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Pronouncer: Johannes is Joe-han-ness

Note to editors: For Elaine Johannes' key principles of positive youth development, check out the K-State News blog at <https://blogs.k-state.edu/kstatenews/>

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It Takes A Village: Youth Expert Says Positive Adult, Community Involvement Keeps Teens From Trouble

MANHATTAN -- Everywhere you look there are troublemaking teenagers with nothing better to do this summer than cruise around town in packs.

That's a statement that makes Elaine Johannes, associate professor of family studies and human services at Kansas State University, roll her eyes in response.

"Adults often don't get it; it is the teenager's job to push the envelope," Johannes said. "If teenagers don't push a few things and take risks, then they won't be able to develop their identity, which is one of the primary tasks of being a teenager."

Johannes does not promote negative behaviors such as sexting, binge drinking, drug use or other criminal activity. She said that the key to preventing teens from participating in those activities are adults -- whom she calls champions -- who can be positive influences and help teens develop healthy lifestyles.

"People have spent their whole profession trying to answer the question, 'How do we keep teens away from drugs, alcohol and early sexual activity?'" Johannes said. "The research has been clear that programs designed to prevent negative behaviors often don't do sustainable good. We need to flip it and emphasize positive development and help adults in the community to become champions by modeling the good behaviors, values and philosophies we want teens to develop."

For the past four years, Johannes has worked with small communities across the state of Kansas as part of the Get It, Do It program. The program awards small grants to communities that are engaging teens and adults to work together on a healthy lifestyle project and build social capital in their community.

Social capital is the interactions among people for mutual support. It can take two forms: bonding, which is among people within a group -- such as between teenagers -- and bridging, which is the interaction among people across different groups -- such as a teenager and an adult.

Johannes is mainly focusing on bridging. This summer she is interviewing adults and teenagers who have participated in the Get It, Do It program to see what worked, what did not and the effects the program has had on increasing social capital in the community. Her efforts to increase social capital in communities was honored

in May when she was one of eight people in the nation to be named an Afterschool Champion by the Afterschool Alliance in Washington, D.C.

"The more you have a teenager feeling engaged and seeing that the fruits of their work actually improve their community, the more they will take pride in their community," Johannes said. "It turns out teenagers like hanging with these adults, and when adults foster engagement with youth, they also like teenagers and they see the teens as leaders, not burdens."

According to Johannes, increasing a community's social capital will reduce an adult's stereotypical view of teenagers as problems. It also decreases teens' likelihood to partake in risky behavior, which increases if they are isolated and bored. Activities such as after-school programs, summer programs or summer jobs provide teens with adult role models, community interaction and activities.

With the slow economy alternate activities have become less available to the average teenager -- especially in economically depressed areas, Johannes said.

"Kids took the biggest hit when the economy downturned because adults have the summer jobs that kids used to have," Johannes said. "So what do teens do when they can't learn job skills and they can't pay for their gas and entertainment? They become bored, isolated and depressed. Imagine the situation of many rural teens who don't have jobs, don't have transportation or don't have access to interesting, engaging activities. This can certainly lead them to want to escape through risky behaviors."

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service, Kansas is one of five states with the highest decline in nonmetro population from 2000 to 2005. Richard Goe, professor of sociology at Kansas State University, said the decline is due to youth leaving their rural hometowns in search of opportunities in urban areas.

"A substantial number of rural communities in the U.S., including many in western Kansas, are losing population," Goe said. "A common pattern is young adults leave for college or employment opportunities elsewhere and do not return. As a result, the remaining population ages and declines in size over the long term."

According to the Energizing Our Youth survey, led by the Center for Rural Entrepreneurship in Nebraska and other organizations, 43 percent of the 6,059 Midwestern youth polled shared the perception that greater chances for success exist outside of their rural hometowns despite the fact that the same percent of respondents rated their community as an above average place to live.

Nearly 600 students in the survey reported that they had been encouraged to leave. According to Johannes, even though rural teens often value the rural lifestyle, a barrier for eventually returning to their hometown to raise their family are sometimes the adults in the community who give the message that there is not a future for them in a rural town.

"Kids put great stock in our opinions and what we do," Johannes said. "So when we tell them, 'Oh we are so glad you are graduating and getting a scholarship to leave for college. Goodbye. We assume we'll never see

you again,' they won't come back. It's awfully hard for a young person to see themselves in a town if the adults don't communicate and demonstrate support for their young people's return."

The survey also found that 72 percent of the students said that no adult had ever asked them their views on how to make their community a more attractive place for young people. This can change by providing the right resources, support and encouragement, Johnannes said, so that many adults in Kansas could become champions for teens in rural communities.

"When the adults model that good stuff for our youth, our communities thrive," she said.

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