

 Youth gather together to tackle social problems

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DEERFIELD - Western Massachusetts and New Orleans youth came together at camp here last week to continue to tackle social problems.

The Harmony Camp Youth Leadership Summit was held as a follow-up to the benefit concert held by Building Harmonies in September 2006, in which the youth group raised and donated \$10,000 for "Kids Rethinking New Orleans Schools."

"I wanted to create an ongoing connection because we have a common mission to support the voices and visions of young people," said Sarah Pirtle, Harmony Camp organizer.

The New Orleans-based Rethink program is a youth-led initiative aimed at rebuilding school systems while influencing public policy. Rethink formed before Hurricane Katrina, but the storm's vast destruction fueled their collective efforts even more.

The "Rethinkers" from New Orleans reunited with their Amherst counterparts, Building Harmonies, to participate in the camp, held at Woolman Hill July 2-4 in Deerfield.

Pirtle also said she wanted to support Building Harmonies and the activist efforts of the group's 13-year-old organizers, Tess Domb Sadof and Joshua Wolfsun.

"It was sort of like, we'll get to the concert and go from there," said Wolfsun. "It's better than I could have ever hoped or

imagined. It's definitely something new."

Social workshops

The campers, including six rethinkers from New Orleans, took part in workshops and activities focused on topics ranging from nonviolence to social justice to what it means to be a better world citizen.

"I'm feeling as if we are all becoming 'rethinkers' with you," said Pirtle, smiling, as she addressed the circle of campers.

Bess Hepner, 13, sang a song she wrote about Hurricane Katrina that was inspired by a picture she saw of a school in New Orleans after the storm hit.

"This weekend I lost everything," sang Hepner softly, while playing her acoustic guitar. "This weekend I was rescued by planes. This weekend I realized Katrina was no game."

Campers also came up with the idea of painting rocks with multilingual messages of love and hope to pass on to their friends.

Pirtle said there will be a Web site where people can write back what they've learned from the experience.

But the rethinkers won't be leaving Harmony Camp empty-handed. In fact, the group hopes to take home some valuable life lessons.

"I hope to communicate teamwork and be more of a leader and work harder to find more connections to help us," said Hoang-Hoang, 15.

A camp counselor, Kate Levitov, 18, of New Orleans, said she thinks it's about "taking home collaborative efforts to work together with different types of people - all working toward a common goal."

Wolfsun told the circle of campers that there aren't words to explain what he's experienced at Harmony Camp.

"When you actually meet the people who've been affected, it's special," he said.

