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From Stranger to Friend at Giant Step Teen Conference



DETROIT — Michigan's longest-running teen conference gathered 289 students from across metro Detroit recently to learn how to respect differences and build friendships. For 31 years, Giant Step's free annual conference has helped students from a wide range of backgrounds get to know each other.

Ninth and tenth graders attended the Oct. 28 event from urban, suburban, public, private, charter, parochial, magnet and even home schools. This year four deaf students and two interpreters attended from the Frederick Douglass Academy for Young Men. Each student is assigned to a small discussion groups with diversity across race, culture, religion, ethnicity and income. "The students are wary at first.

"All those faces they don't know," said Cheryl Deep, media relations manager for Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute. Trained facilitators guide open interactions on topics like bullying, friendship, disabilities, parents, self-image, career plans and conflict. "Facilitators get everyone talking," she said. "By the afternoon, students are sharing cell phone numbers and email addresses. It's beautiful to behold."

"Abusive Relationships" was the keynote and focus of the simultaneous educators' seminar that offers three continuing education credits to the professionals who bring the teens. The groups reunite for the final "report out" in which a student from each table announces what they learned. Comments included:



"We talked about friends, cliques and bullying. We connected because we all felt bullied at some time."

"We are from different schools but face similar problems. I think we'll be friends for a long time."

"Respect others and yourself."

"We all go through the same stuff. It's the struggle, guys. It's high school."

"We are all human."

Conference Coordinator Trudy Shiemke said the event is an excellent fit with Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute's mission to improve the welfare of children and their families. "Our motto is 'Inclusion, Harmony, Acceptance,'" she said. "Young teens are willing to be open-minded. Getting to know someone you might not encounter in your everyday school or neighborhood can change attitudes for life."

Evaluations confirm that because of Giant Step, more than 90% of students are more likely to approach a teen who seems different from them, find talking with teens from different backgrounds interesting and educational, and plan to stay in touch with students they met at the conference. Giant Step is sponsored by the Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute, the Co-Ette Club of Detroit, the DTE Foundation and the Junior League of Detroit. For details, visit www.mpsi.wayne.edu.

*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.*