



Education/Youth

T.G.I.F. program in jeopardy

■ This year's program could be the last without Congress reauthorization

By Dee Ann Campbell
The Choctaw Sun

BUTLER – "We're o.k. until June," says Choctaw County T.G.I.F. coordinator Tina Hare. "After that, we just don't know."

Next week, 26 high school juniors and seniors will begin working with 6th graders in local schools to teach them about the need for sexual abstinence until marriage. The T.G.I.F. (Teens Getting Involved for the Future) program is now beginning its 14th year in Choctaw County.

But if some legislators in Washington, D.C. have their way, it may be the last.

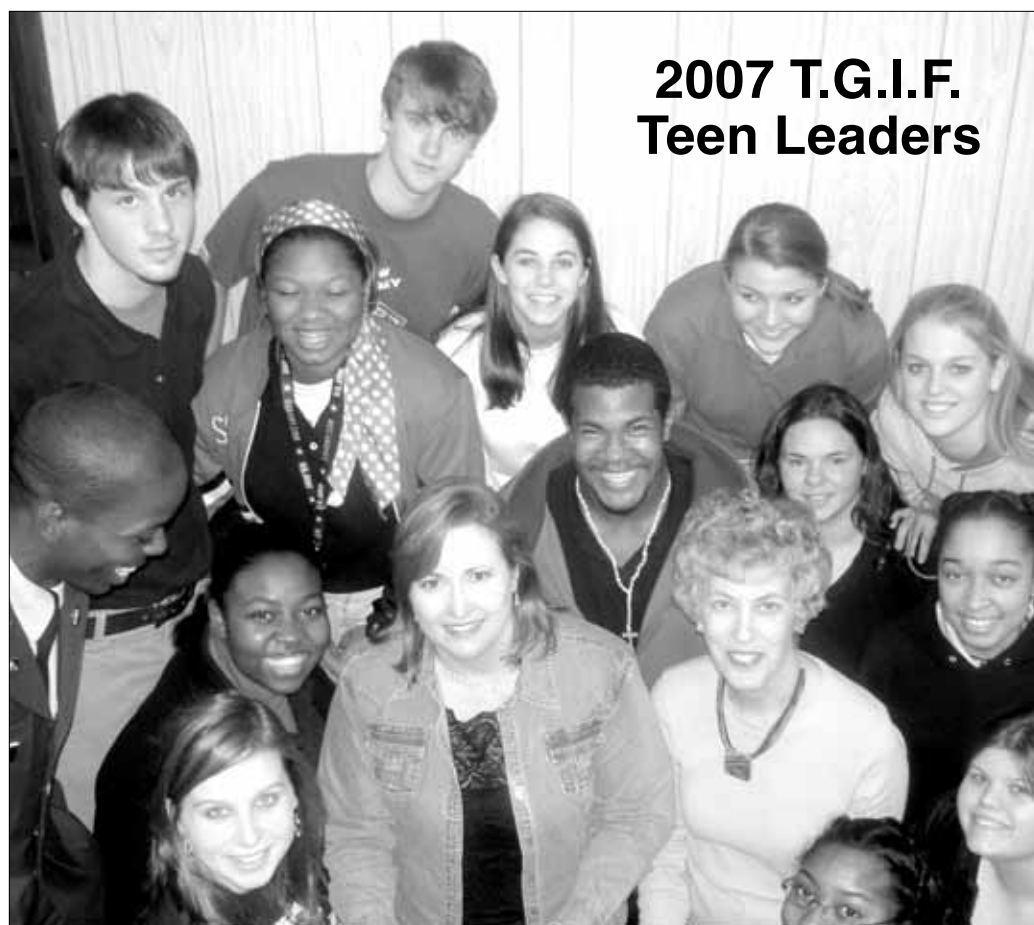
Since 1994, high school students with a personal commitment to abstinence have been teaching preteens the importance of making such decisions in their own lives through the 4-H-based T.G.I.F. program. Provided by the Alabama Cooperative Extension System through a Title V grant, the program was first developed in Choctaw and Sumter counties because of high teen birth rates in the two counties. Since its implementation, more than 30,000 young people have participated in the program throughout the state.

But in recent months, the push against abstinence-based educational programs has risen dramatically on a national level – a push that could directly affect Choctaw County's T.G.I.F. program. The push against the programs has come primarily through the lobbying efforts of organizations such as the Sexuality Information Education Council of the U.S. (SIECUS) and Planned Parenthood.

Following intense efforts by such groups, the 109th Congress did not reauthorize funding for the Title V Abstinence Education Program that includes funding for T.G.I.F. before concluding its session in December, and with a new Democratic leadership taking the helm, proponents of such programs fear that there may be an even less likely chance that the new Congress will do so without an outcry from the public.

Current funding for Title V programs will extend only through June 30 of this year unless the new Congress votes to reauthorize them.

Instead of abstinence-until-marriage programs like T.G.I.F., many legislators are now promoting what they term 'compre-



2007 T.G.I.F. Teen Leaders

Submitted photo
Pictured are some of this year's T.G.I.F. Teen Leaders and sponsors during a recent workshop in preparation for their 6 weeks of sessions with local 6th graders that begins next week.



