

WSCC Human Services students earn state recognition



Students and faculty from the Human Services program at Wallace State Community College were named the winners of the Alabama Department of Mental Health's 4th Celebrate Recovery Challenge. Pictures are, from left, in front: Tammy Johnson, Courtland; Angela Stout, Vinemont; Kristen Rooker, Hayden; Megan Sparks, Hanceville; Cortney Ritchie, Warrior; Susan Beck, Human Services Program Chair; Joyce Barnett, Hanceville; Savana Sullivan, Warrior; in back: Firehawk Warren, Cullman; Mary Beth Lawrence, Cleveland; Brianna Sims, Hanceville; Crystal Bryan, Altoona; Dustin Oswalt, Gardendale.

Using of the theme "Stop Stepping Over Our Dead Bodies and Step Up for Recovery," the groups worked together to bring awareness about the recovery process.

In its announcement of the winning entry, the Alabama Department of Mental Health said their efforts best embodies "the purpose of Recovery Month by increasing awareness and decreasing stigma" related to those dealing with addictions.

Mike McLemore with FORMLL and the Advisory Board President for the Human Services program, said he was proud of the Wallace State students who also serve as interns for the advocacy group. The students worked after hours to attend weekly planning meetings for their events. "They did that at great sacrifice because the planning meeting were at night and they had to drive here to Decatur, some coming from as far away as Blount County."

He said the students worked for about a year on all of the projects surrounding Celebrate Recovery Month. Four other program were entered the contest, with the Wallace State program earning the majority of the 10,000 votes cast to win the award. "Wallace State should be exceptionally proud of them," McLemore said.

WSCC Human Services program director Susan Beck said she offered some suggestions to her students and then let them decide what activities to do for the month. The group combined FORMLL's theme of Stop Stepping Over our Dead Bodies

HANCEVILLE, Ala. — Congratulations are in order for the students in Wallace State Community College Human Services program. They were recently recognized for winning the Alabama Department of Mental Health's 4th Celebrate Recovery Challenge. This is the second time the program has entered the contest and the second time they've been declared the winner.

The Challenge was held in conjunction with Celebrate Recovery Month 2015 in September. Wallace State teamed up with the City of Hanceville and FORMLL (Friends of Recovery, Morgan, Madison, Lawrence, Limestone, Cullman and Randolph

with their own idea of Step Up for Recovery to use as their inspiration. Student Mary Beth Lawrence came up with the Step Up for Recovery portion of their theme. "I felt like we were stepping up for the ones who are in recovery," Lawrence said. "They need recognition for their hard work and dedication."

One of their first steps was to get the word out about Celebrate Recovery Month. Student Joyce Barnett of Hanceville researched proclamations for Celebrate Recovery Month and used those as a guideline to write one specifically for the City of Hanceville. Mayor Kenneth Nail signed the proclamation and took a photo with the Human Services class to submit with a press release to The Cullman Times newspaper. Barnett also worked with the mayor's office to create a message for the sign at the city's recreation center.

Their next step was to get involved in outreach programs. The students attended a rally in Decatur hosted by FORMLL. Along with working their own Wallace State booth at the rally, they volunteered at other booths, registering voters and helping in other ways.

"We just got together and had a lot of resources for people who are in recovery or seeking recovery," said Tammie Johnson of Courtland. "We actually had two people go to detox from the rally."

But they also learned one person died of an overdose just blocks from the rally.

"We had two people call at the rally that afternoon who knew people who were down there looking for Narcan pens and we lost an individual within five blocks of the rally to an overdose," Johnson said. Narcan pens are similar to epi-pens given to those suffering from allergies. The rescue pens include a single dose of medication aimed at treating an overdosing patient before an ambulance or other emergency responders arrive.

Johnson said there is a huge heroin epidemic currently affecting every community, as well as a significant prescription drug problem. "We're seeing all walks of life being affected by addiction," Johnson said.

Also during the rally, those in attendance saw the visual toll of addiction through more than 1,000 markers bearing the names of individuals lost due to addiction. It could have been through overdose, DUI or other means. Each of the names were continuously read over the sound system throughout the event.

"It was really a touching thing to see," Johnson said. "It was heartbreaking."

Throughout the process, several students received certification as Certified Peer Support Specialists. That brings the number of faculty and staff in the Human Services program who can help those seeking recovery to 10.

"Myself, Mary Beth (Lawrence) and Dustin (Oswalt) went to Guntersville for the CPSS training," said Angela Stout of Vinemont, preparing them for their roles as peer support specialists. "You can come to a peer support specialist and they can actually help you with recovery or even before recovery," Stout said. "For someone looking for help, it's a lot easier to relate to someone who's been through it, rather than someone who's wearing a suit and a tie or a uniform."

The students also put together videos or are putting together videos to spread the message of prevention and how addiction impacts not only the life of the addicted, but their family and friends. Kristen Rooker's video tells the story of how her family was affected more than 35 years ago by an accident that involved drinking and driving. An 18-year-old named Jimmy suffered a traumatic brain injury in the accident. For the last 37 years, his parents have been taking care of him and now his siblings and other family members are also pitching in.

"They said they could have saved them for all of this if hadn't had so much alcohol in his system," said Rooker, of Hayden. "But it took so long to pump all the alcohol out of his system before they could do surgery, that it prolonged it."

Since then, the entire family has been affected in some way. “None of the grandkids have ever had both their grandparents at a birthday party,” Rooker said. “Jimmy sits in a chair every day and he has to watch his brother and sisters live life. He’s watched them get married, have babies, move out, and he didn’t.”

Her message to those who see the video is that they deserve to live life, to graduate, get married, has a family. “Although Jimmy was lucky to be alive, that’s not the life he wanted; he could have done a lot of other things with his life.”

For students like Oswald, the experience also helped refine his career path. “It’s kind of pushed me more toward adolescent drug prevention,” he said. “We need more programs because there’s hardly anything out there nowadays. For programs for adolescents who get in trouble in school, there’s next to no prevention in schools nowadays.”

All of the students in the Human Services classes that participated in Celebrate Recovery Month are working toward earning degrees to be substance abuse and addiction counselors. The students are expected to travel to Montgomery to accept congratulations from Governor Robert Bentley.

The Human Services program offers the Associate in Applied Science degree in three areas: Mental Health Technician, Substance Abuse/Addiction Counseling and Social Work Associate. The program can be completed in five semesters. For more information, contact Human Services Program Director Susan Beck at 256.352.8339 or susan.beck@wallacestate.edu.