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Teen conference at Wayne State turns strangers into friends

DETROIT — Michigan's longest-running teen conference continues at Wayne State University on Oct.30, when more than 220 young teens set aside differences and learn to get along. Since 1983, the Giant Step Teen Conference has promoted harmony across diverse groups through frank discussion that bridges race, culture, ethnicity, religion and income. More than 5,200 area students have attended Giant Step since the conference began.



This year's keynote speaker is Ronnie Bachman telling his inspiring story of survival and success. Ron was born with legs so badly deformed they hindered his ability to crawl. At age 4, his parents made the difficult decision to have both legs amputated at the hip. Today he scoots through audiences sharing his message about being "unique and different" and enlightening thousands of teens throughout Michigan and across the country.

Teens attend the free Giant Step conference from an array of schools throughout southeast Michigan: urban, suburban, public, private, charter, parochial, magnet and specialty high schools, and even home schools. Facilitators guide the student discussions on topics like bullying, friendship, disabilities, parents, self-image, career plans and conflict.

"It was a great learning and growing experience," a 15-year-old charter school student wrote in her evaluation. "If people did more things like this, there would be less judgment and racism in the world." Trudy Shiemke, who has coordinated the conference since its inception, said the conference is an excellent fit with the mission of its host organization, the Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute. "We are committed to helping children at all stages, from birth through early adulthood," she said. "Young teens have excellent potential for attitude change and learning how to keep an open mind about others."

Last year, 266 teens from 46 different schools attended Giant Step. Ninety-four percent said Giant Step was a positive experience and recommended their school continue to participate; 93% said talking with teens from different backgrounds was interesting and educational; 79% planned to stay in touch with the people they met at the conference. A majority of last year's students said Giant Step helped them:

- Find it easier to get to know people who are different from them
- Talk more frequently with their parents
- Prefer to live in a community of people different from them
- Accept responsibility for their actions

The Giant Step Teen Conference takes place Oct. 30 from 9 am – 2 pm in the Student Center Ballroom at Wayne State University. For details, visit <http://mpsi.wayne.edu/outreach/step-conference.php>

*The Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute for Child & Family Development promotes and improves the development, health and well-being of infants, children, youth and their families through research, education and outreach. The Institute is part of **Wayne State University**, a premier urban research institution offering more than 400 academic programs through 13 schools and colleges to nearly 32,000 students.*