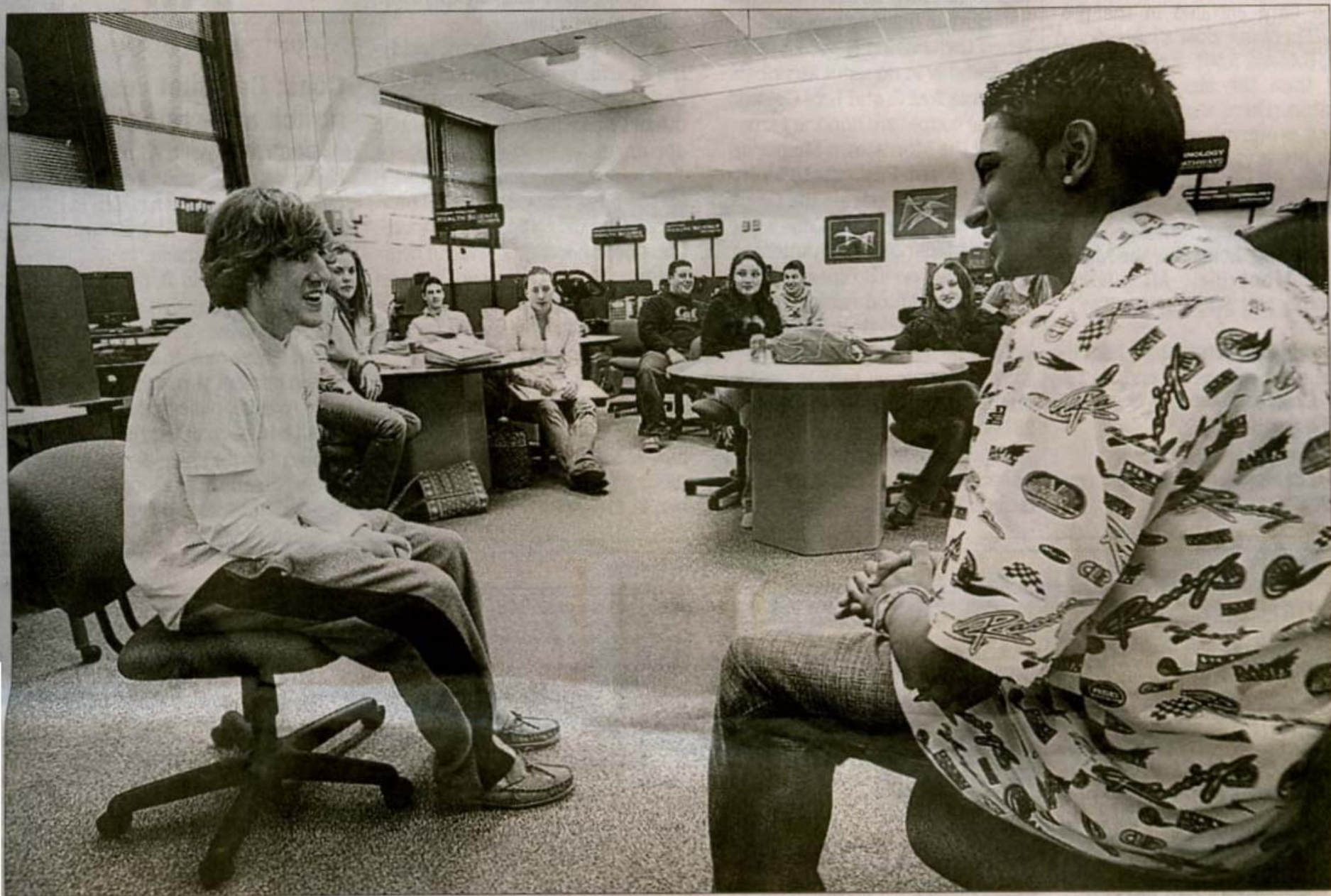


WITH THESE PEERS, NO PRESSURE



PHOTOS BY JERRY McCREA/THE STAR-LEDGER

In a role-playing session, Dean Liakas, left, and Dave Pokhan practice interviewing techniques at Morristown High School. The training sessions are prepping the mentors at the school's Science Academy for how to deal with incoming freshmen.

