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ROBERT CROWN CENTER FOR HEALTH EDUCATION TURNS 50

Chicago Area Institution Celebrates 50 Years of Teaching Schoolchildren How to Stay Healthy, Happy and Safe

If you grew up in Chicago or the area suburbs, chances are you learned some early lessons about life in suburban Hinsdale, where the Robert Crown Center for Health Education has taught generations of area schoolchildren -- close to 5 million to be precise. The students have learned about their bodies and how they work, how to keep physically and emotionally healthy, the importance of avoiding dangerous substances, what changes to expect as they grow into adulthood and how to make responsible choices.

Many remember Valeda, the life-size, talking invisible woman, with internal organs that light up, from whom they first learned about human anatomy. Also turning 50 this year, Valeda is undergoing a makeover, including a new voice track in English and Spanish.

Today, over 140,000 boys and girls from 600 schools across 8 counties participate in Robert Crown programs each year, about half of which are presented in schools and other community settings.

While the mission of Robert Crown has remained the same over decades -- to encourage school-aged children and young adults to adopt and maintain healthy lifestyles, the focus of its programs has changed with the times.

"The Robert Crown Center for Health Education goes to great lengths to stay on top of the latest trends, threats and findings impacting the health, happiness and safety of our students," said CEO Kathleen Burke. "When you understand the world where kids live, you create lessons that break through their resistance and make a difference."

From the Drug Culture to the Sexual Revolution, New Programs Meet New Needs

When it opened its doors as the Hinsdale Health Museum in 1958, Robert Crown was the first health education center in the country and a model for others to follow, distinct for the era in its classroom setting, range of exhibits and straightforward teaching style.

By the time the organization moved into its current facility, the Robert Crown Center, in 1974, substance abuse prevention topped the agenda in response to the drug culture of the '60s, LSD and the introduction of opiates brought back from Vietnam.

Sex education became a central theme in response to the sexual revolution of the '70s, a decade that also saw growing interest in personal health and wellness, the start of the running culture and the spark of interest in healthier diets.

The '80s brought a need to protect youth from a rise in sexually transmitted diseases and the onset of AIDS, as well as a much enhanced awareness of women about their bodies and how they worked. The era also saw the onset of conservative initiatives to limit what could be taught about sex in the schools, leaving centers like Robert Crown to fill the gap.

As more and more working parents turned to day care through the '90s, teaching pre-schoolers such basic hygienic tasks as properly washing their hands and brushing their teeth took on greater importance.



The new millennium ushered in enhanced outreach initiatives on the part of Robert Crown, including programs and services to meet the needs of such diverse urban neighborhoods as North Lawndale, where Robert Crown opened in Homan Square in 2002. Continually after 9/11, many schools cut back on student travel, furthering the trend to "go where the kids are." Currently, about half of the presentations given by Robert Crown educators are out in the community. Another Robert Crown Center opens in Aurora in the summer of 2008.

Growing Emphasis on Empowering Youth to Make Responsible Decisions

The approach of Robert Crown's staff of professional instructors is to motivate true behavioral change by teaching the skills to make healthy decisions. More than 30 age-appropriate programs for pre-school through high school age are offered.

Program areas include general health and wellness; drug, alcohol and tobacco abuse prevention; and family living, which progresses from teaching pre-adolescents about the changes they will experience during puberty, through the risks and consequences of teenage sexual activity, to tough relationship issues.

Robert Crown provides a safe environment where kids can ask questions and talk through issues that could lead to problematic behavior. Key messages to pre-teens and teens going through seemingly insurmountable developmental changes include "you're not alone," "it will pass" and "these are the skills that will help."

Collaborations and Partnerships to Tackle Emerging Challenges

The rising incidence of depression among youth is a growing concern. One of the newest Robert Crown programs, called Express Yourself, aims to combat negative media messages and peer expectations that lead an alarming number of young girls and boys to dislike their bodies. This, in turn, can lead to dangerous behaviors, including eating disorders.

In a society ever more characterized by aggression and violence, the emerging barriers to healthful and emotionally stable youth are many -- cyber bullying, early onset of male violence patterns that can lead to sexual aggression and domestic violence, risky behavior in violent communities where boys and girls grow up thinking they have to cram a lifetime of experience into the few years they expect to live.

Increasingly, the Robert Crown Center for Health Education is working to reach a wider audience through a collaborative "train the trainer" approach that assists teachers in integrating health and wellness concepts throughout their curricula and prepares parents, nurses and others who interact with youth to reinforce healthy behavior choices on a consistent basis.

Robert Crown has a growing list of partnerships designed to strengthen its impact on the community, from serving as an internship site for an Aurora University master's level leadership program for teachers, to designing an integrated health curriculum for a north suburban school, to working in conjunction with Kane County on an obesity prevention campaign.

"At the Robert Crown Center, delivering outstanding health education in a non-threatening and engaging manner has been the secret to decades of success," CEO Burke said. Reaching youth early, before poor habits take hold, is crucial. We don't wait for problems to develop. We teach children how to make good decisions, and the consequences when they don't."