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Six teens form own anti-poverty panel

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Six seniors from three Clarke County high schools formed Young PPA to help in the poverty fight.
Kelly Lambert / Staff

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A group of teenagers want to take on the fight against poverty, and they aren't waiting for adults tell them how.

Six high school seniors from Cedar Shoals, Clarke Central and Classic City high schools have met for months to plan a strategy and now want to recruit other teens to join the struggle.

Members of the grassroots effort known as Young Partners for a Prosperous Athens are planning everything from infomercials and anti-poverty summits to a benefit concert to raise teen awareness of Athens' high poverty rate and the role education can play to help the problem.

"Our ultimate goal is to promote the value of education," said Austin Martin, a Young PPA member and senior at Cedar Shoals High School. "If you have an education, you have a way out of poverty."

At a planning session last week for the anti-poverty summit, Cedar Shoals senior Yihe Dong said she never realized how high the poverty rate is in Athens until last summer, when she read a statistic: 28 percent of residents live in poverty.

How could that be, Dong asked, in a community that's home to a major university and a vibrant downtown?

It was a side of Athens she'd never seen.

"It's an issue no one realizes the severity of in their community," Dong said. "People immerse themselves in a closed atmosphere. We should see beyond ourselves to see what other people are dealing with."

So Dong approached organizers of the anti-poverty coalition known as OneAthens - originally called Partners for a Prosperous Athens - about volunteering.

But after she talked with OneAthens organizers and Monica Knight, the director of student achievement for the Clarke County School District, Dong decided to find her own way to help - by organizing the Young PPA.

Now, a group of students from across the school district has formed a steering committee for the Young PPA and has been meeting regularly since September, trying to come up with strategies to fight not only poverty, but also the school district's high dropout rate, the lack of affordable housing in the community, homelessness, hunger and poor workforce development.

And the answers to those problems all start with education, Dong said.

"Every problem here is connected," she said. "It's a cycle. If you're raised in an impoverished family, you're more likely to struggle academically, you're less aware of the importance of getting an education. Once you have no education, you're less likely to get a high-paying job. The mission is to break that cycle."

Young PPA organizers think the simplest way to get other teens involved is to get them talking about the problem.

The group has planned an anti-poverty summit for about 100 local students Dec. 7 at the Lyndon House Arts Center and Lay Park Community Center.

The summit will feature speakers from OneAthens and other community groups, information booths from volunteer organizations and brainstorming sessions. In a poverty simulation, teens will role-play to try and recreate obstacles poor families face.

Dong hopes the Young PPA will be the "United Nations" of student organizations by encouraging other student groups to build a common set of goals and plan events to fight the problem.

Young PPA already has started filming an infomercial that will air next month in most Clarke County classrooms. Next spring, organizers will help stage a benefit concert featuring local high school bands, known as Battle of the Bands. Started last year by Cedar Shoals graduate Judy Bau, the second-annual concert at Legion Field raises money to fight poverty and the winner is invited to play at AthFest.

OneAthens is working with the Young PPA by giving information and putting the students in touch with other volunteers and community groups, OneAthens spokesman Joe Whorton said. Several of these groups will have booths at the summit, and their volunteers will speak and foster dialogue between students.

While high school students have volunteered with OneAthens and other community groups to fight poverty, Young PPA is the first long-term, student-launched effort in some years, Whorton said.

"It's very impressive that young people would come to us wanting to help, and it's their idea and their initiative," he said. "... You can't create change if you don't have awareness."

Young PPA member Athena Lao said one of the priorities for next month's summit is to recruit underclassmen to join. Each member of the steering committee is a senior, and the group needs to plant some seeds with freshmen and sophomores to keep the effort going in the future.

"We want to spread the word and find some people who are interested and willing to devote their time and resources," Lao said.

Want to help?

To contact the Young PPA, e-mail contact-yppa@gmail.com or call (706) 546-7721, ext. 18326.

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