Teen mentors train to help 9th-graders

BY MAURA McDERMOTT
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

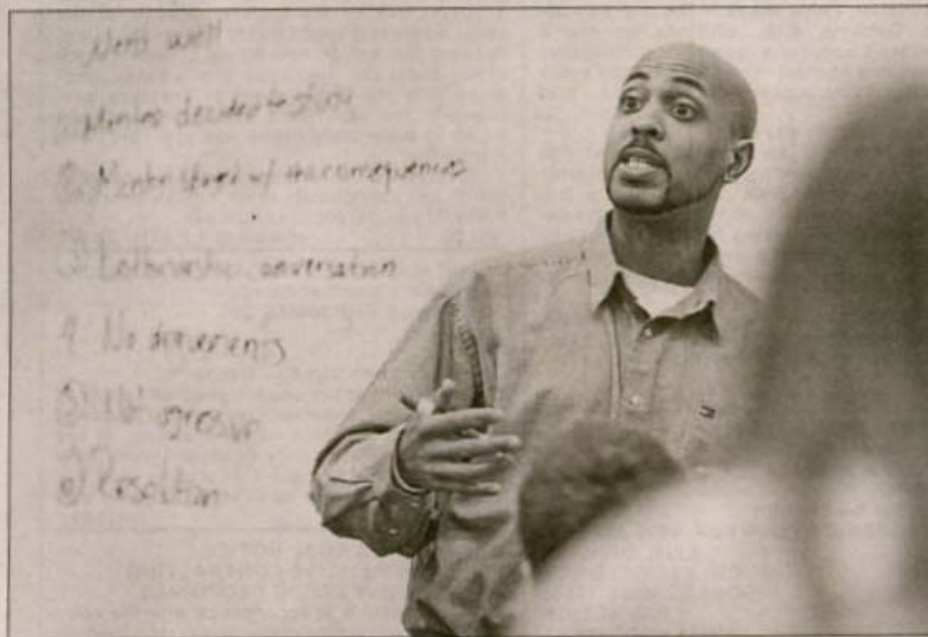
The life of an incoming high school freshman is rarely easy, and it's no different at Morristown High School.

Ninth-graders contend with all the usual adolescent jitters along with navigating the structure's labyrinth of stairs and hallways, nervous about asking directions from the older, taller youths.

Even the school's best attributes, like its long list of clubs — one that combines surfing and environmental advocacy, another for Japanese anime, not to mention arts, languages and public service — can seem overwhelming to newcomers.

"It's so confusing," said Heather Lewis, 16, a petite junior who recalls feeling swamped as a ninth-grader. "If I had a senior who would help me go around and figure out where my classes were, that really would have helped."

So, in an effort to ease the transition, Lewis and 16 classmates are getting ready to serve as peer mentors to more than 30 incoming freshmen. The participants — all members of the school's selective



Patrick Fennell, who led the training, said the key is for mentors to draw out the younger students' ideas on solving problems, and to respect those ideas.

Science Academy — are due to meet for the first time at the high school on May 23.

"It's always nice to have someone you can ask for help for homework and anything you need to talk about," Lewis said. "Somebody who's not a parent or a teacher, who might have gone

through it too long ago to understand."

The mentors-to-be gave up 20 lunch periods for United Way training sessions, where they learned about everything from respecting other people's values to knowing when to alert teachers or authorities that a student may be

troubled.

"It's not about giving them answers or giving them directions, but more about helping the mentee to think it through for themselves," said JoAnn Tsonton, manager of training and volunteer development at United Way of Morris County.

The key is for mentors to draw out the younger students' ideas on solving problems, and to respect those ideas, Patrick Fennell, who led the training, told students during lunch.

But it's one thing to talk about being a good mentor, and another thing to do it.

So Fennell watched as the upperclassmen practiced their skills in role-play sessions.

Junior Julia Walter played a shy freshman who was crumbling under her peers' relentless teasing.

Her role-play mentor, Eric Smith, 16, sympathized, then asked if she might do something "crazy," like hurting herself or someone else.

Fennell praised Smith for catching on to signs of trouble and knowing he should alert an adult.

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But he cautioned students to choose their words carefully.

"How open do you think she's going to be to talking or sharing?" Fennell asked. "You have to be

careful about the way we say what we say."

Younger students are not the only ones who will benefit, said Jill Magidson, who heads the 103-student Science Academy.

For the past two years, the Academy has matched students with mentors at Pfizer from sopho-

more through senior year. The scientists help with everything from research projects and presentation skills to college applications.

Trouble is, sometimes the teens feel nervous about approaching the scientists, Magidson said.

"I hope that by training to serve as mentors to incoming freshmen,

they will be much better prepared to be better mentees to their Pfizer mentors," she said. "They will have a better appreciation of what it means to be a mentor. It will give them a sense of responsibility."

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