome significant educational hurdles, including obtaining her GED after her high school diploma.

Murkey continued to persevere and earned a bachelor's degree from Northwestern Illinois University (NIU). While she was a student at NIU, a friend mentioned a job opening at the College of Lake County. She returned to the college as the outreach director in 1976.



"You get sort of passionate about exposing young people and communities to educational opportunities."

—Eleanor Murkey

During her tenure at the school, she has also served as director of the Community Education Center, director of the Lakeshore Educational Center and the Lakeshore Campus, and associate dean of the Lakeshore Campus.

"I was the first [in my job] and I kind of shaped it as I went," Murkey said.

At points during its development, classes were offered in church basements and various locations around downtown Waukegan. It has always been a stark contrast to its big sister, the Grayslake Campus, which sits nestled in a suburban grove of elms and maples.

The Lakeshore Campus was created to become a gateway for the educational and civic needs of the urban community. Eventually, the college purchased an abandoned department store in downtown Waukegan.

Today, the campus features a bookstore, child care center, registration and counseling centers, basic nursing assistant laboratories, and more. Fittingly enough, Lake Michigan is visible from a number of the doorways and windows of the school. A fortunate few can view the lake from their classroom. In many ways, the view reflects the image of the institution. The lake and college represent possibilities and opportunities as far as the eye can see.

There is passion, too, clearly evident in the energy and determination of the students, staff, and greater community. Due in part to Murkey's efforts, members of the community are well aware of the opportunities that lie within its doors. "You get sort of passionate about exposing young people and communities to educational opportunities," she said.

Her dedication to this cause stemmed from her own tragic childhood. After experiencing the loss of her mother at the age of 12, she was torn from her eight siblings. "When you're so lonely and heartbroken, you get involved with people and they give you meaning and purpose," Murkey said.

The nurturing spirit has gone both ways—while students clearly appreciate the intimate, welcoming atmosphere in the classrooms, Murkey has found a spiritual sustenance as well.

"People think I'm joking when I tell them this, but going to work has been like waking up for Christmas morning every day," she said. "I cannot believe how blessed I am; the Lord couldn't have chosen a better channel for my life." ¶

Project Staying Alive

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 33

2,000 by 2010. Eventually, they hope to expand to include ninth-grade classes as well, Riegg said.

Project Staying Alive is funded through the Safe Schools/Healthy Students grant, which was awarded to Milwaukee Public Schools in 2007. The \$8.5 million grant is set up to provide intervention resources for 28 MPS schools, as well as six local, non-public schools. Project Staying Alive is one of many programs funded through this grant initiative.

When these classes are in session, Milwaukee firefighters use several training techniques to teach youth how to control their anger. Group exercises and role playing help to get students actively involved. After they learn classic

"A lot of these kids are looking for role models and mentors—people they might not find in their homes or neighborhoods."

anger-control methods—such as taking deep breaths, counting to 10, and walking away from volatile situations—firefighters hand out pulse sticks to each group. The devices are used to show students how their bodies can react differently to anger. Once the students are worked up, calming methods are used to bring down their heart rates.

Another interactive approach used during each session is a 15-question quiz. Students use touchpads to record their answers to questions about violent crime and conflict resolution. The touchpad system tracks their answers on a computer, an especially useful tool in charting what they learn over the course of five workshops.

So far, 33 Milwaukee Fire Department members have trained to teach Project Staying Alive workshops and several attend each one. "A lot of these kids are looking for role models and mentors—people they might not find in their homes or neighborhoods," Riegg said. "So every little bit we can do to help, we'll do." ¶

Students learn to rein in anger

Firefighters coach kids to avert violence

By LINDA SPICE
lspice@journalsentinel.com

Inside Sean Veternick's sixth-grade classroom at Alexander Mitchell School, 22 students talked in the final days of class about things that make them mad.

School let out for Milwaukee Public Schools students last Friday, and city firefighters hope that children head into their summer break safely, using anger-management skills gained this school year under Project Staying Alive.

Students at Mitchell, 1728 S. 23rd St., said that at school, two-faced friends anger them. At home, it's bossy sisters. In their neighborhoods, it's problems with gangs, fighting in the street and garbage thrown on lawns.

All anger triggers.

"It's OK to get angry, but how do you control it?" Milwaukee Fire Department Lt. Steve Riegg asked the group during a recent visit to the classroom. Firefighter Doran Kemp and fire Lt. Julian Gladney joined him.

The question was put to about 200 sixth-graders at Mitchell, Carson Academy, and Victory, Hi-Mount and Auer Avenue schools. The 15 firefighters trained in the Project Staying Alive curriculum shared stories of what they see on medical runs, which account for 80% of their calls.

"We go on all the shootings, stabbings and violent injuries," Riegg said. "As a firefighter, it's the worst run you can go on, especially when children are shot and killed. It's horrible. We want to see what we can do to decrease that."

The goal is to train 500 sixth-graders in anger-management skills by the end of 2008, followed by 1,000 more students in 2009 and 2,000 others in 2010.

The Fire Department has \$96,000 in grants for each of

the next four years through the Safe Schools/Healthy Students initiative operating in MPS. Five 90-minute sessions are taught by a teacher trained in conflict resolution. Two sessions are taught by firefighters. A final class, in which the teacher can wrap up the material, is optional.

Kristi Cole, who manages the MPS initiative, said students are responding well to having firefighters in the classroom.

"I think they are learning some tools of how they can talk to their friends, not get into fights or arguments, work through conflicts peacefully and develop some of those strategies that will stay with them through their school years," Cole said.

Maritza Cortez, 12, was so impressed by the firefighters that she said she wants to become one, or maybe a police officer.

"I want to help people," she said.

She will start by sharing what she has learned with children in her neighborhood, she said.

"Get away from gangs, get away from drugs, walk away. Don't be like that, and if you're going to be like that, something is going to happen to you. You're going to get hurt," she said.

Daniel Decker, 11, said he tries to take a deep breath when walking away from a bad situation, a lesson the firefighters teach.

"You never know if you use your anger and you start into a fight, at least one person has a gun and they might set it off," he said.

Those are lessons Veternick hopes translate from the classroom to homes and the streets.

"I hope that a couple of seeds have been planted, and somewhere, somehow, something is pulled from there and they make a good choice," he said. "It's tough out there."

JSOnline.com

For a link to Project Staying Alive, go to www.jsonline.com/links.