The month of March is designated Women’s Month. In this edition of the Prevention Newsletter, we would like to pay tribute to one of Nyack’s High School sheroes, Ms. Georgia Williams. Recently deceased, Ms. Williams was one of the biggest protective factors Nyack High School had. Her life didn’t only impact the students in the district, it impacted the staff as well.

Upon hearing of her passing, many staff and students expressed their grief by sharing stories and fond memories about Ms. Williams, including her infamous selfies that she would take of herself if she found a student had his/her cellphone out doing her class. Without realizing it and just being herself, Ms. Williams, like many other teachers, was the poster person for substance prevention protective factors.

According to the Social Development Strategy (SDS) framework, which consists of 30 years of research (from 1996 and still used today) summarized by Dr. J. David Hawkins and Dr. Richard F. Catalano of the University of Washington, “Protective factors are research based predictors of positive youth development and healthy behaviors that buffer children and youth’s exposure to risk factors. They are illustrated in three broad categories: healthy beliefs and clear standards, bonding and individual characteristics working together to promote positive youth development. Adults must communicate these standards of healthy behaviors to youth.”

Unknowingly, students that had Ms. Williams witnessed such strategies executed with a little flair. For example, healthy beliefs. Healthy beliefs includes demonstrating caring, equality and social justice, integrity, honesty, and responsibility. Ms. Williams exhibited those characteristics daily. Every student in her class or those who interacted with her were clear about her healthy beliefs and clear standards. Doing your best was always the expectation in her class, no matter your level. Several students, told me stories about how Ms. Williams illustrated how much she cared. The story that sticks out the most is her farewell message when students left her class. Students said Ms. Williams would stand at the door or wherever she ended up at the end of the class period and tell them “Remember, your English teacher loves you!”

Experts in prevention state that a school setting is one of the domains that are consistent and can help guide willing students to develop healthy behaviors. It is where students can interact with adult role models and focus on increasing academic and social competence. Ms. Williams connected, increasing students’ academic and social competence in an awesome way. Every student remembers Ms. Williams swiftly navigating the halls with her bag on wheels. That bag held her tools for engaging students, interacting with adults (a sample of something) or items she needed for the next class. I was recently reminded by a student alumna of Ms. Williams’ efforts to get her to read more. Ms. Williams had a way of gathering groups of students together and holding their interest about a book or subject she was teaching in such a way that the conversations would carry over into their social settings.

The bond Ms. Williams made with her students allowed her an avenue to deliver several messages about planning and decision making and anti-drug use, which during our conversations would include a messages about equity and social justice. Ms. Williams exhibited protective factors without notice. She was a friend to many of the staff and her legacy will continue. If anyone ever needs a reminder, just imagine Ms. Williams in her favorite color, purple. Purple represents the way she lived: royalty, power, creativity, wisdom, dignity, grandeur, devotion, peace, pride, mystery, independence, and magic. Georgia Williams, a shero, gone but not forgotten.