



ROME

CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT

SPOTLIGHT STORY - May 2023

RFA KNIGHTS UNITED: EMPOWERING STUDENTS FOR MENTAL HEALTH AND ADVOCACY

by Jill Pekarski

In an era where mental health concerns among students are on the rise, it is heartening to witness the positive impact of initiatives like **Knights United at Rome Free Academy**. Led by passionate individuals, this club aims to empower students, promote mental health awareness, and foster healthy relationships. With a focus on social skills, future planning, and goal setting, Knights United has become a catalyst for change within the school community.

While visiting the high school to learn more about Knights United, I observed a student who was in a state of emotional distress while using her phone. At that very moment, Deanna Butera, the school social worker, was in the hallway and promptly approached the student, helping alleviate the situation. Butera emphasized the significance of RFA in establishing a nurturing atmosphere where students can readily seek support. "It is important to be available to students who may be going through a rough day and require someone to confide in," she said.

A Club with a Purpose:

Knights United was established by Deanna Butera, LCSW, for RFA. Lara McNamara, Site Coordinator for Connected Community Schools, assists the club, with the



RFA students, along with Site Coordinator, Lara McNamara gather in The Connected Community School Hub.

mission to increase student advocacy and empowerment. The group gathered like-minded students who were eager to create a positive change in their lives and the lives of their peers.

Promoting Awareness and Education:

One of the primary goals of Knights United has been to raise awareness

surrounding mental health issues. The club has organized assemblies and events to engage students in discussions about healthy relationships, self-esteem, coping skills, and self-efficacy. The assemblies were planned and executed in collaboration with the RFA administration. By inviting organizations like the YWCA to lead groups and share their expertise, Knights United has helped students gain knowledge, form bonds, and build relationships around these essential topics.

AMEND Together: Fostering Respect and Preventing Domestic Violence:

One of the two groups under Knights United is AMEND Together, which promotes respect, prevents domestic violence and establishes healthy boundaries and social cues. Through workshops and interactive sessions, students have the knowledge and skills to foster healthy relationships and identify signs of domestic violence. Knights United creates a safe and inclusive environment by encouraging respect and understanding. Note: Grady Faulkner is the contact for AMEND Together group at Strough Middle School.



Lara McNamara and Deanna Butera.

Girls Circle: Building Self-Esteem and Coping Skills:

The second group within Knights United is **Girls Circle**, which focuses on providing young women with essential tools for building self-esteem, developing coping skills, and enhancing self-efficacy. Recognizing the challenges young women face today, this group aims to create a supportive network where participants can openly discuss their experiences and find strength in one another. By fostering a sense of belonging and empowerment, Girls Circle is helping students develop the resilience they need to face life's challenges.



Girls Circle discussion, led by a facilitator from the YWCA.

The Impact and Future of Knights United:

Since its inception in March 2023, Knights United has significantly impacted the students of RFA. By fostering mental health awareness, promoting healthy relationships, and facilitating future planning and goal setting, the club has empowered students to take charge of their well-being and advocate for positive change. Through their dedication and hard work, Deanna Butera, Lara McNamara, and the entire Knights United team have created a culture of support and empowerment that will have a lasting impact on the school community.

Knights United at RFA is a shining example of how student-led initiatives can make a real difference in promoting mental health, social skills, and healthy relationships. By providing a platform for advocacy, empowerment, and education, the club has positively transformed the lives of countless students. As Knights United continues to grow, one can only imagine its profound impact on future generations, creating a legacy of compassion, resilience, and mental well-being within

the school community and beyond.

ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS:

The HUB

A place where students can come to visit during their study halls or lunch periods. The HUB provides a safe space for students. The HUB has grab-and-go meals, snacks, hygiene supplies, school supplies, and clothing. Site Coordinator Lara McNamara is a resource for students and staff at Connected Rome Free Academy, parents, and community members.

