

"STAY OUT OF TRAFFIC"

By: Ron Barry

What child do you know who is unlikely to be attracted by the question, "Hey, would you like to see some puppies?"

A group of thoughtful students at Crockett County High School knows the answer is "nobody."

That's why, through their involvement in the school's Human Studies program and membership in the FCCLA (Family, Career & Community Leaders of America), they decided to tackle an extremely difficult topic and carry a needed message to younger learners.

The topic is human trafficking. Very few adults have any meaningful concept of it. So imagine a group of high schoolers trying to explain it to fourth, fifth, and sixth graders.

But that's exactly what happened back in March. And you would be reasonable if you figured they probably flubbed the effort a little bit.

Except they **didn't**. In fact, the two CCHS teams who undertook the assignment won first place in the Tennessee STAR Event competition at the FCCLA's State Convention in Gatlinburg. That qualified them to go to the National Convention in Denver, Colorado in July, where they both received gold stars (the highest placement) in the national competition, with one group nailing a Top 10 finish.

While the awards are nice, the students involved – and their Human Studies teachers, Misty Garrett and Sara Phifer – all agree that getting a preventive message out to the younger children is far more important.

Three current CCHS juniors – Gayle Prescott, Jack Sanders, and Hope Stewart – teamed up to compete in Professional Preparation Level 2 to deliver a program to fourth and fifth graders entitled "Smarter Than the Scoopers," based on a book by noted children's author Julia Cook. Their creative effort earned the Top 10 national distinction.

The Crockett duo of now-graduated senior Ava Rosson and current junior Addy Moorehead developed a sixth-grade presentation named "Open Your Eyes to Human Trafficking," earning a national gold star ranking.

Researching the human trafficking situation was an eye-opener for each student involved, and their presentations would probably stun most of the adults who hear it, let alone the younger kids who actually **did** experience it.

"For these students to take on a subject like this and then make it impactful to younger children is a tremendous accomplishment," Garrett said. "I'm so blessed to be around them every day in our program. FCCLA is student-led, so they did this work on their own. Sara and I just give them a little feedback once in a while."

What the students learned in developing the presentations was sobering, and sometimes shocking. But what they want to do now is encouraging.

"I think we want to find new avenues and creative ways to keep getting this message out there," Prescott said. "There's so much about trafficking that communities don't know, and unless they're informed, the chances of an abduction in this area will only increase."

"Especially with younger kids getting their own phones more and more," Stewart added. "So much of this stuff is being done on social media and phone messaging, so kids need to know how to resist."



Pictured L to R: Gayle Prescott, Jack Sanders, Hope Stewart

U.S. law defines human trafficking as the use of force, fraud, or coercion to compel a person into commercial sex acts or labor against their will. But the thoughts of picturing the practice as a creepy predator hanging out in a dark alley need to be dispelled, the students (and the research) say.

"The perpetrators can be any gender or any race, and many of them are part of large networks, with deceptive ways to lure people in," Sanders said. "And it's staggering to me how frequently it occurs. The research says that one in three girls and one in five boys will be targeted."

Stewart added another fact that may surprise you. "It's actually more common for a child to be targeted by someone they know and trust," she said. Prescott added, "And the money involved is mind-blowing. Worldwide, it's a \$150-billion industry. That's **billion**, with a 'b'!" Moorehead said the increasing prevalence of trafficking "makes me not only want to watch out for myself, but for others too. We need to help young people be more aware of the tricks traffickers are using."

Sanders and Prescott both alluded to the fact that rural areas were just as likely to be targets as urban ones, at least partially because local law enforcement may have less resources to catch them.

Our county's nearness to I-40 is a factor," Phifer remarked. "An abductor could reach it pretty quickly from here, and it would be very hard to stop it once it happened."

Prescott said that's one reason to encourage children to recognize a trafficking attempt as early as possible before a predator can get too physically close in a conversation. "Kids should make noise and draw as much attention from other people in the area as they can," she said. "That's the best way to potentially scare off an abductor and cause second thoughts."

It's estimated that more than **40 million** people worldwide may currently be stuck in a trafficking situation. Much of it does not involve the sex trade, another fact that may surprise people.

"A lot of these cases don't involve an abduction like a kidnap," Garrett said. "For a lot of the victims, it's a source of income. They're promised labor of some sort, and many are in a position where they end up having no choice."

Predators tend to prey on those whose economic need is prevalent, zeroing in on those in difficult situations, according to the Blue Campaign, a Department of Homeland Security initiative to combat trafficking.

Rosson and Moorehead produced a board display for their "Open Your Eyes" presentation which featured trafficking examples: being tricked into the sex trade; being forced to grow or sell drugs; being made to shoplift; or working and being forced to turn over their earnings.

Both Crockett groups addressed "boyfriending," which Stewart described as a phone manipulation measure that takes advantage of children who tend to be "people pleasers."

"They don't want to let anybody down or seem to be rude," she said, "so when they're targeted, they're more likely to go along with what the caller or texter is requesting."

Presenting their message to younger children was one of the toughest parts of the task, Prescott said. "We tried to filter out some of the language which could sound too harsh. We tried to think of relating it as, 'What would we tell our own children if we were parents?' It wasn't easy, but the younger classes were very receptive."

The students said they were encouraged by Director of Schools Phillip A. Pratt to get the message in front of as many Crockett students as they could. Consequently, all the sixth grade classes at the middle school heard Rosson and Moorehead's program. Two of the three CCSD elementary schools saw the "Smarter Than the Scoopers" lesson. "We just ran out of time before we could get to the third school," Prescott said.

Their presentation uses the acronym SCOOP to help children remember five lines of defense: be **S**mart; use your **C**all list (verify incoming phone calls and texts before responding); zero talking to strangers; keep strangers **O**ut of your personal space; and always **P**air up (it's always better to be with a friend). Children who follow these guidelines are less likely to succumb to the lure.

Gold Star Presenter: Addy Moorehead





FCCLA VP of Individual Development: Reese Barker

MORE ON FCCLA & CCHS

The FCCLA is a national career and technical student organization for those in family and consumer sciences education through Grade 12. It offers intra-curricular resources and opportunities for students to pursue careers that support families, and has been in place since 1945. There are 46 state associations, as well as chapters in the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the American Virgin Islands.

Its mission is to promote personal growth and leadership development, focusing on character development, creative and critical thinking, interpersonal communication, practical knowledge, and career preparation, all summarized by its tagline "The Ultimate Leadership Experience."

That leadership is even demonstrated locally by CCHS junior Reese Barker, who is actually one of Tennessee's state officers. Barker is the State VP of Individual Development.

"We're very proud of all these students," Garrett said. "Crockett County has some outstanding young people, and I feel like this group often gives back more to me than I could ever do for them. It's just a joy to be around them."

And with the influence they're wielding to younger students, maybe they'll help ensure better safety awareness for the grades coming up - because **nobody** likes to be stuck in traffic.