

# Majority Awareness Walk celebrates positive decisions

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**Participants braved Monday's cold temperatures to support the 2nd annual Majority Awareness Walk. (Ryan Berry photo)**

GREENVILLE – Monday morning's return to wintery weather didn't stop nearly 200 participants in support of the 2nd Annual Majority Awareness Walk.

Sponsored by the We Are the Majority peer-led program, the walk brought attention to young people who are making positive decisions and the efforts being made to educate the public about the dangers of substance abuse.

Gathering at Annie Oakley Park, participants walked up Broadway to the Greenville Fire Department, where a program was held.

Kelly Harrison, prevention specialist with Recovery and Wellness of Midwest Ohio, thanked the young people who participate in We Are the Majority.

"You all help make a brighter future for Darke County," she said.

On March 20, Greenville Mayor Stephen Willman signed a proclamation declaring April 1-7 as We Are the Majority Awareness Week. On Monday, Greenville senior Grace Coakley and Willman read the proclamation, which included statistics that 98 percent of teens have never tried heroin; 58 percent have never tried marijuana; and 94 percent have never used cocaine.

Students from several school districts shared how they have been working to spread the word, especially with elementary age students about remaining drug- and alcohol-free.

Greenville senior Will Coomer encouraged younger students to be cautious about accepting invitations to party with their peers.

"The way I say no is 'that's not what I'm in to,'" he explained. "I stick to my studies and to sports."

Making the decision to turn down invitations gets easier, he said, and opens more time to participate in positive activities. "I'd rather be safe than sorry," he said.

Also speaking Monday, Chief Deputy Mark Whitaker shared some statistics about the county's jail.

"I looked at the numbers," Whitaker said, sharing when the county's 36-bed jail opened in 1982, Darke County's population stood at 55,000.

The jail, he said, "didn't house many" in those days.

Today, the county's population has dropped to 51,000 – but the jail remains full every single day – with up to 15 inmates being housed in neighboring county jails due to the Darke County Jail's overcrowding.

"The reason is because of substance abuse," Whitaker said, explaining how local crime could be cut in half if drug abuse was to be eliminated.

Whitaker invited people to report if they see something suspicious.

"Solving crime is a community-wide program," he said, thanking the We Are the Majority young people for "stepping up and standing out" against drugs and alcohol.

Whitaker also took a moment to invite students to be diligent about including others they may see sitting alone or who are new to their school.

"Think about inclusion not exclusion. If you see a student sitting by themselves, invite them in, include them. Keep up the good work and invite more of your friends to be part of We Are the Majority."

According to Harrison, the We Are the Majority program is growing from being considered an after-school activity to an in-school program.

Several school districts are encouraging students to form We Are the Majority groups, which meet during the school day, for example at lunch time.

Older students also are providing activities for middle- and elementary-age students, offering activities to promote positive decisions.

For example, Greenville Middle School's We Are the Majority recently presented a play for the elementary and on Tuesdays they volunteer with the district's afterschool latchkey program.

In an effort to support the We Are the Majority, the county's school districts also received a total of \$25,000 in grants during the past year from the Coalition for a Healthy Darke County, said Sharon Deschambeau, president of both the coalition and the Darke County Chamber of Commerce.

"Schools can design their own programs and (invite) speakers to help students make decisions" about substance abuse awareness, Deschambeau said.

"To change the culture in our community, we have to start with our youth. We're so proud of our youth," Deschambeau concluded.

Two new programs were introduced Monday by Wellness and Recovery, including a drug-free driver program in collaboration with American Family Insurance for teens ages 14-18 and a Color Me Well 5K, set for 9 a.m. July 14 at the Darke County Fairgrounds.

For more information, contact Recovery and Wellness at 937-548-6842.