

School anti-violence group gets \$1K

All students should feel safe.



(Photo Mike Hensdill/The Gaston Gazette) The Students Against Violence Everywhere chapter at Highland Tech recently received a \$1,000 grant to continue its anti-violence efforts in the community. The club read and spoke to kindergarteners at Woodhill Elementary School on Woodhill Drive in Gastonia early Tuesday morning, November 10, 2015. Here, SAVE president Haley Abernathy (17) works with (L-R) Azariah Gaither (6) and Anthony McCleave (5) with a coloring exercise after the reading.

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All students should feel safe.

It's the goal set by a group of about 30 students at Highland School of Technology. They are members of Students Against Violence Everywhere. The club meets twice a month to brainstorm ways to combat violence and promote safety in the school community.

"I think everyone has seen or experienced suffering at some point in their life. I know I have," said senior Haley Abernathy, the school's SAVE chapter president. "Our goal is to limit the suffering in people's lives as much as possible."

SAVE started at West Charlotte High School in Charlotte in 1989 following the tragic death of a student who was trying to break up a fight at an off-campus party.

Students created the organization to promote youth safety and to work together to prevent future violent incidents. Highland, under the direction of school counselor Ami Parker, created a chapter when the school opened in 2000.

"That is one reason why it's so relevant for us here is that local connection," said Parker.

Now they'll be able to boost those local efforts.

Highland's SAVE is one of 20 chapters in the state to win a \$1,000 grant from the Allstate Foundation. The charitable organization's mission is to provide assistance to domestic violence survivors, empower youth and celebrate community involvement. The school was selected as a grant recipient based on its dedication to the organization's cause.

Abernathy says her chapter will use the money for community projects.

In the past, the group has partnered with the Boys and Girls Clubs of Greater Gaston for trunk or treat events and Easter egg hunts, served food at the Gaston Recreation Center for the senior citizen prom and asked students to pledge to practice responsible driving. They also focus on bullying awareness and prevention.

In October, the club held a mix-it-up lunch, where students were randomly assigned a colored sticker. Students had to eat lunch with students who had the same color sticker. Parker says it was a way to break down barriers at Highland, a magnet school where many students aren't familiar with each other.

"We're encouraging them to participate," said Parker. "We had students tell us they'd love it if we did it earlier in the school year to encourage that getting to know each other."

Abernathy joined SAVE during her freshman year after she saw the club represented at a local event. She has become an integral part of her chapter's operations and was recently selected to serve on the organization's national youth advisory committee.

The eight-member committee assists in the planning and implementation of the organization's initiatives. They also write articles for the organization's electronic newsletter about topics central to the campaign. Abernathy says it is a great responsibility she is proud to accept.

Page 2 of 2 - "SAVE has given me a lot of responsibility skills and leadership skills," she said. "I want to go into a health-care career, so this will help."

Abernathy says former chapter members have stayed involved with the group through the years. Some have started similar initiatives at college campuses and partnered with other civic organizations. Abernathy hopes to do the same.