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## Teen Pregnancy Prevention: Winter Haven Girl Selected for National Campaign

When Desiree Simons was in seventh grade, she came home from school one day and told her mother, “Everybody’s pregnant.”

Simons, now a senior at Winter Haven High School, said several eighth- and ninth-graders were showing signs of pregnancy.

“I think I was shocked to see so many people actually pregnant at school because I never saw that until I recently went to this public school,” said Simons, who previously attended a private school.

About two years later, Simons joined the Youth Leadership Team, a teen pregnancy prevention program overseen by the Healthy Start Coalition of Polk, Highlands and Hardee counties. And now she has the opportunity to address the issue on the national level.

Simons, 17, was recently selected as one of 14 student members of The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy’s Youth Leadership Team for 2015-2016. She is one of two Floridians appointed to the team, whose members serve an 18-month term.

In early August, Simons traveled to Washington, D.C., for three days of meetings with the other team members and leaders of the National Campaign. She will return to Washington for two more such gatherings during her term.

“I really want to be able to help to just spread awareness of teen pregnancy and how to prevent it,” Simons said.

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, founded in 1996, is a Washington-based nonprofit, nonpartisan group focused on reducing teen pregnancy and unplanned pregnancy among adults. Unlike some pregnancy-prevention programs, the National Campaign promotes use of contraception and does not focus exclusively on sexual abstinence.

Former New Jersey Gov. Thomas Kean serves as chairman of the National Campaign’s board of directors, and former U.S. Surgeon General C. Everett Koop is a board member emeritus. The organization draws funding from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Department of Health and Human Services, the Annie E. Casey Foundation and other foundations and corporations.

The national group created the Youth Leadership Team in 1998 to incorporate input from teenagers into its policies. Team members are expected to serve as youth advisers for the National Campaign, plan and execute local projects, meet with elected officials in Washington to discuss teen pregnancy prevention and take part in National Campaign activities, such as the National Day to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, held the first Wednesday in May.

Simons is the third youth from Polk County selected to the national team since 2011, said Mariah Andresen-Otten, youth program specialist for the Healthy Start Coalition.

Simons’ involvement with the issue reflects the influence of her mother, Angela Forte, who serves as co-chairwoman of the Polk County Teen Pregnancy Prevention Alliance, an initiative of the Healthy Start Coalition. Forte, employed as tobacco prevention program manager for the Polk County Health Department, said she joined the group about five years ago.

“I was delighted when my child started seeing some things and asking questions,” Forte said. “She was hearing the statistics, and yes, teen (pregnancy) rates are going down, but she sees there are still so many things happening in our schools.”

Teen pregnancy rates have indeed declined about 50 percent since their peak in the early 1990s, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

The birth rate was 26.5 per 1,000 females ages 15 to 19 in 2013, the most recent year for which HHS offers statistics. The rates are considerably higher for Hispanic and black females than for whites.

The teen birth rate in the U.S. has dropped 29 percent since 2010, the National Campaign reported in July.

Despite those positive trends, there remains an urgent need to curb teenage pregnancies, Andresen-Otten said. Polk County had 2,109 births to teenagers in 2012 through 2014, according to the Florida Department of Health.

Andresen-Otten said Simons and other youth can have a real impact.

“Really, what we’re trying to do with the Youth Leadership Team is give youth in the county the opportunity to be the voice to their peers,” Andresen-Otten said, “because more often than not I hear from the kids I go out and teach to — they don’t want to hear it from the older adults. They want to hear it from the youth.”

Simons, who plans to become a marine biologist, said she enjoyed her three-day visit to Washington earlier this month. The Youth Leadership Team members met National Campaign leaders, and they also had the chance to tour some of the city’s monuments.

Simons said she will contribute to the national Youth Leadership Team’s social media efforts, including its website, [www.stayteen.org](http://www.stayteen.org). She also plans to organize a “fun day” event in Polk County and make a video of it to share with the national group at its next meeting.

The Winter Haven student said she hasn’t gotten any grief from schoolmates for her advocacy on what might be perceived as an adult concern.

“People will actually come to me if they have questions because they know I’m in this (program),” she said. “So it’s good I’m able to be there as that outlet.”

Though plenty of information can be found online about pregnancy prevention and avoiding sexually transmitted diseases, Simons said many teenagers remain misinformed.

“I do get a lot of questions about the myths because a lot of kids don’t know that they are myths,” she said. “So they ask if I can bring them a piece of paper to show them all the facts. ... One time a kid was asking about using a plastic bag instead (of a condom). I don’t know where they got that from, but that’s definitely not going to work.”