



2005 INDIANA YOUTH INVESTMENT AWARDS



It's one thing no one wants to talk about. So when it happens, the tragic shock is long lasting. Teen suicide.

During a 14-month stretch in the early 1990s, Jasper suffered five teen suicides. Tri Cap, the community action agency for DuBois, Warrick and Pike Counties, responded by organizing a task force to examine why this was happening. Community leaders spent a year listening to students, parents and teachers, and those discussions led to solutions.

Tri Cap launched a suicide prevention helpline that now receives about 100 calls per year. The helpline is staffed every day from 4pm until midnight by volunteers who are trained on listening skills and how to refer callers to local social services.

Tri Cap then surveyed high school students, asking them who they talk with about their problems. "The survey revealed that many students are more likely to go to their friends before they go to adults, including their parents," said program manager Jane Chappell.

In response to this finding, Tri Cap launched Natural Helpers. High school students are recruited to identify and help other students who are overly anxious or stressed. Similar to the helpline, the volunteer Natural Helpers are trained on how to listen and how to offer assistance. The most serious cases are referred to Tri Cap for professional help.

The services are promoted via posters displayed throughout Jasper as well as on wallet-sized cards handed out at local high schools. Funding is provided by a mix of state and federal grants along with private donations.

The programs have made an impact. DuBois County recently enjoyed a four-year stretch with zero youth suicides.

Chappell offered the following advice for communities interested in starting similar programs and enjoying similar success. "You need a community group that is willing to devote significant time to this issue. I'm sold on the helpline and on Natural Helpers, but it takes a long time and significant commitment to properly recruit and train volunteers and then to effectively promote the services."

There is at least one school in Indiana that actually encourages students to be class clowns.

The Scott County Unity School in Scottsburg teaches at-risk students who are failing or who have been suspended from middle school or high school. The alternative school, like most others, encourages improvement in grades, attendance and personal character. The school's unique teaching method, however, is as surprising as a whipped cream pie to the face.

Community volunteer John Lowry teaches students the theatrical art of clowning. A national curriculum is utilized to help each student develop a clown character complete with props and stunts. The students then clown around together, developing skits that are performed for service clubs, at senior citizens homes and for local church groups.

Chris Marshall, who left a career in engineering to become the principal of Unity School, said the clown curriculum is building something stronger than the structures he used to design. Instead, the school is building healthy kids.

"For kids who struggle to focus in the class room, they come to their clowning classes and get right to work," Marshall explained. "It's their time to really express themselves."

Marshall tells the story of Paula, a quiet, despondent 8th grader who never smiled and who was failing school. After being transferred to the Unity School, Paula saw the world in a new way behind clown makeup and a big red nose.

"We did an event for Kiwanis at the Methodist church," Marshall remembered. "Paula put that costume on and the light bulb just went on for the first time in her life, and she hasn't been the same since. Now, Paula is outgoing, friendly, interactive, always smiling and laughing. And she's doing so well academically that she'll be going back to the regular high school next year."

In fact, of 30 students who attended Unity School last year, 25 of them returned to school the following year. Four earned a high school diploma or their GED. Only one dropped out in a county where 33% of high school freshmen do not graduate four years later.

"These kids think no one cares about them, and that's because no one ever has cared about them," Marshall explained. "The biggest thing we do is show them we care."

That, and how to squirt water from a flower on their lapel.

According to a common formula used by social scientists, there are three things you can do to virtually guarantee that you will never live in poverty. First, graduate from high school. Second, obtain a full-time job. And third, delay parenthood until marriage.

At Richmond High School, the DIPLOMAS program helps students who have missed one factor in that equation still meet the other two.

DIPLOMAS is a partnership between the high school, a day care center and other community organizations to provide child care to newborns of teen moms. The program started when a community task force identified teen pregnancy as a major issue and recommended finding ways to help teen parents avoid dropping out from school.

Students served by DIPLOMAS are required to maintain good attendance, improve their grades, have zero discipline referrals and not have a second pregnancy. In return, the teen moms receive free child care, life skills courses on parenting and child development and assistance connecting to college or full-time employment following high school graduation.

The results are encouraging. All but four of the 108 moms who have been assisted by DIPLOMAS have improved their attendance and their grades. Only five have had a second pregnancy. And only 8 percent require welfare or other public assistance after graduating from high school. Importantly, none have been referred for child abuse or neglect.

Board president Sue Routson admits that providing free child care to teen moms can be controversial, raising concerns that such service actually might encourage teen pregnancy. But Routson points to the statistics on DIPLOMAS alums and adds, "All you need to do is spend a day with one of these teen moms and see how difficult her life is, getting herself and her baby ready for school. Or see the challenges they have in caring for a sick child, or realize the fact that they no longer have a high school social life because they need to care for their child and maintain good grades in school."

