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NEWS RELEASE

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Gov. Christie Whitman, Gen. Colin Powell Urge Personal Responsibility; Promote Volunteerism

Governor Christie Whitman was joined by retired General Colin Powell in Hamilton Township today to promote individual responsibility and volunteerism, highlighting mentoring and early intervention efforts in Mercer County as exemplary programs in action.

"Volunteerism benefits both those who volunteer and those they serve," said Whitman. "It can restore hope. It can turn a life around. It can even save a life. I hope we can use volunteerism to counteract a problem that I have been observing and thinking about for a long time. It's what I call a crisis of personal responsibility."

Whitman said the crisis is most "clearly and shockingly" manifested in the rash of acts reported recently: new parents throwing away their infants; teenagers killing pizza delivery people; a giant swastika carved into a cornfield; and the murder of 11 year-old Eddie Werner in Jackson Township.

Whitman and Powell met with junior high and high school students in the Trenton and Hamilton Township School Districts to discuss the importance of personal responsibility, and to encourage volunteerism as a way of promoting positive values and making a positive contribution to the community.

Powell, a retired general who served as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff during the Gulf War and head of the National Security Council under President Reagan, chairs America's Promise - The Alliance for Youth, a national campaign to improve the lives of the nation's at-risk youths.

Mercer County's Big Brothers/Big Sisters School Based Mentoring Program was spotlighted as a program that is helping reduce students' risk of failing or dropping out of school, falling victim to crime, drugs, teen pregnancy or other pitfalls by helping them build a set of positive values in their formative years.

The Governor and General met informally with 40 participants in the Big Brothers/Big Sisters School Based Mentoring Program, in which volunteer mentors spend time each week with children ages six through 14 in a

school setting. The goal of the Mercer County-based program is for volunteers to serve as mentors, friends and role models to the children. Student-mentor interaction is informal, and might include sports, help with school work, eating lunch or just talking. Many of the program's mentors come from the state departments of Law & Public Safety, Community Affairs and Labor.

Applauding the Hamilton students' ongoing volunteer efforts, including the Key Club, Interact and the Parent Teacher Student Association, Whitman said, "Freedom is about having choices, but freedom is also about taking responsibility for those choices and their consequences," said Whitman. "The better we prepare ourselves to make those choices, through the help of parents, teachers, religion, mentors and peers, the more confident we are that they are the right choices, the responsible choices."

Later, Whitman and Powell talked to about 600 Nottingham High School juniors and seniors about volunteerism and personal responsibility, discussing issues they face in school, at home and in their communities.

A second program which was highlighted during the visit is Positive Steps, which was created in 1997 in Mercer County for at-risk juveniles and first-offenders. This educational program focuses on prevention and early intervention for youths at risk of involvement in drugs, alcohol, fighting, truancy, teen pregnancy and underage gambling. Graduates of Positive Steps are linked with mentors in the traditional Big Brothers/Big Sisters program, or the School Based Mentoring Program.

Positive Steps uses a five-week, multi-faceted curriculum to teach at-risk youths and their parents skills such as conflict resolution, communication, solving problems together, and the importance of taking responsibility for their actions. Funded through the Mercer County Prosecutor's Office with forfeited funds, Positive Steps is currently in its second, five-week session.

"I want to begin a statewide dialogue with students, parents, business people and clergy about how we can promote a greater sense of responsibility among ourselves," Whitman told the student assembly. "And I want to start this dialogue by calling on all of you to meet the challenge, to be responsible to do the right thing. It's not easy, and it may not make you the most popular person in your class. But ultimately, it can mean the difference between whether you succeed in life or not."

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