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Area teen joins select team to tackle national problem

By PHYLLIS SALMONS
Correspondent

ORMOND BEACH -- "Bardia Khajenoori is at the White House . . . hopefully my future home!"

The 16-year-old Spruce Creek High School junior left that ebullient entry on the wall of his Facebook page Aug. 13 while he was in Washington, D.C., to participate in a national effort to prevent teen pregnancies.

"Where better to study politics than D.C.?" he said during a recent interview.

Bardia, who lives in Ormond Beach, was one of a dozen teens from throughout the country invited to attend a Aug. 12-15 roundtable and become a member of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy's 2009-2010 Youth Leadership Team. The nonprofit, nonpartisan initiative is dedicated to reducing the nation's teen pregnancy rate by one-third by 2015.

"Toward the end of last year I was writing an article for The Talon, our school newspaper at Spruce Creek, about the rising birth rate among teens," Bardia said in explaining how his trip to D.C. came about. "As part of my research, I went to the Web site of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy and there was a link on the home page to apply for their Youth Leadership Team.

"I filled out the application, wrote the requested essay, found a sponsor (Pathways Elementary School teacher Kym Ferguson) and I made the team."

While doing his research for his article, Bardia said he learned that teen pregnancies cost the nation's taxpayers more than \$9 billion annually and that roughly half of all women on welfare are teen mothers.

In addition, he reported that 60 percent of teen mothers don't finish high school and only 3 percent have a college degree by the time they turn 30.

"So, as hard as it is to believe, adults with no children are still paying for the problem as taxpayers," Bardia said. "On top of that, the children of teen mothers are more likely to end up in poverty and do worse in school. The girls born to teen mothers are more likely to become teen mothers themselves, continuing the cycle."

Michael Rosst, senior manager of communications and audience strategy for the national campaign, said the youth team was created in 1998 to get teens actively involved in efforts to prevent teen pregnancy. The group does not consider abortion an option but instead focuses on preventing unwanted pregnancies.

During their 18-month terms, Rosst said, team members will participate in a variety of related activities designed to prevent teen pregnancies while developing and expanding their own leadership abilities.

"Some of the other (youth team members) are from areas where teen pregnancy is a huge problem," Bardia said. "They can go to the mall and count the pregnant teenagers. For that reason, there are organizations in those areas specifically devoted to the issue of teen pregnancy.

"Luckily, by those standards, there isn't as big a problem here," he said. "To my knowledge, there are no specific teen pregnancy prevention organizations around here, so my goal is to do what I can to improve awareness. "

Bardia said he intends to see what local pregnancy crisis centers and similar organizations are planning for the National Day to Prevent Teen Pregnancy in May 2010 and participate in those efforts.

"If they are not yet planning anything, then I'll get with them and see if I can help organize something," he said.

In keeping with his dreams of one day attending college in Washington, D.C. -- with the ultimate dream of living in the White House -- Bardia said he is pursuing his passions for playing soccer, studying politics, history, journalism, foreign languages and cultures, traveling, and meeting new people.

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