

Seniors, students work to solve gun violence

By Lisa Reisman

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CHESTER — These days, a group of senior citizens at Masonicare at Chester Village isn't waxing nostalgic about school days past.

Not since the Feb. 14 shooting in Parkland, Fla., and the student walkouts and march on Washington, D.C., that followed, anyway.

Their message is simple. "The lives of our young people are too precious to be snuffed out needlessly," said Ellen Berman, 92, the irrepressible ringleader of Seniors Standing with Students to Solve Gun Violence.

To spread the message, "we don't have time to look back," she said. "We're looking forward. We're inspired by the energy of the young people in Florida, Connecticut and all around the country."

Not to mention what they learned from five Westbrook High School students at a lively hour-long discussion at Chester Village in early June. The two groups plan to meet again later this summer, as well as on a regular basis throughout the school year, according to Berman.

"What we talked about was human beings," said the grandmother of seven and great-grandmother of one. "The word gun didn't come up. Usually it seems the shooter is a person who's been bullied or feels like an outsider and needs support and doesn't know how to find it."

The five students underwent training in School Climate and Restorative Practices, a program that promotes nonpunitive ways of dealing with disruptive student behavior, according to Chet Bialicki, a teacher and student school climate coordinator at Westbrook High.

"The whole idea is to be proactive," he said of the program, which recently received a \$5,000 grant from the state to foster the practices in other school systems.

"If someone is cutting class or



Lisa Reisman / For Hearst Connecticut Media

Seniors Standing with Students to Solve Gun Violence, a group formed in the wake of recent school shootings at Chester Village West.

acting out, rather than suspending them, we'll meet with him or her to understand what they're going through and together determine what we can do to help."

And not just teachers. "We talked at the meeting about how we look out for other students, especially ones who seem detached or struggling," said senior Charlotte Barton. "And also how we work with younger students on their self-image and self-concept. If they feel good about themselves, they're less likely to lash out."

"The students were inspiring," said Bruce Greenfield, 89, a member of the group. "Even with all the other issues that have come to the forefront since Parkland, they inspired us to keep our focus fixed on the safety of kids in school."

That includes, in the last four months, meetings every two weeks for residents to share ideas on the issue. "One man takes notes and types up the minutes and the agenda for the next meeting," said Judith Osborne, 67, another member.

Others, like Flora Tucci, a 97-year-old resident at Chester Village and former teacher in the Middletown school system, have been reaching outward. In a letter published by the Middletown Press in late May, Tucci urged "senior groups and individuals to become part of this movement of young and old working together to ensure the safe future of today's youth."

Members of the group also met with Lauren Gister, Chester's first selectwoman. From that came a discussion with Moms Demand Action, an organization formed to



Westbrook High School students involved in the school's Climate and Restorative Practices program discuss school safety with residents of Masonicare at Chester Village, including Seniors Standing with Students to Solve Gun Violence.

advance the cause of common-sense gun reform. There's also a plan for the group to man a table at the Chester Farmers Market in late September to further spread the word.

That's not counting the efforts to network with other senior groups in Sun City, Fla., Cleveland and River Vale, N.J., among other cities and towns.

That so many senior groups have organically formed in the wake of Parkland is no coincidence, to Osborne's mind.

"We're all concerned about our children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren," she said. "We're concerned about them living in a world where learning to play dead to avoid being shot in school is considered normal."

The group is in talks with U.S. Sen. Chris Murphy, D-Conn., to attend a meeting at Chester Village. "We need his support and he needs our votes to keep doing what he's been doing," said Chester Village Activities Manager Priscilla Merritt.

Their support is no small matter. According to U.S. News and World Report, seniors cast their ballots

more often and in greater numbers than any other age group. At the same time, millennials this year "will pass Baby Boomers as the largest generation of Americans eligible to vote," CNN reported.

"Seniors are galvanized, and so are our young people," Merritt said. "That makes the alliance that much more significant."

For now, the group is, for the most part, keeping its focus narrow and local. The early returns have been encouraging.

"From a little germ of an idea, we've blossomed into this really well-organized little group," Osborne said. "The Westbrook students have shown us a proactive way to solve the problem. We just need to keep working together to get the word out."

Berman agreed. "We have to try to get something done before we die," she said. "Even if it's just one student getting the help he needs before resorting to doing something we'll all regret. We have to keep trying."

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