

Building positivity in teens

BY JOIE TYRRELL

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About 250 students, teachers, social workers and administrators from 28 high schools throughout Nassau County focused on issues such as mental health, building self-esteem and positive coping skills during Long Island's first Youth Wellness Summit on Tuesday.

The daylong event in Merrick was organized by 20-year-old Adelphi University student Stacy Brief of Bellmore, a Society for the Prevention of Teen Suicide volunteer who struggled with emotional issues and thoughts of suicide when she was a teen. She has volunteered with the organization for more than five years.

"Mental health is just the same as any other aspect of one's health, yet it's also the least addressed," Brief said. "Specifically, it's important we engage high schools because as a teenager the majority of their day is spent in school, so it is important the school has an active role in their students' mental health, as well as their education."

The event, hosted by the Society for the Prevention of Teen Suicide, featured panel discussions and workshops on effective prevention and wellness techniques for sophomores and juniors, as well as school staff. This included suicide awareness practices, yoga, preparing for college and adult life, building self-confidence and effective communication skills. Workshops also were set up for adults from each school who will address suicide prevention and self-care.

This was the first such summit to be held in New York State by the Society for the Prevention of Teen Suicide, a New Jersey-based nonprofit started in 2005 by two fathers whose teenage children died by suicide. The organization has held similar events in New Jersey, and Tuesday's initiative, held at the Brookside School Building in the Bellmore-Merrick Central High School District, was billed as a first of its kind on Long Island.

"There are a lot of young people who are struggling and we know the value of increasing awareness and education, the



Mayary Santos, 16, of Roosevelt, and others participate in a yoga program led by Gabriele Fodor. ■ Video: [newsday.com/education](https://www.newsday.com/education)

community knowing the warning signs and the resources so they can identify and connect those struggling with help," said Dawn Doherty, executive director of the Society for the Prevention of Teen Suicide.

In one workshop called "Knowing Your Worth," students sat in a circle and wrote personality traits on the chalkboard. In addition, they taped signs to each other's back and wrote positive attributes of that person that were then shared.

Mayary Santos, 16, a 10th-grader at Roosevelt High School, said such initiatives should be held more than once a year. "I feel like it's helpful be-

cause kids and even adults can speak up about their issues and feelings like they are not alone," she said. "There are a lot of kids, especially teenagers, who are very depressed and anxious."

Mepham High School social worker Theana Cheliotis said students at this age don't realize that developmentally they are going through so many different changes.

"A lot of things are scored by a number . . . Obviously, grades are important and being involved is important, but building their own self-worth and their own self-confidence is equally as important," she said.

The Bellmore-Merrick Central High School District sent about 25 students and 10 staff members to the event.

"Knowing Stacy's partnership with SPTS, she approached us earlier this year and had aspirations of bringing this to Long Island," said Michael Harrington, assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction for the district. "What she is trying to do to try to help educate peers and students, that fits right into our district theme this year, which is 'Where Wellness Matters.'"

Brief hopes to expand the initiative to include Suffolk County schools next year.

There have been recent efforts statewide to increase awareness of such issues, with New York being the first state in the nation to require mental health education. Regulations went into effect July 1 mandating public and charter schools to include mental health in their curriculum.

Suicide is a leading cause of death among youths and young adults. In a mortality report the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released last year, suicide rates among those aged 10-19 rose 56 percent between 2007 and 2016, with greater increases for females than males.

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