

Public misconception



“Social Norms Approach to Health Promotion and Prevention” was held Monday at the University of Pittsburgh Titusville. The workshop focused on misperceptions and how these misperceptions affect behavior. Keynote speaker was Dr. H. Wesley Perkins, a professor of sociology at Hobart and William Smith Colleges. (Herald photos by Tom Boyle)

Workshop focuses on ways to see kids in a positive light

by Tom Boyle
tboyle@titusvilleherald.com

The common perception of the public's view of today's youth is that they are out all night drinking and taking drugs.

According to Dr. Wesley Perkins, this is a misconception.

“We need to reduce the misconceptions about the behavior of young people,” said Perkins, whose workshop at University of Pittsburgh-Titusville on Monday was attended by both school officials and the community as a whole. Perkins' workshop is a way of introducing a marketing campaign to high schools and college campuses, which is based on countering these misperceptions.

Perkins noted campus newspapers usually carry a police blotter listing such alcohol-related crimes among young people as DUI and open container. He said this leads people to believe that all students are involved in this kind of behavior. Perkins said he would like to buy an ad in a newspaper listing all the names of students who are not involved with alcohol.

“We need to turn things around,” he said of the public's view of youth.

Perkins also suggested a display for Alcohol Awareness Week that is different from what is generally seen outside of school buildings. “Instead of a wrecked car, put out a new car listing the students who have signed the pledge never to drink and drive,” said Perkins. “It's the same message.”

In reply to a question, Perkins noted



Dr. H. Wesley Perkins

that school surveys about drug and alcohol use can be misleading. “Imagine asking the question ‘Have you ever had alcohol in your life?’ You would get a large response. If you ask, ‘Have you had a drink this year?’ fewer students would respond. If you ask, ‘Have you had a drink this month?’ there would be fewer responses. If you ask, ‘Have you had a

drink this week?’ typically there would be no responses.” He said schools must be careful about the time frame over which questions are posed. “A survey can expand a group of students into a majority,” he said.

Perkins also said that most traditional surveys are designed to show social problems as a way of getting grants. “Most students are not a problem,” said Perkins. “It is important to get that message out.”

Another misconception is that kids do not eat right, or get enough sleep. Perkins said the majority of students eat three balanced meals a day and receive at least seven hours of sleep each night.

Perkins discussed getting the word out about young people. His strategy focuses on the good choices most teens make in a media-savvy manner. Perkins suggested putting positive information about young people on a school Web site or by producing

a low-production video clip in which kids talk about alcohol. Another method of discussing alcohol was through a power-point presentation, which shows the correlation between alcohol consumption and grades, he said.

“We force people to talk about the three quarters of young people who are not problem,” said Perkins.

Perkins wants parents to get on the ban wagon and start seeing their kids in a more positive light. “We are empowering parents said Perkins. “It's easier if we have the moral support of a group behind us.”

According to Terry Kerr, director of student services, Titusville Area School District, the program was a collaborative effort by several agencies including The Genesis Family Center, of whom Kerr is a board member, and the local school district. Kerr said the program also received support from the Rees Foundation, Titusville Area Hospital and UPT.

“This is a program we felt had merit,” said Kerr. “It had a fresh approach in regard to drug and alcohol prevention issues.” Kerr said the program was geared toward school officials, students and the public in general, to learn about the approach advocated by Perkins. Many attendees were people from out of the local school district area.

“We were extremely pleased by the turnout,” said Kerr. “We had about 160 people. We appreciated all the support.”