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Day-long conference involves youth from city high schools

By **SABRINA ZIEGLER**
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High school youth had the chance on Friday to express their concerns, ideas and other general comments about the job the City of Porterville is doing.

The second annual conference organized by the Porterville Youth Commission, the Porterville Youth Voice Conference, took place at Santa Fe Elementary School. The PYC is a body of 10 youth, including two representatives from each high school. They meet throughout the year in order to discuss youth and city issues, as well as organize events.

In all, 65 students from four different high schools participated in the Youth Voice Conference. Student government, club representatives and PYC representatives were invited.

As they walked in, many helped themselves to a table spread of pizza, cookies, apples and oranges.

The band Compassion, the members of which are alumni and students of local high schools, played "phase two" to open the conference. Their "melodic hard core" sound created an atmosphere of youthfulness, to set the tone for a long day — from 1:30 to nearly 5 p.m. — of talks and activities.

The keynote speaker was David Gong, a seven-time cancer survivor and water polo coach at Granite Hills High School. He told of his battles with cancer, including his fall from grace as an athlete, and his choice since then to use his experience to come back and make a difference in his hometown. He encouraged the youth there to also choose to make a difference in their hometown.

"There's a lot of things going on in your town. What are you going to do about it?" Gong said.

According to Parks and Leisure Services Superintendent Donnie Moore, who helped set



PHOTO COURTESY CITY OF PORTERVILLE

Students from Porterville high schools take part in an icebreaker called 'Human Knot' led by Youth Commissioner Asia Martinez of Monache High School during last Friday's Porterville Youth Voice Conference which took place in the gym at Santa Fe Elementary School.

up the event, other speakers included Noel Gregory, from Community Services Employment Training (CSET), who talked about the jobs available to students over the summer, and what it takes to look for a job. Three officers from the Porterville Police Department gave a presentation on the DUI, using beer goggles to demonstrate the effect alcohol has on motor skills. They also talked about gang awareness and Internet safety.

Porterville Recorder Editor Claudia Elliott talked to teens about their attitudes about newspapers, finding that many like both print and online newspapers.

Representatives from the City of Porterville's Community Development Commission talked about Census 2010 and about the Community Development Block Grant money that made building the Heritage Center possible.

At the end of the day, those who attended had a chance to ask questions and take a survey that asked a number of questions including, "if you wanted to see one thing built in Porterville, what would it be?" Moore said.

Natalie Congdon, who is a member of the PYC, said each member of the commission had a role with the planning of the event.

"I think it's a really great experience, and I think it allows for a lot of the tension between schools to dissipate," she said. The commission is now in the process of planning a Farmers Market in April and establishing a "no cussing week."

Granite Hills ASB member, Zoe Kisling said, "I think [the Porterville Youth Voice Conference] is a really good idea, because our town is starting to get more developed for the

younger generation, and it's cool because they take our ideas."

City Councilman Pete Martinez, who is responsible for the addition of the PYC as a temporary extension of local government, showed excitement as he talked to a cafeteria full of high school student government members and representatives, during the introduction.

"Last year, we did an all school survey at all the high schools, ranging from what they want to see in Porterville and what we think about what the city has done," said Dalton Rogers, Associated Student Body President at Harmony Magnet Academy (now freshmen and sophomores). "This is the second year we've done it. It was Pete's idea to bring the youth together to hear the youth's voice and see what [they] want done in the city."

Last year, those who attended had the chance to assess and comment on the city's 20-year plan, as well as make their own suggestions. A case was made that the city ought to invest in a mall, because it would create more of an opportunity for people to spend money locally, as well as offer youth a place to hang out.

"I think it's great," Rogers said. "I think that the opportunity this presents for us to be heard is great, is outstanding."

Martinez said the City Council recently discussed whether to make the PYC a permanent extension of the city government. "This youth voice conference was put together by the youth commission, and I'm here to hear those concerns and take them back to City Council," he said.

The PYC has a Facebook, and a Website link on the city's Website. They also established a telephone line, where people can call to hear a recording with the announcements of all the activities being offered to youth in the city.

Last year, one of the big concerns expressed had to do with the gang activity in Porterville. Since then, the city has stepped up its neighborhood watch programs and graffiti abatement, and put more police officers on the streets, Martinez said.

"When you start hearing about how young people are knowledgeable about what's going on in the city, it's impressive," he said. "Obviously, they're either talking about it at home or talking about it at school. They're able to articulate what their issues are: everything from having a skate park on the other side of town to having a mall.

"If we open the door, they're willing to come in and talk... it's going to be them that are going to be making decisions in five, 10 years, and our hope is that after they go to college, they come back here."

The Youth Commission includes Natalie Congdon and Gabby Chester from Granite Hills; Gregory and Stephanie Haas, and Vince Sandoval, from Porterville High; Asia Martinez and Andri Rollans from Monache High; Zachary Harris from Citrus High; and Daniel Reif and Dalton Rogers, from Harmony Magnet Academy. Their information telephone line is 782-7523.

► **Sabrina Ziegler is a freelance reporter. Send e-mail in care of recorder@portervillerecorder.com.**