"The other students do see this, and having a baby suddenly loses any and all glamour."

Yet Routson also points to the positives. "One of the first babies ever cared for by DIPLOMAS is now in 4th grade, and that student recently won the spelling bee."

At the age of 16, Mary Joan Dickson and a group of friends tore down two old houses in Cedar Lake, and they used the property to build basketball courts and a park with donated materials. Three decades later, the basketball courts and the park are still there, and so is Mary Joan.

"Cedar Lake is a town where most kids live and then leave," said Dickson, who graduated from Hanover Central High School, left for college, but then returned to Cedar Lake to work with kids in her hometown. Dickson started in the local parks department, worked at the Boys and Girls Club and then served in the high school as a coach and as a substitute teacher.

While she now is back directing the parks department, Dickson remains active at the high school, leading a Key Club of 176 students who design and run numerous community service projects.

"The students determine all of the projects, and they are responsible for managing all of the details," Dickson explained. "I tell the kids that it's their club. It's their job to get things organized. It is not my job."

Those projects have included a ceremony honoring local police and fire fighters following 9-11, holiday baskets for low-income families and a "Support the Troops" rally that earned a national award from Kiwanis.

Dickson is most proud of the "Mondays with Me" program. High school students volunteer each Monday at a local day care center, reading to toddlers and organizing a party and a book fair at the end of the school year.

The students also raise their own funding for their community service projects. From the traditional pancake breakfast, to an annual charity basketball game featuring former players from the NFL's Chicago Bears Super Bowl championship team, funding has been raised to clean up the local lakefront, host activities in a local senior citizens home, and provide smoke detectors to community residents.

"We lost four students in drunk driving accidents 11 years ago," Dickson said, explaining why she started the Key Club. Outside of sports and drama, there really wasn't anything for kids to do."

Which is why Dickson is glad she returned to her hometown. "I love this town, and I love these kids."

The Indiana Youth Institute is proud to recognize 10 organizations and individuals with Indiana Youth Investment Awards. Winners each receive a \$5,000 prize to be used for professional development and to enhance youth programs. They are also publicly acknowledged at an Indiana Pacers game and will receive free admission to the Indiana Youth Institute's annual Kids Count in Indiana Conference.

The Indiana Youth Investment Awards are intended to highlight extraordinary - but often unrecognized - efforts on behalf of children and youth. IYI is proud to play a role in honoring these individuals and organizations for their exemplary youth work, and hopes this recognition will encourage and inspire others to make a difference in a child's life.

Indianapolis Art Center ArtReach Program | Indianapolis



The world of art can take kids to a whole new world.

That's the philosophy behind "Art Reach," a community arts program run by the Indianapolis Art Center. The center recruits and sends artists to inner-city community centers, youth programs and public housing projects, delivering arts activities to low-income children and youth.

"Art Reach" has been implemented at 75 sites over the last 16 years, serving an average of more than 1,000 kids each year. Each site enjoys about 45 sessions throughout the year, with each session lasting three hours. Some of those sessions invite parents to work on an art project with their children.

The program then concludes each year with an art festival held at the Indianapolis Art Center. Each child selects one work of art created during the school year. All of the art work is then professionally matted and displayed, honoring each child's creative efforts.

"Art Reach" is continually evaluated. Children who participate in the program issue report cards on program activities and instructors, while the instructors fill out journals with their observations and recommendations for improvement.

While the arts provide a positive activity and the art festival delivers a life impacting experience, vice president and director of programs David Thomas said something much more fundamental is occurring. "This is not about teaching kids to become professional artists," Thomas said. "This is about expanding their vision of the world and their place in it.

"We want to expose them to new opportunities that they otherwise would not be aware of, instead of the usual world they see every day with poverty, drugs and violence."

Thomas added, "Art gives kids another voice to communicate with, and art provides a unique educational opportunity to learn to work both independently and with a group. This develops life skills that can help a child throughout the rest of life."

This philosophy is summarized by a poster at the arts center quoting Pablo Picasso: "Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once he grows up."

School on Wheels Indianapolis



From birth to age 18, a student spends just 10 percent of life in the classroom and the other 90 percent at home and in community. But what happens with that "90 percent" when the child is homeless?

That question haunted Sally Bindley, who responded by creating "School on Wheels." The program recruits volunteers who provide after-school tutoring at eight homeless shelters each day in Indianapolis.

