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League reaches out to millennial voters

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Local students got a lesson in civic duty when the League of Women Voters brought its program "No Vote, No Voice" to Clay High School last week.

Started as a national initiative known as the "High School Voter Registration Project," "No Vote, No Voice" will be held at six local high schools to increase youth voter registration and participation, League co-president Lisa Plencner said.

"We've had a lot of positive feedback so far," Plencner said. "All of the high schools we've approached have welcomed us with open arms. We recognize that people under 30 are a large group, and they are tolerant and optimistic that they can make a difference."

Plencner spoke in government teacher Darcia King-O'Blenis' classroom Wednesday, giving four presentations over the course of the school day. She gave three more on Thursday.

"I want my students to be politically active," King-O'Blenis said. "I want them to know where they fall on the political spectrum. I want them to be up to date on the issues, and I want them to identify what issues are important to them."

During the presentation, Plencner used examples, including college expenses and military involvement, to show students how voting and legislation affects their daily lives.

"I think it's important to make it a role in your life," Plencner told students Wednesday. "What happens in elections affects you."

With help from League member Lauren Sucharetza and former president Nikki Hutchinson, Plencner got 156 students to register.

Clay High School senior Lauren Zeithammer acted as the student liaison between the League and

the student body. Student liaisons are asked to work with their student newspapers for articles as well as make announcements to the student body leading up to the presentations.

“(Presentations like this) get us informed about elections, since we’re new voters,” she said.

Zeithammer said she was already registered to vote prior to the presentations, but she hopes many of her classmates will fill out the forms.

“Everyone’s vote counts,” she said. “There are a lot of situations where it comes down to just one vote. A lot of the students feel like their votes don’t count, but that isn’t the case.”

To reach teenagers, Plencner said she had to get used to speaking directly to 17-year-olds and 18-year-olds and approach them on their level.

“The presentation is trying to get them to open up,” she said. “We need to convince them that who their elected officials are impacts their lives.”

While she was nervous with her first presentation, held at Washington High School, Plencner said her nervousness faded as she began to talk to the students.

“It got to the point that I didn’t need the presentation notes,” she said. “I realized as I was talking that this is something I want. I want them to care, to want to vote — I want them to be the citizens our community deserves.”

Plencner said that by this year, 24 percent of the voting population will be composed of “millennials,” or individuals born within the last 30 years. By 2020, the voting population will be 36 percent millennials.

“We’re noticing a trend that young people are becoming more civically engaged,” she said. “Our effort is to increase that trend.”

In addition to Washington High School, “No Vote, No Voice” has also visited Mishawaka High School, where the presenters helped around 170 students register to vote.

“There’s a certain sense of satisfaction with registering kids,” Plencner said.

“No Vote, No Voice” continues at Adams on Feb. 16, Riley at a later date, Rise Up Academy at Eggleston and a return trip to Washington High School.

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