

Laughter is the best medicine

By *JESSICA ORLANDO* *October 26, 2024* *Publication: Englewood Sun (FL)*

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ROTONDA WEST — Laughter could be heard all around the Rotonda Hills Golf & Country Club on Thursday evening as teachers, school officers and families listened to a comedy show for a cause.

It was both a celebration and acknowledgement of the Englewood Community Coalition and their partner agencies striving to eradicate vaping in schools.

ECC Executive Director Kay Tvaroch said the organization is making a difference in students' thoughts on vaping.

"Last year in September, we surveyed kids at a high school age level in Englewood and only 43% of those kids believed that vaping is harmful for their health," Tvaroch said.

"During the past year, many community members that are concerned about health and welfare have addressed that issue."

This year, the same survey was conducted with high school students, resulting in 67% of kids believing that vaping is harmful to their health. That's a 24% increase.

"We're celebrating that tonight," she said. "That is just amazing."

Sarasota County Schools Police Chief Jacob Ruiz partners with the ECC to invest in the wellness of the students they watch over.

"We just want to thank you and the Coalition for the support that you give our children, investing in their health and wellness and investing in our children is investing in our future," Ruiz said. "They are our most precious resources."

Ruiz and Sarasota County Resource Officer Marc Arnold surprised Tvaroch with a challenge coin and certificate in appreciation of her efforts.

In Charlotte County, Jack Hamm was recognized for his efforts in creating a Vaping Task Force comprised of school administrators, resource officers, counselors, parents and more.

"We met every month with a plan that Jack helped develop, and I think that has really made a difference in the kids' perception," Tvaroch said.

Hamm is the director of school support for Charlotte County Public Schools, and his goal was to get vaping numbers down.

"The concern of our School Board was not only vaping, but students are not feeling comfortable going to the bathroom because that's where students were going to vape," Hamm said. "We've had a variety of people who jumped on this committee, and we're

up to 20 people."

The group divided into three subcommittees. One dealt with education, another resources and the last one discipline.

"We work collectively to develop different types of approaches, and so we continue to evolve," he said. "We went out and met with students, we met with schools and we just tried to collect as much information to put together a game plan."

The group continues to effectively educate students about the harmful effects of vaping to curb the epidemic.

"We want to get in with the hands on engaging activities to really get to the youth, so as they get older, they make those better choices of not vaping," he said. "We want to educate our children."

In 2023, there were 178 vaping referrals in Charlotte County schools. In 2024, that has come down to 60.

"We are seeing kids making better choices," Hamm said. "They feel safe, and they feel protected."

Jeff Dillon is director of community alliances for the Englewood Community Coalition and Englewood Creative Arts. He's combating vaping by providing an artistic outlet for kids.

"We're trying to share our message of arts appreciation and arts education, and to expose it to children and help them, of course, broaden their horizons," Dillon said.

Kathy McSteen with the Florida Comedy Network dittoed Dillon's encouragements for the arts. Her journey through comedy has inspired her to embrace creativity.

"You have nurtured your soul, you have learned something about you and you have been awarded by what you have created," McSteen said. "Don't we want our children to have that feeling of accomplishment, self esteem, purpose and filling that void with something positive rather than something that's dulling their senses?"

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