

## Harding High Students Give H.O.P.E

A group of students at Harding High School in Bridgeport, who participated in The School for Ethical Education's Youth: Ethics in Service (YES), recognized that homelessness is a problem and decided to do something about it. Beginning in the fall of 2002, 21 students - 16 seniors and 5 juniors - met during their Peer Leadership class, under the direction of teachers Sheena Graham-Owens and Kevin Muhammad, to learn about homelessness and how they could make a difference.

To raise funds for those who are homeless and to increase awareness of this issue, the students produced a CD of songs and poems. The CD, called "H.O.P.E.," was sold for \$6 and all proceeds from the CD donated to a local homeless shelter.

The story was picked up by the CT Post who published the following story.

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### Students Team up in Fund-Raiser to Help Homeless



## Teens put together musical tribute, learn about life's difficulties

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BRIDGEPORT — When recent Harding High School graduate Jocelyn Zayas sings about being homeless, people do more than listen. They cry.

"Life gets hard when you fend for yourself," she crooned recently in an original composition. "When you make choices, they affect someone else."

Zayas' emotional work, which her riveted classmates say often evokes tears, doesn't reflect her own condition. It is an outgrowth of the lessons she learned this year through her peer leadership class.

Now, the class has produced a compact disc featuring Zayas and others as a way to continue efforts to help the homeless, even though most of the students have graduated.

Titled "H.O.P.E.," for Helping Other People Excel, the 21 participants hope the \$5 album — available through Harding — will continue to provide relief to the Families in Transition Shelter on Brooks Street, which the students helped throughout the school year.

The peer leadership class at Harding is a service-oriented course designed to hone leadership and community service skills.

During the just-completed academic year, the class was challenged to develop a specific project using a \$500 grant from the School for Ethical Education in Milford, which seeks to foster character development in youth through service learning.

The grant provided seed money for a project, said one of the class' teachers, Sheena Graham-Owens. But choosing one wasn't so easy, as the class wavered between recycling and homelessness.

Ultimately, attacking the problem of homelessness won out.

Jessica Santiago, one of the few juniors in the class, said she recalled how her mother has worked three jobs to keep the family going. "If my mom's going through this, how many other people are?" she said.

When they first got together as a class, Graham-Owens said she was skeptical that the students — a collection of athletes, scholars, musicians and cheer-

leaders — could be functional.

"What a mix," the teacher recalled thinking. "This is never going to work."

But those involved said they came to appreciate each other at a retreat last fall when different teams competed in survival skills.

"It got a lot of people who didn't say anything to each other to talk to each other," said senior Nicole Gonzalez.

The group's first project to assist the homeless was a talent show in March. They didn't charge admission — but they blanketed the neighborhood with publicity to fill their auditorium, solicited donations and also raised money by selling refreshments.

Buoyed by their success at raising \$500, they started visiting the shelter, where they saw that homelessness can happen to anyone.

"It really changed my attitude about other people," said Sarde McIntosh, a senior, adding she got a sense of how fleeting a job can be. "You can have a lot of money and the next month be homeless."

Jimmily Lundy, another se-

nior in the class, said he was struck by how one of the youngsters at the shelter warmed up to play with him, despite her difficult circumstances.

"It just amazed me a little 2-year-old or a 3-year-old just connects with somebody my age," he said.

The shelter's director, Carmen Colon, said she was impressed with the students' contributions — both personal and financial.

"They were completely wonderful," she said. "They helped clean the shelter, read stories for the kids."

But the students' fund raising came in handy, too, as they replaced a broken microwave at the shelter.

They also made up buckets with cleaning supplies that were given to families being relocated from the shelter, which normally serves those in need for up to 90 days.

The class' other teacher, Kevin Muhammad, said the experience taught students lessons about how diversity can contribute to teamwork.

"Sometimes, it's difficult to



**Musical teamwork:** Harding High School students Jessica Santiago and Nicole Gonzalez Morales and Willie Ruiz, in back, mix

work with someone who's different from you," he said. But "everybody here has a gift and a talent."

Colon said she hopes the project shattered stereotypes that homeless people may choose to live on the streets. Especially in high-priced Fairfield County, she said, the Harding students came to understand how families can fall on hard times.