

Program for youth opening up the conversation

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A program for youth, originating from Antigonish is not only spreading province-wide, but also receiving national recognition.

The Healthy Relationships for Youth Program (HRY) at the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre is delivered in all high schools in the Strait Regional School Board (SRSB) and is now being delivered in an additional 15 high schools across the province.

Aside from the program's growth, it has also been recognized nationally by the Canadian Women's Foundation as a promising practice program.

"It's unique because so often programs are developed in urban areas and then offered to rural communities but this is a program that's really home grown," Betsy MacDonald, HRY provincial co-ordinator said.

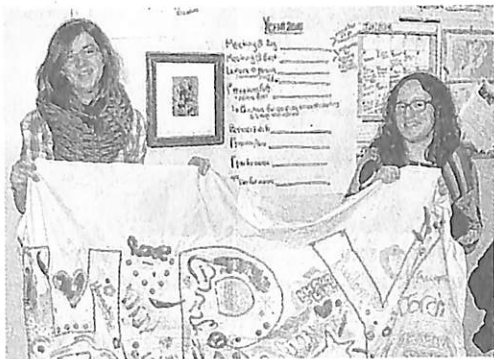
"It's a Nova Scotia program for Nova Scotia youth."

The program is delivered to Grade 9 students by trained youth facilitators between Grades 10 and 12.

MacDonald said HRY also recently learned the program is one of just a handful of peer facilitated violence prevention programs for youth across the country.

The program first began in 2006 as a proactive approach focusing on teaching skills and knowledge for creating and maintaining healthy relationships. In the beginning, there were just two schools in SRSB participating.

"Now we're getting into generations where even the Grade 12s received HRY when they were Grade 9 students themselves so, because of the impact the program has, they want to facilitate now for the Grade 9 students,"



Dayna Barnes and Betsy MacDonald are two co-ordinators for the Healthy Relationships for Youth program at the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre. The program is continuing to see growth across the province and has been recognized nationally by the Canadian Women's Foundation. PHOTO: Emily Hiltz

Dayna Barnes, HRY SRSB co-ordinator said.

Barnes noted the peer mentorship makes it more comfortable for youth to talk about important issues because they are able to relate to one another.

MacDonald added Grade 9 is a crucial transition year for youth as well as their social and emotional development. Although the challenges of peer pressure begin earlier than Grade 9, she believes the conversations can be had on a more mature level by the 9th Grade.

Every September, Barnes

visits the 10 schools in SRSB participating in the program and holds full day training for all of the facilitators. Throughout the year, schools choose how they want to participate in the program. Some will do it in a semester, while others will hold it over a year.

Most school groups meet bi-weekly, with Barnes completing monthly check-ins to debrief past sessions and prep for the next.

"We try to tailor it for each class because one class might be really engaging in discussion

and one might be a little more reclusive," Barnes said. "For the classes that aren't engaging in the discussions we'll try to come up with more visual arts pieces."

Barnes said many of the youth have developed a more critical perspective on the media through their sessions.

"A lot of them are really engaged and note afterwards how critical it makes them of watching TV and commercials and being on the internet," Barnes said. "For me that's a really big piece - making them more mindful of not just consuming."

MacDonald said she enjoys when she gets to help out with the facilitator training because of the passionate energy from

the facilitators.

"Just knowing that this program is opening up spaces for conversations that otherwise might not happen makes the work really meaningful," she said.

Both women agreed knowing the Grade 12s will be graduating and able to carry on the HRY skills with them is greatly important.

MacDonald noted the program is constantly moving and changing with the times. In the future, she hopes they continue to see the program grow.

"I think the more we deliver the program and the more schools we deliver it in, the stronger it gets," MacDonald said.