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Bronx Teens Look to Peer Education to Combat High Teen Pregnancy Rates

The JAM peer educator program is working with Bronx teens on reproductive health.

**By Kate McGee
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The number of teenagers giving birth in the Bronx is twice as high as the other boroughs, new statistics show.

New York's 2009 Summary of Vital Statistics, released in December 2010, shows that between 2007 and 2009, 11.6 percent of all live births in the Bronx were to teenagers. In the South Bronx, that percentage increases to 13.3. In 2008, 2,680 area girls between the ages of 15 and 19 gave birth, according to the District Public Health Office.

That's where JAM steps in.

JAM (Just Ask Me) is a peer educator program where high school students teach sex education and reproductive health to middle school students at P.S./M.S. 218 in the

South Bronx. The program is organized by the Women's Housing and Economic Development Corporation, a non-profit organization that provides after-school programming among other services, such as affordable housing, education and youth programs.

JAM was started by a group of seventh grade girls who decided to combat teen pregnancy in their neighborhood. Those students are now seniors, but their program has lived on. "Getting pregnant and dropping out of school is a big concern for them," said Nicole Jennings, the program coordinator in charge of JAM. "A lot of them have teen moms, and they know first-hand how challenging teen pregnancy is, and having a child at a young age can be."

Yanilsa Frias, a senior at Aquinas High school in the Bronx, is one of the founders of the program and a peer educator. She said the large minority population in the area plays a part in the high rates of teen pregnancy. "I'm Dominican and my mother never talked about it...Because of sex-ed here in my school she was like, 'OK, you're learning so I don't have to tell you about it.' But there are a lot of kids that don't have that opportunity."

Jennings agreed. "It's a cultural difference. A lot of our kids are first generation American, so parents are coming from different culture and don't understand what their kids are facing with American media, advertising and what other kids are saying. It's very taboo."

Students enrolled in the program are introduced to various topics through different workshops, including classes on communication, contraceptives, puberty and anatomy, healthy relationships, sexual identity and more.

Katherine George also founded the program and she said having teenagers teaching the class makes it easy for the students to feel comfortable asking questions. "We grew up with a lot of the kids we're working with now. A lot of them say 'you used to walk the same hallways that I'm walking now,' so they're very excited to learn from us."

Eighth grade student Melissa Hernandez said the program has taught her to speak up: "Now I'm totally comfortable speaking about any problem I've had."

Training for this year's peer educators finished last week, and workshops begin this week. The course runs until the end of the school year.

Recently, the Fund for Public Health in New York received \$1.5 million from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention to use towards reducing teen pregnancy and birth rates in the South Bronx. Their goal is to reduce rates by 10 percent over the next five years by implementing more sex education courses in schools and community based organizations.