Zen Den

Last year, the counseling office opened the “Zen Den” at RFA. This space is available for students who need a spot to relax and reduce their anxiety and stress. Relaxed lighting, calming music, and comfortable chairs provide an atmosphere that will help students relax and get back on track. Funding for this project was provided by a grant from the Rome Teacher’s Federal Credit Union.



RFA Zen Den.

Lunch Bunch

The Lunch Bunch, also known as the Fox Den, is a smaller space for students to be themselves. It offers a comfortable environment where students can have conversations, eat lunch, do homework, and discuss various topics. The Lunch Bunch provides a relaxed setting for students to unwind and promotes bridge-building and mentorship among peers. “Creating an inclusive and supportive atmosphere plays a crucial

role in helping students with anxiety, providing a safe space for connection and solace,” said Sara Fox, Student Support Specialist.

Clothing Closet

The Clothing Closet at RFA is a place for students to shop. The best part is that everything is free. “If a student has forgotten gym clothes or would like a prom gown, we have them covered,” said Courtney Spatto, LSW, who helps run the closet. Seniors MJ Bates and Giuseppe Celento have been instrumental in keeping the clothing closet organized.



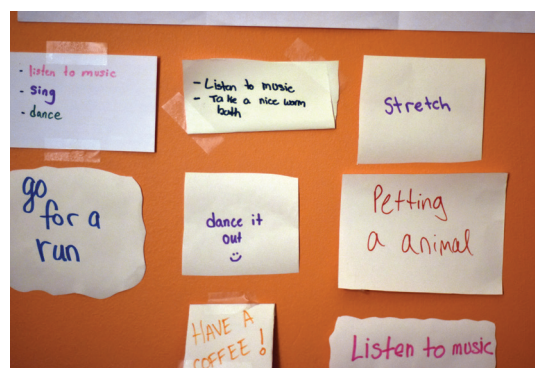
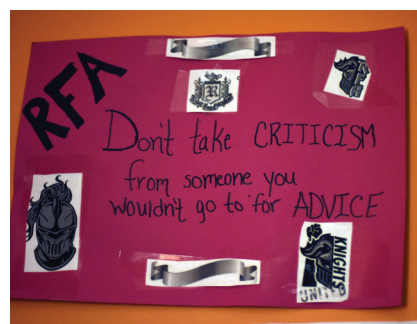
Courtney Spatto, LSW (right) speaks with RFA Senior, MJ Bates.

L to R: RFA students, MJ Bates and Giuseppe Celento.

AMEND Together Group



AMEND Together, which promotes respect, prevents domestic violence and establishes healthy boundaries and social cues, led by a facilitator from the YWCA.



May is Mental Health Awareness Month

You are #MoreThanEnough

"The Rome City School District offers our students many mental health supports. We have preventative programs in every school across the district and targeted higher-level interventions and support for students that need it the most. We want the community to know that our School Counselors, School Social Workers, School Psychologists, and all our staff are here to support our students and families in any way that we can," said Amanda Jones, director of counseling services.

"Additionally, the Community Eligibility Provision (free breakfast and lunches) and summer meal programs throughout the City of Rome can help address food insecurity among students, as proper nutrition is also crucial for their well-being," said Chris Whitmore, Director of Food Service for the District.

If you have any questions or would like more information, please get in touch with the school counselor at your child's school. They will be able to provide you with the necessary guidance and support.

*National Institute of Mental Health: <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/>



As far as Single Point of Access (SPOA) goes we are definitely seeing a big increase in anxiety, physical aggression, refusal to go to school and continued suicidal ideation/threats or attempts. We have also had an increase in Residential Treatment Facilities (RTF) referrals over the last two years," said Dawn Piccione, Child SPOA Coordinator. *Oneida County Dept. of Mental Health*

On May 19, the RFA Girls Softball Team held a Mental Health Awareness Night before the game. Students Rich Artigiani and Maggie Closinski from the Class of 2022 spoke about their friend, Stone Mercurio. Bracelets with, "You Matter Stone" were sold in his memory. There is a gofundme site to build a skate park in his name: [Stone Mercurio Skate Park](#).



If you or someone you know is in crisis, call or text 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline.