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Speaking out

By Brad Meyer
Courier staff

A pilot program to help disadvantaged and at-risk children learn better communication skills is achieving better results than anticipated, encouraging organizers to expand the scope and availability of the concept in Montgomery County.

Breaking Off Our Chains, a youth-oriented group focused on curtailing intergenerational violence, has combined with the Outspoken Toastmasters of Conroe on a five-week class to help 15 area children learn better public speaking and communication techniques.

“The goal is to help build confidence, organization and leadership by teaching the kids about public speaking,” said Sallie Edwards, founder of BOOC. “The response from the children has been incredible.”

The project was initiated by Edwards to help local children improve in school by learning better communication skills. She contacted Sharon Hickson, a member of Outspoken Toastmasters of Conroe, for recommendations.

“I immediately volunteered to be part of the program,” said Hickson. “Public speaking is skill that can be taught and this seemed like a worthy project.”

Using humor, music and incentives, the group set up a weekly three-hour session for children at Edwards’ II Ed’s Horse Ranch in Conroe. The youths, ages 5-17, are taught the basics of public speaking, including eye contact, organization of thought and speaking in a clear voice.

“We established basic rules of conduct,” added Edwards, “but we let the kids be involved in determining topics of interest.”

Midway through the pilot program, Edwards and Hickson are excited by the results.

“We can already see a big difference in the confidence and quality of speech in these kids,” said Hickson. “We are very encouraged.”

The participating kids see benefits as well.

“When I’m called on in class, I don’t panic any more,” said John Homes, a 15-year-old participant who attends Conroe High School. “I just stand right up and give the answer. Sometimes it’s right, sometimes it’s not – but I don’t feel embarrassed either way.”

Creating a safe, comfortable environment is key, according to Edwards. Many of the kids were suspicious in the beginning, but once they developed faith in the project leaders, the project made great progress. She hopes to expand the program in the future with support from the community.

“These are good kids that have dealt with challenges in their lives,” said Edwards. “This program is helping them deal with their world in a new and better way.”



A joint effort between Breaking Off Our Chains and Outspoken Toastmasters of Conroe is helping disadvantaged children learn confidence, organization and leadership by teaching them the basics of effective public speaking and interpersonal communication.



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