

# the weekly northside**sun**



## DANA LARKIN ON GROWING UP KNOWING

THU, 03/15/2018 - 5:14PM

Growing Up Knowing is a relatively new organization, founded in 2011, that has been reaching out to young students and their parents to spread correct information and communication skills about sexual health and responsibility. Executive Director Dana Larkin began working with the organization in 2014. Prior to Growing Up Knowing, Larkin worked for 12 years for Parents For Public Schools. Growing Up Knowing has been named as the 2018 beneficiary of Wells Fest. Sun Staff Writer Megan Phillips spoke with Larkin about the programming and how to better communicate with and inform families about sexual health.

### When was Growing Up Knowing founded?

“Growing Up Knowing was started at the end of 2011 by a retired social worker, who worked at Catholic Charities. She worked in the adoption area and saw these teen parents and wanted to help diminish teen pregnancies. She put together a really good board of directors, and they researched

about the curriculum for middle school children and their parents. Then, she implemented it at Stewpot Community Services but had difficulty getting a program.”

How and when did you become a part of the organization?

“I used to work for Parents for Public Schools, and they hired me after that to do the programming. I was hired in October of 2014.”

What does the program include?

“I added to the curriculum some activities to get people up and moving. That program is our middle school program. It’s four nights of eight hours of instruction. We partner with after school programs like Stewpot and Boys and Girls Clubs, churches and a lot more community partners that are listed on our Web site ([www.growingupknowing.org](http://www.growingupknowing.org)). The parents have to come with their children. So, we first separate them to get everybody comfortable talking about sex and that difficult topic. Then, the third and fourth nights, we’re all together and really working with each other through scenarios and trying to improve the communication between the children and the parents for middle schoolers in sixth through eighth grades.”

What is included in the curriculum?

“This is a research-based curriculum that’s targeted to middle school children, because we’re hopefully educating them before they engage in all that risky behavior and helping improve the communications in their homes. So, they can go to their parents with questions and information, and they develop an emergency code in case their child gets in trouble... We talk about risky behaviors and how to prevent them. They actually develop a contract on what behaviors they’re going to allow and not allow in the house, and they sign it. We laminate and give it back to them at the end of the fourth session. Even if they don’t stick to it, at least they’ve talked about it. That’s really important, and we just give them the tools and the right information, so they can continue talking at home.”

### What is the mission of the organization?

“We like to say that we are family-driven. Our mission is, ‘Promote healthy sexual decisions through family education and community partnerships.’ So, we are very family-driven. We’ve been told by the directors of the health department that we’re the only sex education program in the state that engages parents.”

### Why is there a stigma about openly and honestly communicating about sexual health?

“Research shows that abstinence-only programs do not work. So, that’s why we use research-based curriculums. The two things that reduce pregnancies and sexually-transmitted infections are education and access to contraceptives. So, we’re doing the education part. Our program covers all the contraceptives except for abortion. We don’t talk about that, but we talk about everything else... “It’s so awkward. It’s just crazy awkward... I think over history or over generations, sex is just really hard to talk about, and kids learn the wrong stuff on the street or from their friends or whatever. So, this is the program to help them (talk about) it... It does provide a safe environment, language and permission. In the middle school, we give homework between the lessons. It’s really just talking to each other about whatever topic we ask them to talk about: bullying the first week, and then we get a little more technical the next. We also are big believers in data. We’re collecting our own data from our own pre- and post-surveys.”

### What kinds of questions are in those surveys?

“We ask them how much they know about the topics we’re going to cover and then, four weeks later, how much do they now know about those topics. How often do children talk to their parents about these topics? Hope Policy Institute takes our data and then gives it back to us in a beautiful PowerPoint that we can show funders, and we’ll make presentations about how effective we really are. One statistic out of that, which I’m very proud of, is that 52 percent of the parents that participate in our middle school program were teen parents themselves, so they’re trying to stop the cycle within their own family...”

### What was the basis for creating the new program My Body, My Boundaries?

“We’ve been developing the program since last summer... So, when I went to Operation Shoestring — when I first got started to recruit parents for the program we did there — some parents said, ‘Why are you waiting until fifth grade? My child needs it in elementary school.’ So, through the generosity of the women’s fund, we got a two-year grant, and we did a lot of stuff to shore up our infrastructure. So, we got a Web site, we got a vision statement, we got a strategic plan, and we also worked with a professor at University of Southern Mississippi to develop a program for elementary children and their parents called My Body, My Boundaries for kindergarteners through fifth graders.”

### What does the program include?

“It’s a one-hour program. In the middle school program, we train the staff at the location where we are. For the elementary program, we have trained facilitators to go out and deliver it since it’s only a one-hour program. We talk about the correct names for their body parts, who a trusted adult is, what to do if you get in a situation. We tell them to be RAD — run away, ask an adult for help and describe what happened. We talk about how everybody has the same body parts, but everybody looks different, so respect your body. Say, ‘No,’ if you have that horrible feeling in your stomach, just say, ‘No,’ and be RAD... We have the parents in the room, and we give parents tips on communicating with their children. We let them take home the handbook.”

### When do these programs take place?

“We always want to be in the evenings or on Saturdays for both our signature programs, because we want parents there.”

### What about high school students?

“The program is directed to middle school kids, but some people bring their high school kids. It’s not that it’s too young for them, it’s just that they might be already engaged (in sexual activity). But, they need the information, they need to be able to talk to their parents.”

What topics or programs do you think the organization might add in the future?

“We’re always talking about what’s next, but people are telling us that we might to talk a little more about internet safety and sexuality. We do mention it in the middle school program. We talk about it in terms of what’s abstinence and what’s not... We don’t lecture. We have exercises and we facilitate conversation, but there’s no lecturing.”

What is the organization’s annual budget?

“We’re about \$85,000 right now, but, after Wells Fest, it’ll be a lot more, and hopefully we’ll keep getting big grants.”

Are grants the main source of the organization’s funds?

“And donations. We do not charge for our programs. It’s all done through fund-raising, because we do not want money to be the barrier to reaching these families.”

What can parents or guardians do for their children in terms of encouraging them to be open and honest with them and other trusted adults when necessary?

“There are internet sources, and they’re listed on our Web site. Our middle school program is only for 10 to 12 families at a time. So, it does not have to be an organization to do it. If you want to gather 10 families in your living room, we are so happy to come out and do it. We’re not limited to just organizations. It’s just easier to market ourselves to organizations.”

How can students and children assist their peers?

“One of our ground rules is, ‘What’s learned here leaves here and is shared,’ so, we really do encourage them to take out the information they’ve learned. One thing we’ve found is that the staff gains so much more confidence and knowledge. During our program, they’re only working with 12 families, but every afternoon they’re with 50 kids, so they use what they’ve learned to help other kids

that aren't in the program. I think our facilitators really spread the correct information and the right wording for us.”

Is there anything else you would like to add that I haven't asked?

“We do our middle school program within the culture of the place where we're conducting the program. In our programs, we supply the curriculum, the resources, dinner to the facilitators at the partnering organization, and we give a gift card to every family that comes to all four sessions. The partnering organization has to supply the location, the facilitators that we train, and they have to recruit and retain the 10 to 12 families.”

What is the best way to get in touch if someone wants to help or be involved or has questions?

“We try to accommodate volunteers, but it's really hard. But, we would love for people to give us their contact information... We send them out information in emails every so often. 601-589-0275.”