

FPA teaches teens how to be better lobbyists

By **KATRINA KIELTYKA**

Gazette staff writer

Teens from around the state came to Albany last week for the Family Planning Advocates of New York State's Get the Facts NY Youth Leadership Conference.

The conference, hosted by the Education Fund of FPA, was dedicated to training the youths in advocacy how to better lobby on reproductive issues. The 100 youths, according to the FPA, attended workshops on online advocacy, organizing events in their communities and knowing their rights as young organizers.

Tracey Brooks, president and CEO of New York state's FPA, told the teens, "You will learn skills today and throughout your advocacy work that will serve you well into adulthood." She added, "Some of you may very well have an office in this state Capitol one day."

Brooks said she was also excited that Sen. Antoine Thompson, D-Buffalo, who spoke to the teens, reinforced much of what was discussed in the workshops on online networking and advocacy by conveying to the teens

how much strength they already have by being so connected online. Thompson also encouraged the youths to stay in touch with their legislators, many of whom now have a presence on social networking Web sites themselves.

A keynote address was delivered by Shelby Knox, a 22-year-old feminist activist who speaks nationwide on the importance of comprehensive sex education. Knox, having grown up in Lubbock, Texas, where she found her school's abstinence-only education to be insufficient, has been working throughout the country to mobilize a youth movement to establish a more comprehensive and accurate sex education program.

Defining activism for the teens, Knox said, "Activism is understanding that your existence is political and living your life accordingly. And as we heard today, that can take very many forms."

Knox also emphasized the importance of the "radical power [young people] have when we speak our lived experience," saying, "When we hear our own struggle, our pain, our anger in another's voice, we realize that there's nothing wrong with them and nothing

share with their teen constituents to discuss work surrounding reproductive health care issues in the Legislature. Assemblyman Marc Molinaro, R-Red Hook, met with Angela Mathews, Letycia Tillman and Sabrina Soares-Kern, high school peer educators from Upper Hudson Planned Parenthood's S.T.A.R.S. program.

The program, which stands for Seriously Talking About Responsible



Gazette photo by Lauren Johnson
Sex education reform activist Shelby Knox stands with three peer educators from the Upper Hudson Planned Parenthood's S.T.A.R.S. program, from left, Sabrina Soares-Kerns, Letycia Tillman and Angela Matthews, at the Family Planning Advocates Youth Leadership Conference.

wrong with us, but there's a system of oppression designed to make us feel that way."

Attendees were also encouraged by Knox to use blogs and social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter to

Sex, is funded through the Health Department's Community Based Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Program. The teens discussed with Molinaro how the state's funding allows them to effectively educate their peers and create healthy dialogue about sexual education.

"There's so many people we reach on a weekly basis just through teen clinic," said Soares-Kern, referencing a weekly

share their stories and effect change. Noting that though older activists may scowl on this form of activism, Knox said, "Just because our activism looks different than the generations before us,

See Teens on page 33

after school clinic at Upper Hudson Planned Parenthood where teens can go to get information and services.

The teens also spoke to Molinaro about the Healthy Teens Act, which would establish a competitive grant program to fund sex education. Though the assemblyman said right now the focus of the Legislature is on the budget, he was receptive to the dialogue.

Teen

Continued from page 16

it doesn't make it any less valid" and that blogs can be used as a tool to "bear witness to our experience in the genre of our generation to make each other stronger and to combat ignorance in all its forms."

Some legislators also took time to