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community news

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Allen grad offers her insights to the lowlights of a teenager's life

By **GEORGE WACKER**
The Allentown Times

Salisa Berrien's work with "at-risk" teens fills a gap in Allentown where she was once lost.

A teenage mother, Berrien graduated from William Allen High School and the University of Pittsburgh before returning to the Lehigh Valley. Upon her return, she began an organization to target the causes of her own adversity.

After surviving teenage crisis without much intervention and without much information on "at-risk" activities, Berrien said she believed students in situations similar to her own should be educated.

"Once a student is tagged 'at-

risk' that connotation alone can cause problem," said Berrien. She is now the president and founder of STRIVE, an Allentown-based weekend program for 'at-risk' students referred from local schools. "What we try to do is give them the proper guidance — real life guidance."

STRIVE, a strictly voluntary program which meets two weekends per month at Lehigh Carbon Community College, began in 1995 with the aim of erasing the 'at-risk' tag.

"We start from the beginning with the students," she said. "We work on personal development, social development, and try to find exactly why these students are putting themselves at risk or aren't doing as well in the classroom as they

could be."

Monthly STRIVE themes this past year included community outreach, etiquette, personal development and interpersonal skills.

The program usually lets out after the school year ends, however, the participants in this year's STRIVE program wanted to do something more during the summer.

"Many of them said they turned to drugs or alcohol because they couldn't adequately talk to adults about what was bothering them," she said. "They grouped together in January and thought up the

teen summit as a chance for teens and adults to speak out on issues."

The first STRIVE Teen Summit will be held Aug. 9 from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. at the Lehigh County Government Center on Seventh Street in Allentown.

Incorporating entertainment and a two-panel

discussion between teens and adults, Berrien said this was the first step toward alleviating a larger problem in the community.

"When teens feel they can't talk about their emotions or problems to adults they turn to other things," she said. "Maybe not all of

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them try to subdue their feelings with alcohol or drugs, but they are still worried and confused."

In an effort to shed light on the rift between teens and adults, the panel will discuss drug use, school work and sex.

"It is going to be a very open environment," she said. "Those in the crowd are going to be able to interact with the panel and hopefully learn a lot."

Members of various local and regional coalitions against violence and rape will also be on the panel, answering questions that many teens may have a hard time asking at home.

"We want to open the lines of communication to show teens that there are ways to talk to parents,"

she said. "There are people who want to help teens who are confused and struggling. We were all there at some point."

However, the panel discussion is not meant to be all admonishment and intensity. Berrien and STRIVE students thought entertainment would be a good stress reliever.

"We don't want the whole day to be such a weight on the mind," she said. "We have the Nubian Gents, a step team from New York, and Rappers Organized Against Rape, to perform at the summit for teens and adults."

The summit is open to the public and some local organizations, such as the Boys and Girls Club of Allentown, will be busing students to the event for the day.