

CRESTVIEW
News Bulletin

Students plan, prepare hospice banquet

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Emerald Coast Hospice's volunteer appreciate dinner on April 22 was even more special than usual. The entire meal was planned, prepared and served by Crestview High School student hospice volunteers in the SSTRIDE program.

SSTRIDE — Science Students Together Reaching Instructional Diversity and Excellence — is a program of the West Florida Area Health Education Center (AHEC). Sponsored by the Florida State University College of Medicine, SSTRIDE seeks students in rural areas who are interested in a career in medicine and offers them practical experience in various medical fields. The hope is that after graduation, they will return home and practice.

"The kids did an awesome job," raved Emerald Coast Hospice Volunteer Coordinator Ann O'Connor.

Working with the students' faculty adviser, Hazel Holmes, O'Connor has trained 13 CHS students to be hospice volunteers. She said the idea of having the students organize the banquet came up at the beginning of the year during one of the regular monthly meetings of the school's SSTRIDES group.

"I had this idea in January about our banquet," she related. "I said, why don't I give you guys a budget and you do the banquet this year."

The students, who are between 15 and 18 years old and are mostly sophomores and juniors, picked the '50s sock-hop theme, found a hall, decorated it, and cooked and served the food. To add to the atmosphere, some of the students wore poodle skirts they made themselves. New Beginnings Church offered their Fellowship Hall as the banquet's venue.

"It was very fun," said 10th-grader Sherri Mitchell. "We had spaghetti and salad and all different kinds of dessert."

"The volunteers had a wonderful time," O'Connor reported. "And the kids, they got to eat what they cooked."

Michelle Stewart, wife of Emerald Coast Hospice's Dr. Dennis Stewart and mother of 11th-grade SSTRIDE volunteer Catherine, oversaw the kids, and helped out in the kitchen.

"She made the spaghetti sauce," O'Connor said. "It was phenomenal!"

The student volunteers are actively involved with patient care, O'Connor said. This summer those who are 17 or older will be volunteering at Camp Braveheart, the three-night summer camp for hospice clients and family members.

"They can go out and visit patients with the supervision of an adult volunteer," she said. "They read to patients. They're interested in doing the journaling program. Right now they're just getting their feet wet as to what volunteering is about."

Though Sherri is hoping to be a veterinarian, she knows that taking care of pet owners is as important as taking care of their animals. Volunteering with Emerald Coast Hospice is a valuable experience, she said.

"It is very rewarding," Sherri said. "We talk to people. We help them by sitting with them and talking with them and listening to them. It's actually very interesting to hear. Some of them have war stories."

The SSTRIDE students' service at the banquet could not have come at a more welcome time for O'Connor, whose own father had recently passed away.

"I could not have done it without these kids," she said gratefully. "They are just so eager to give back."

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