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FOR TEENS, A DOSE OF COMMON CENTS

Credit union teaches financial literacy to teens at hands-on workshop

By Philip Walzer

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PORTSMOUTH

They might have slept in or caught an early "Harry Potter" showing.

Instead, half a dozen teenagers attended a three-hour financial literacy workshop Thursday morning at Guardian Federal Credit Union.

They learned how to fill in a check register. They went over fixed and flexible expenses. They helped a fictional family erase a \$150 shortfall from its monthly budget.

"The schools are not teaching it; the parents are not teaching it," said Chris Anuswith, president and CEO of Guardian, which has 8,000 members. "But financial literacy is more of a problem than computer literacy. You ever meet a 5-year-old that wasn't more wired than you?"

The instructor, Jackie Cross, the credit union's financial counselor, juggled games and financial lessons. In one exercise, the students received 20 beans, which they had to apportion among expenses such as housing, food and recreation.

Cross questioned the plan crafted by Deja Lyles, 13, a rising eighthgrader at Greenbrier Middle School in Chesapeake. Deja had bought a house and car but had spent nothing for insurance on either.

"You have to re-evaluate your situation because you don't have enough money," Cross told her. "Adults come to see me because of that, so think about it."

Moments later, Cross drastically cut the students' budget: "Everybody take off seven beans and work with 13. We're in a recession now."

After reviewing the fictional Browns' budget problems, the teens suggested they cut expenses for food or recreation.

But what about their \$107-a-month allotment for clothes? Cross asked. "No one mentioned that. You don't have to buy clothing every month when you're trying to get out of debt."

Cross preached the virtues of saving and planning. "If you spend everything you get your hands on," she said, "when you're an adult, you'll live paycheck to paycheck, and you won't realize how you got there."

Lucinda Harris, a business teacher at I.C. Norcom High, brought her son Andrew, 11, who will go to John Yeates Middle School in Suffolk. "I want him to hear it from someone else before I make him accountable," she said.

Seth Jones, 16, a rising junior at Smithfield High School, won points from Cross for starting to save for his \$500 class ring. "I'm going to keep track of my money," he said, "and if I spend too much in one spot, I'm going to try to slow down."

Deja said she attended because her mother made her. "I know I can't spend it all on frivolous things," she said, but she admitted it would be hard to put that knowledge into practice.

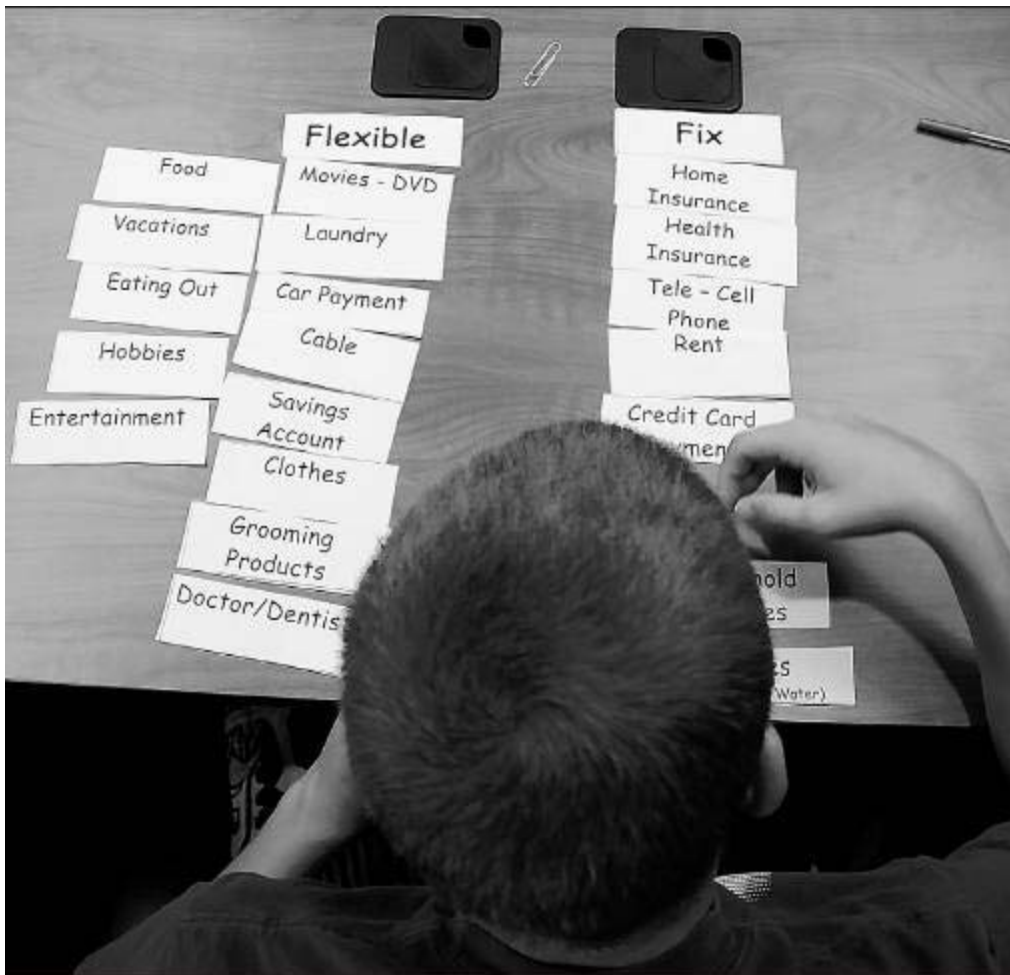
Cross said attendance was stunted by summer activities and difficulty getting the word out. Maybe, too, by the problem she addressed. "If the parents don't believe in finances, why would they push the kids?"

Anuswith, the credit union's CEO, said: "Ultimately, if people had been more financially literate, I have my doubts as to whether the mortgage crisis we're in would be so severe. We wouldn't have some of the issues we currently have with credit cards."



THOMAS SLUSSER PHOTOS | SPECIAL TO THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

From left, Deja Lyles, 13; Daniel Cross, 14; and Kendall Jones, 15, divvy up beans as payment for fictional expenses during an activity at a financial literacy workshop for teenagers in Portsmouth.



Seth Jones, 16, of Smithfield tries to differentiate between fixed and flexible expenditures during an in-class exercise. The rising high school junior is starting to save money for his \$500 class ring.