

Stepping into “The Phoenix Spa” at Bertie Middle School is being transported into a safe, calming oasis where conflicts are resolved, and no topics of discussion are off limits. The Phoenix Spa is the brainchild of Sgt. Bonnie Powell, school resource officer and deputy of the Bertie County Sheriff’s Office.

Powell said that often at school, young ladies would be in and out of her office at random to talk about confrontations, issues and other things that happen in their daily lives – little things, really, but nonetheless, things that can mean so much to middle school-aged girls.

Then one day, at half time at one of the middle school basketball games, the vision suddenly came to Powell. She thought, “Why not have a structured time and an open and controlled atmosphere where these girls can gather to talk out their issues?” The idea for this “Conflict Resolution Room” was taken to Principal William Peele III around Christmas time. He was immediately on board and gave Powell a space on the seventh grade hall to do what she wanted.

With money out of her own pocket, she transformed the classroom into a spa to give these girls a haven with comforting décor and inviting ambiance to hold some of these important conversations.

Powell said, “There was a need for this, and I did this for the love I have for the children. It is innovative, creative and relative.”

You would never know that the room was a classroom, once you pass the threshold of the entrance. To try to describe the space with words or capture the vibe with a photograph is virtually impossible—it is a total experience.

The group of about 21 seventh grade girls gathered on Feb. 2 for the first time, and again on Feb. 14. Powell said that she hopes they can eventually meet as a group as often as once a week.

“The group is made up of a variety of young women, some who have had discipline referrals; some who have not had referrals; some with self-esteem issues; and some who just need a little uplifting,” said Powell.

Spa sessions take place during the ENCORE time for seventh graders. The group usually sits in a circle to discuss things that are important to them, and the spa features a “Conflict Corner” and a “Gaming Station.” In the conflict corner, girls can express anger and other emotions, “talking it out,” which Powell said helps them to realize that some issues are not as “big” as once thought. And there are other ways to express frustrations, besides yelling and fighting.

“They end up respecting others’ opinions and come back to the circle, agreeing to disagree,” said Powell.

At the Gaming Station, Powell said that girls may work on puzzles or other games to learn how to work together. “They learn that you get more accomplished when you work as a team,” she said.

And each time the group meets, participants can expect a sweet treat as an incentive to keep them motivated. On Feb. 14<sup>th</sup>, it was assorted cake pops.

There is also a nail polish station in the spa and little bottles of bubble bath for the taking.

In the room, the lights are dim; there are soothing melodies in the background; and the girls who participate are able to come with an understanding that what is discussed in the spa is confidential. Topics so far have included: managing money, sexuality, having respect for yourself and for others and resolving conflicts. Powell meets with some girls spontaneously, one or two at a time if there is something pressing to resolve. For the group sessions, sometimes there is a lesson plan; other times the girls have their own topics that need to be addressed.

Participants are recommended by Assistant Principal Tawanda Smallwood and the guidance department. Parents also received letters about their daughter’s participation.

Soon, Powell hopes to facilitate parent forums at the spa.

And she said she is discovering that some issues that might have resulted in disciplinary action with the students, are being avoided altogether—a direct reflection on the “spa treatments!”