

# School's Out for Summer

By Debbie Benevides, Education & Training Coordinator

As another school year comes to a close, students around the city are looking forward to summer and vacation plans. Though it is a bittersweet time for the Education & Training Department, the summer months are used to evaluate sessions — what worked, what didn't, what we need to change and make better, as well as working on developing new activities to keep youth interested and engaged. We also hope the students who participated in our Healthy Relationships Groups will take the skills they learned and apply them to their everyday lives, as they move up to the next grade level.

A few days after completing a presentation at a local high school, I found out a difference it made in one young girl's life. A school administrator reported the young lady broke up with her controlling, emotionally abusive boyfriend after she began to realize she deserved better and that the relationship made her more sad than happy. It wasn't an easy decision, but she knew she was making the right choice to get out of the relationship before it got any worse. Real life situations like these help us realize teens are struggling and with a little guidance and knowledge, they learn to make the right choices and realize what type of relationships they really do deserve.

When meeting with youth for the first time, we, as educators, walk in not knowing their stories or backgrounds. Yet, often, we walk out hoping students received the messages and understand the importance of having healthy relationships. We hope that they evaluate their own relationships and share their new found knowledge with their classmates.

One in five high school girls reports being physically or sexually abused by a dating partner ([www.clotheslineproject.org](http://www.clotheslineproject.org)), this number is staggering when thinking about how many there are in their classrooms, schools and communities. A healthy relationship is based on respect. If you have respect, you have boundaries, acceptance, independence, trust and support and most importantly, a voice; a voice to say what you're feeling without fear; a voice to speak honestly and make decisions; and a voice to help yourself and others.

Warning signs happen to give us the feeling or realization that our relationships could potentially crumble and get violent. For many youth, they hear it, they see it, and even experience it; yet, they aren't aware that what's happening to them is unhealthy. Our groups focus on what they should expect from a relationship because the types of relationships they have now will more than likely be the same types of relationships they will have in the future.

We strive to motivate youth to be agents of change. Although it's not an easy task, we plant the seed of prevention to challenge youth to think about their community, the media that influences them and to look at issues of violence and oppression in a different way or for some, to even

recognize and learn what it is. For many, the violence they see has become a norm, a “that’s the way it is” mentality, or part of their everyday lives. This makes it challenging but with the help of other youth who are aware and knowledgeable about these issues is what will eventually help our generation to take action and make a difference in the world.