Choctaw Sun photos by Dee Ann Campbell
Teen leaders from CCHS -- Alisha Johnson, Crystal Parks, Laquetta Rumley, and Sara Bonner practice one of their sessions during their final workshop on Monday.

hensive' sex education that includes a limited reference to the value of abstinence, with much broader emphasis on the use of contraceptives, the practice of 'safe sex', and explanations of abortion rights. Over the past year, some legislators have begun pushing for 'comprehensive' sex education programs such as the 'Responsible Education About Life Act (REAL) and the Guarantee of Medical Accuracy in Sex Education Act (GMA).
"Individuals of all

ages require complete and accurate information about all aspects of sexuality," states a portion of the GMA bill, which goes on to endorse 'the right of children and youth to receive comprehensive sexuality education that includes facts, information, and data'.
Since 1998, almost \$1 billion federal taxpayer dollars have been spent on abstinence-only-until-marriage programs. For 2007, the Bush Administration had proposed another \$204 million to be

allocated to such programs. But according to opponents of the President's proposal, the GMA bill would require that 'taxpayer dollars be spent only on sex education that properly informs and instructs today's youth.'
Proponents of 'comprehensive' sex education cite the failure of abstinence-based programs to reduce teen pregnancies, sexually transmitted disease, and other problems associated with teen sexual activity.

However, local and



Role-playing possible scenarios in which young people may need to make a decision about sexual activity is one of the techniques used by Teen Leaders as they teach 6th graders about abstinence. Pictured are Thirlow McGrew (SCHS) and Dana Brown (CCHS) as they practice role-playing on Monday. Teen Leader Simone Ridgeway (CCHS) looks on in the background.

state statistics show the opposite. Over the past few years, the Alabama Department of Public Health reported that in counties that participate in the T.G.I.F. program, there has been a 19.3% drop in the number of teen pregnancies, a 13.4% reduction in births to females age 15 to 17, and a 5.5% decrease in the numbers or abortions for that same age group.

On a national level, the Centers for Disease Control also credits the increase in abstinence-until-marriage among teenagers as being largely responsible for the drop in the teen pregnancy rate.

Proponents of T.G.I.F. cite not only amazing benefits for the younger children who are taught by the program, but also substantial benefits for the teens who lead the program. Studies have shown that the program has a positive impact on their attitudes and self-concept, as well as improvements in their decision-making capabilities.

A recent Zogby poll revealed that, by a large margin, parents of teens prefer their children to be taught abstinence instead of 'safe sex'. The poll showed that 79% of parents want their teens to be taught that sex should be reserved for marriage or for an adult relationship leading to marriage. Another 12% of parents believe that teens should be taught to delay sexual activity until they have, at least, finished high school. Only 7% of parents stated that they want teens to be taught that sexual activity in high school is okay as long as

teens use contraception.

The poll also showed that 91% of parents want teens to be taught that sex should be linked to love, intimacy, and commitment, and that these qualities are most likely to occur in marriage – which is the predominant theme of abstinence-until-marriage curricula like T.G.I.F.

But despite the statistics shown through T.G.I.F. and despite polls showing the preferences of parents, abstinence-based programs could be in jeopardy after June.

In order to save T.G.I.F. in Choctaw County, local citizens are strongly urged to contact their U.S. senators and representatives immediately to voice their support for abstinence-based programs by asking them to reauthorize federal funding of the Title V Abstinence Education Program through Fiscal Year 2010.

(ED. NOTE: Sample letters in support of Title V programs are available at the Choctaw Sun. Here is contact information for Alabama's congressional delegation: Sen. Richard Shelby, 110 Hart Senate Office Building, Washington, DC 20510, (202) 224-5744, FAX (202) 224-3416, senator@shelby.senate.gov; Sen. Jeff Sessions, 335 Russell Senate Office Building, Washington, DC 20510, (202) 224-4124, FAX (202) 224-3149, senator@sessions.senate.gov; Rep. Artur Davis, 208 Cannon House Office Building, Washington, DC 20515, (202) 225-2665, FAX (202) 226-9561)



Submitted photo

ASCC gives to hospice patients

GILBERTOWN – The Alabama Southern Community College Library group recently provided bags for patients of Caring Angels Hospice. Pictured (left to right) are: Connie James, Shelia McGrew, Debbie Jimerson, Miranda Boothe, LuAnn Williams, and Stephanie Adams.



Choctaw Sun photo by Ashley Downing

Wilson is top speller at SCES

GILBERTOWN – Adam Wilson, middle right, took top honors at Southern Choctaw Elementary's annual spelling bee last Thursday. Also earning top positions were Jeremy Thompson, left, and Whitney Sealey, center. Sponsor for the event was teacher Tonya Harris. Other competitors who won their class competitions were (not pictured) Robert Presley, Abbey Shepherd, Braxton Betts, Olivia Downing, Billy Covington, Margie McMillian, and Jasmine Turner. Wilson will represent the school in the county-wide bee to be held later this month.