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Giant Step Teen Conference bridges borders to build friendships

October 24, 2013

DETROIT — Michigan's longest-running teen conference celebrates 30 years of building harmony on Oct. 29, when more than 275 high school students will unite to set aside differences and learn to get along. Since 1983, Giant Step has built bridges across race, cultural, ethnic, religious and income groups to show diverse students how much they have in common. More than 5,500 area teens have attended since Giant Step's first conference in 1983.

This year's keynote speaker is Maureen Stapleton, a long-time supporter of Giant Step and former member of the Michigan House of Representatives. Stapleton's story of her rise to a position of statewide influence will inspire teens to find their own voice and fight for what they believe in.

Teens attend the free Giant Step conference from different types of high schools throughout southeast Michigan. The goal is to break down the walls that artificially divide teens and show them how alike they are beneath the surface. Teens from urban, suburban, public, private, charter, parochial, magnet and specialty high schools, and even home schools are randomly assigned to discussion groups. Facilitators then guide open interactions on topics like bullying, friendship, disabilities, parents, self-image, career plans and conflict.

"I wish everyone could experience this conference," a University Liggett freshman said after last year's Giant Step. "We really opened up and talked to each other. Our lives weren't that different." Trudy Shiemke, who has coordinated the conference since its inception, said the event is an excellent fit with the mission of its host Wayne State's Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute to improve the welfare of children and their families. "Young teens are at the right age to be open-minded about others," Shiemke said. "The power of getting to know someone you might never encounter in your school or neighborhood can change an attitude for life."

Evaluations completed by Giant Step students before and after the conference confirm that the day's discussion makes a difference. More than 90 percent of students:

- rate Giant Step as a positive experience,
- say they found talking with teens from different backgrounds interesting and educational,
- are more likely after the conference to approach a teen who seems different from them,
- plan to stay in touch with students they met at the conference.

Giant Step Teen takes place Tuesday, Oct. 29, from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. at Greater Grace Conference Center, 23500 W. 7 Mile Road, Detroit. Schools can register to send students through Oct. 28. For details, visit www.mpsi.wayne.edu or contact Trudy Shiemke at tshiemke@wayne.edu. The event is sponsored by the Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute, the Co-Ette Club of Detroit, the DTE Foundation and the Junior League of Detroit.

The Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute for Child and 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 370 academic programs through 13 schools and colleges to nearly 29,000 students.

Photo: Maureen Stapleton, former member of the Michigan House of Representatives.

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