

Blind teens learn the ABCs of dating

Deborah Circelli EDUCATION WRITER

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DAYTONA BEACH — Kevin Brathwaite hasn't had much experience dating.

The 20-year-old Deltona resident, who started losing his sight when he was in middle school, said he "decided to make my main focus school." He recently graduated from **the** Florida School **for the** Deaf and Blind and plans to attend Daytona State College.

But Friday he and a group of other 14 to 21 year olds got to experience **the** dating life as part of **the** Summer Teen Transition Program with **the Center for the Visually Impaired**.

The group of 18 were paired together and went to eat at **the** Volusia Mall and then bowling at Bellair Lanes in Daytona Beach.

They first had a workshop on social skills and dating tips, including everything from what to look **for** in a partner and how to act such as males opening **the** car door **for** females. They also discussed who should pay **for** dinner and whether to give a goodnight kiss.

Dan Pekich, vocational program manager **for the Center for the Visually Impaired**, said one of **the** biggest things is **for the** teens to know "it's OK to be blind. It is who they are. They have to be confident and accept themselves and when they do — other people will accept them."

Overall, he said, dating is no different **for** someone who is blind than **for** a sighted person.

The teens mentioned several things they look **for** in a date such as honesty, sense of humor and someone who doesn't cheat.

"Someone who likes you **for** who you are and doesn't dump you in one week," said Stephanie Knob, 15, from Palm Coast.

Pekich told **the** group he was surprised no one mentioned physical looks and several responded — "we're blind."

But he told them there is "nothing wrong finding something attractive about a person whether you are blind or not. There's nothing wrong with being physically attracted to somebody. You have **the** same needs as anybody else."

Ronee Silverman, president and CEO of **the Center for the Visually Impaired**, said teens in **the** program don't have **the** same access to transportation as other teens their age or their parents may be overprotective.

"They don't always have **the** same life experiences as their sighted peers," Silverman said.

Aaliyah Gisondi, 15, of Palatka, was paired with Brathwaite and double dated with two other students. She had never been on a date before, she said, because "no one has ever asked."

Prior to leaving **the** center Friday, she was reluctant, saying, "I'm not a people person." But at **the** bowling alley she laughed and gave "high-fives" to another teen and encouraged Brathwaite, who got a strike.

"It's all right. I'm having fun and I got free food too so I'm happy," she said.

The nonprofit agency has offered **the** Summer Teen Transition Program **for** seven years. **The** students, who come from Volusia, Flagler, Brevard and Putnam counties, also participate in **the** year-round program, which houses 33 people.

During **the** summer, students learn not only social skills during **the** nine-week program that started this past week, but also how to adjust to being blind, including how to find jobs and

prepare **for** college. Learning to use computers and other devices is also part of **the** program as well as how to travel independently by actually taking public transit.

Pekich, who started **the** program, tries to make learning fun. He has competitions and prizes where teens are placed in groups and given clues, money and a packet, and travel throughout town using **the** clues to reach various destinations similar to **the** television CBS reality show "**The Amazing Race.**"

Part of **the** program is also having people in **the** community get exposure to teenagers with visual impairments.

"I want people in **the** community to see they are no different than anyone else. They have **the** same dreams, **the** same goals, **the** same needs and desires," Pekich said.

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