



Students learn ropes of government at symposium

By Matthew Rink

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One hundred fifty students from eight area high schools took part in the 2nd annual Youth Civic Engagement Symposium Friday at Gannon University.

Cassandra Rodriguez, an Iroquois High School senior, plans to study public relations and political science in college with the hope of one day running a campaign or even seeking elected office herself.

At the 2nd annual Youth Civic Engagement Symposium, Rodriguez and 150 other area high school students heard presentations from local leaders, including elected officials, about how the judicial, legislative and executive branches of government work at all levels and why they are critical to a well-functioning society.

"It helped me learn what offices I can go into," Rodriguez said, "and how the system works."

The symposium is a partnership between U.S. Sen. Pat Toomey's office, Gannon University and Erie Together, a group that works to "reduce poverty, elevate prosperity, and make the Erie region a community of opportunity where everyone can learn, work and thrive."

Last year, the symposium drew about 50 students from three schools. This year, students from Collegiate Academy, Corry, Erie, Iroquois, North East, Seneca, Barber National Institute and Union City participated. In addition to sessions at Gannon, students visited Erie City Hall and the local and federal courthouses.

Youth Civic Leadership Symposium

At City Hall, they heard from Mayor Joe Sinnott, Police Chief Don Daucus, Fire Chief Guy Santone, Councilman Curtis Jones and Erie County Convention Center Authority Executive Director Casey Wells.

Jones, a 12-year member of Erie City Council, asked students to turn to someone from a different school and introduce themselves.

"The reason I asked you to introduce yourselves is because even though you live in a particular area ... we are all connected," he said. "We all are part of Erie County."

In addition to talking about how he came to run for office and the process of running a campaign, Jones noted that the work that goes on inside City Hall impacts everyone in the room. He said the Erie Fire Department, for example, often will respond to emergencies outside of the city when smaller, neighboring departments need assistance.

Dacus told students that police work is a good profession but it “has to be a calling.” He said the job requires officers to act as lawyers, doctors, psychologists, even politicians at times. Dacus also used the platform to dispel negative perceptions of Erie in regard to crime and to warn students about the use of heroin and opioids.

“There is nothing more dangerous,” he said.

Wells said being in government requires collaboration and cooperation, regardless of political party. He said the Convention Authority’s board of directors is split politically, but often votes unanimously on major development projects.

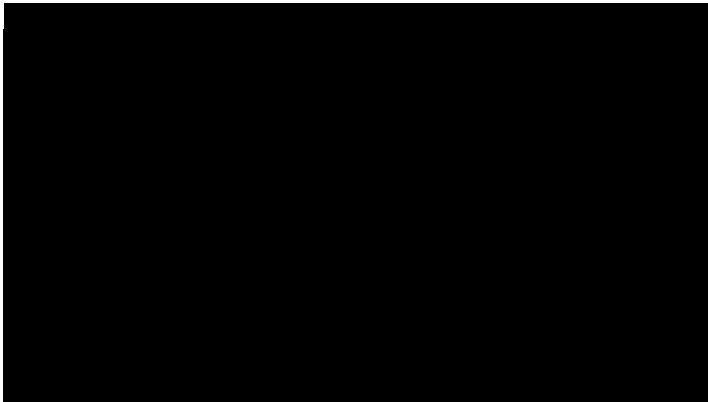
“They’re smart enough to understand it’s not a zero-sum game,” Well said. “Meaning, anytime you win, I lose. That’s not the case (with the board). That’s often the way government works nowadays. One side of the aisle, if they get a win (on an issue) the other side is against it because they don’t want to let them win. When that happens, we all lose.”

Mary Bula, facilitator for Erie Together, said the symposium was a “fantastic opportunity” for students to learn how they can get engaged in government.

“The feedback we got last year was tremendous,” Bula said. “People really recognized how valuable it was for them to be able to hear from all of these officials at all levels of federal, state and local government.”

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