

Get all the news you need from the  
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette.



**Aliquippa Middle School students Marquie Karas (left), Ericka Willis, Shamara Priest and Rashad Brown will visit with Gov. Ridge to celebrate their school's win in a state contest. (Robin Rombach, Post-Gazette)**

## **Aliquippa school's program has decreased violence, improved academics**

Caring Habit performance reaps positive results for middle and junior high school students

Tuesday, May 02, 2002

By L.A. Johnson, Post-Gazette Staff Writer

Rashad Brown and three other Aliquippa Middle School students are preparing to break bread with Gov. Ridge tomorrow.

**Aliquippa Middle School students Marquie Karas (left), Ericka Willis, Shamara Priest and Rashad Brown will visit with Gov. Ridge to celebrate their school's win in a state contest. (Robin Rombach, Post-Gazette)**

Their school's Caring Habit of the Month Adventure program has been named a winner in the state health department's Violence-Free Youth Challenge 2000 contest. The school's prize package includes lunch for six at the governor's mansion and a \$5,000 grant from the state education department.

The Violence-Free Youth Challenge encourages middle and junior high school students to be violence prevention advocates by creating violence prevention programs or messages.

"If we can increase the level of empathy and sense of respect and regard for one another between students, that is going to be one of the best ways we can reduce the likelihood of violence in any student environment," said Caring Habits creator Elaine Parke of Zelienople.

The state health department's Injury Prevention Program in Harrisburg came up with the contest to encourage youngsters to think about ways to prevent youth violence.

"One of the big things about their program is that it involved the entire student body -- 550 students, grades 5 through 8," said state public health administrator Felicia Meredith. She developed the Violence-Free Youth Challenge, now in its second year.

Through the Caring Habits program, each month during the school year students receive color-coded bookmarks, pencils and homework planners that highlight a different Golden Rule theme. For example, May's theme is "Be Appreciative" and May's celebration color is "Grateful Pink." So all the school posters, bookmarks, pencils and homework planners are pink. March's theme was "Resolve Conflict" and March's celebration color was "Peaceful White." "I love it," said Brown, a seventh-grader. "The homework planners help me keep track of my homework and stuff, so I won't miss an assignment."

Each monthly theme is reinforced throughout the school, at home and in the community. The homework planner includes places where students can write down three goals for the month that exemplify the theme, quotations reinforcing the theme, and vocabulary words.

Parke devised the program a decade ago to market healthy thoughts to children with the same vigor a company would use to advertise a product.

"In a consistent, organized manner, it's a call to action that asks children to behave better," she says. Negative influences on youngsters are overwhelming, and positive influences often are fragmented and confusing.

"They get a D.A.R.E. officer who comes in with this message. Then, Dad says this, and teacher says that," Parke explains. "The Caring Habits give all these people a common theme they can talk about and reinforce."

Last month's theme was "Take Care of Our Environment" and the celebration color was "Spring Green." As part of his goal last month, Brown and his friends cleaned up their street and mowed neighborhood lawns. "They totally reached their objective as far as decreasing youth violence and increasing GPAs of the students, but what I was personally most impressed with was the environment," says Eileen Smith, the state health department's regional injury prevention coordinator. Smith visited the school unexpectedly. "It was quiet, orderly and when I went into the classroom the children paid attention to me," she says. "Then, there were the people coming up to me saying, 'Two years ago you would not have recognized this place. It's so much better.' "

Since the Caring Habit program began in September 1998, school records indicate the percentage of Aliquippa Middle School students on the honor roll has increased from 26 percent to 44 percent. Homework completion has doubled. About 85 percent of the children have improved behavior, and there has been a 25 percent reduction in detentions and expulsions.

"Before, it was really rough," Brown says of his school. "You could walk down the hallway and kids would just start to pick with you. Now, they don't really do that any more."

Last school year, the Aliquippa School District was placed on the Pennsylvania Governor's Watch List for Schools with Poor Academic Outcomes. However, Aliquippa Middle School sixth-graders performed above average in Beaver County on the Pennsylvania State School Assessment in the 1998-99 school year.

"I've seen some really neat changes in the kids," fifth-grade teacher Tracey Heinlein says. "The biggest change I see: more caring and more positive attitudes."

The students have started to care about each other and their grades.

"It changed a lot about me, helped me understand how I can deal with problems," says Aliquippa seventh-grader Ericka Willis, 14, who also will be lunching with the governor tomorrow.

Willis finds the quotations interspersed in the homework planner, such as "Be yourself. Not going with the crowd can help you stand out," inspirational. She also thinks the Caring Habits program has reminded youngsters in her school that if they set goals for themselves they can achieve them.

"It's changed me a bit," Brown adds. "I used to really not care about myself sometimes and wouldn't do my best or try my best."

Now, he does. His mom, Tinita Fields, likes the effect the program has had on him and how it reinforces values she and her husband have been teaching him at home.

"He's more helpful around the house and he's doing a lot in the community and with church," she says. "He kind of thinks a little bit more about things before he does them."

He also likes to participate in groups and speak his mind. He's already told her all the things he plans to tell the governor.

Parke stresses that Caring Habits are simply good behavior maxims that people have known for centuries.

"The program isn't somebody's new idea of what to do, but how to present a new way of presenting ideas -- providing reminders of caring behaviors to kids that will stick," she says.

The Rotary Club of the City of Pittsburgh plans to sponsor the Caring Habits program in a Pittsburgh school this fall. The cost of the materials used is approximately \$25 per student.

"We're trying to pick out one of the more appropriate City of Pittsburgh schools," Rotary Club president-elect Ralph Manning said.

The Rotary Club wants to start with one school, then add a new school each year. The group also wants to encourage other organizations to sponsor the program in schools.

"I think every school should have it, and I think they would love it," Brown says.