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Jacksonville Youth, 17, Helping Steer National Teen Pregnancy Prevention Campaign

For three years Romalous Jones has been helping fellow Jacksonville teens make healthy life decisions.

As a teen health educator for Project Youth Link, he helps increase youth awareness about how to prevent teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, among other things.

This month the First Coast High School senior stepped up from his local platform to be part of a national effort.

He was named to the 2015-16 Youth Leadership Team for The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, a nonpartisan nonprofit in Washington, D.C. The 14-member team had its first meeting Aug. 5-7.

Over 18 months, the new team will serve as youth advisers to the campaign and participate in its activities, meet with members of Congress to talk about teen pregnancy prevention and receive assistance planning youth-awareness projects in their own communities.

Jones, 17, found out about the opportunity through Project Youth Link, wrote a paper to apply to the team and was selected. Helping youth navigate their health and sexuality — without talking down to them — is critically important, he said.

“I believe it is an issue that is a big part of today’s youth,” he said.

At the team’s first meeting, Jones and other members received a “crash course on teen pregnancy prevention,” advised campaign staff on the current teen world and explored Washington, according to the campaign website.

“It was so fun and nice. I got to meet all these different kids. We all got to talk about our different experiences,” he said.

They got to be part of a national discussion.

“It felt important, like it mattered,” Jones said.

He made an impression on campaign staff.

“Romalous is one of our most vocal and enthusiastic members, and his contributions as our resident Floridian teen are extremely valued,” said Kate Meroski, the campaign’s communications manager. “This year’s Youth Leadership Team represents some of the brightest and most ambitious teenagers across the United States. It’s not every day you meet young people excited about community health — particularly the sometimes controversial and all-around awkward subjects of pregnancy prevention and sex education.”

At the next team meeting members will meet with their representatives on Capitol Hill, she said.

“This second gathering ... is always the most exciting, because our members get to see firsthand how their voices really matter to those in office,” she said.

Team members are recruited from national, state and local youth-serving organizations. The next recruitment period is in February 2017. To date, nearly 200 teens from more than 40 states and the District of Columbia have participated in eight classes, according to a campaign news release.