"I spoke with several of the shelter directors, and they said they did not have time, money or people to provide after-school programs for kids in their shelters," Bindley said. "School on Wheels meets that immediate need while also providing hope for improving a homeless child's long-term prospects."

The program relies on more than 130 volunteer tutors who learn of the opportunity from college community service fairs, the United Way volunteer center, and in church bulletins. Bindley also has recruited teams of volunteers from businesses.

According to Bindley, relying on volunteers instead of paid staff is time consuming but essential. "The kids know that their tutors are volunteers, and that has a big impact," she said. "A child feels special because they know the tutor doesn't have to be there."

Each one-hour session features help with that day's homework. If the child does not have homework, the volunteer tutor offers work sheets as well as additional assistance with math and spelling. During the last 15 minutes of the session, students can play board games that reinforce learning skills.

School on Wheels also helps parents, providing a resource guide of after-school programs and tutoring services that parents can turn to when they no longer are homeless. Volunteers also provide life skills training to parents, helping them learn how to communicate with teachers and other school officials - communication that can be intimidating for someone who is homeless.

"A lot of these kids are so smart, but they don't have anyone to tell them that or to tell them that they are special," Bindley explained. "Our main goal is to change that."

Phoenix Youth Center Fort Wayne



"The end of all education should surely be service to others."

So said civil rights leader Cesar Chavez, and his message was heard loud and clear by a former drug addict who now is helping struggling students.

As a teenager in Michigan, Maria Heredia lived for the next opportunity to get drunk or get high. Then one weekend, her uncle hosted a conference for the National Commission on Violence and invited her to attend. That's where Maria met the keynote speaker, Cesar Chavez, who challenged her, "So, what are you doing to help others and help your community?"

Heredia recalled, "I went home and thought, 'I get drunk, and I get hungover.' He really challenged me to get up, get on my feet and do something positive."

Maria decided to return to school and earn a GED. When her uncle moved to Ft. Wayne, Heredia followed, joining him in his work with Latino gang members. "You need to listen to why they're in a gang," she explained. "They want protection, they have nothing else to do, they lack understanding of people who are different from them."

The experience inspired Heredia to form a community organization serving Latino children and youth - an effort that evolved into the Phoenix Youth Center, which now provides services and positive activities for students at Ft. Wayne's South Side High School.

The youth center offers tutoring for Spanish-speaking students who are learning to speak English. Food and school backpacks are handed out on a regular basis. An after-school art program and access to a community soccer league delivers positive alternatives from destructive behaviors. Through it all, Heredia is there to listen.

"When I was a kid, I drank and took drugs," Heredia said. "I never had anyone to talk to. I want these kids to have someone to talk to about their problems instead of taking those problems to the street. I help them understand that turning to drinking or drugs is just an excuse to deal with their problems, and there are better ways to deal with those problems."

And when asked about people who think it's too late to make a difference in the lives of troubled teens, Heredia sounds like the civil rights leader who turned her life around. "It's only hopeless if you allow it to be hopeless," she exclaimed. "There always will be problems, but things can improve if you invest your time and really commit yourself."

The Shed | LaGrange



Being "taken out to the wood shed" used to imply negative consequences, but that no longer is the case in LaGrange where a former wood shed is now being used to build something of greater significance: healthy kids.

The Shed truly is a former wood shop that previously was used to teach wood working skills to disabled residents of LaGrange County. When the wood shop closed down, a group of high school students approached youth minister Chris Denney with the idea of converting the small "out building" into a youth center.

The Shed now serves about 70 students on Friday nights with activities ranging from karaoke to battles of the bands to games of "Who's Line is it Anyway?" While a board of directors comprised of local adults serves as the legal trustee of the nonprofit organization, an advisory board comprised entirely of high school students plans all of the activities.

"In a rural area, there just aren't places for kids to hang out and have fun," said part-time director LouAnn Sherck. "There are just so many parties, and Fort Wayne is an hour-and-a-half away. The kids need something positive to do. We want to show them that you can have fun without drugs or alcohol."

A good example was The Shed's recent Super Bowl event. Instead of simply sitting around a television to watch the game, the youth board decided to drive a pick-up truck into The Shed and have a tailgate party.

"Instead of just saying, 'Someone should do this' 'the youth on our board continue to say, 'We will do this!' Denney explained. "The youth have full ownership of everything that happens here."

In addition to providing positive activities, The Shed also helps teens cross boundaries. Students from three rival high schools learn how to get along with each other, and The Shed also provides opportunities for students to meet and befriend Latino immigrants who have recently moved into the county.

"You need to create an environment for kids to use their gifts on behalf of their community," Denney said. "The Shed provides young people with an opportunity to work together to help themselves and to help other people."

Three for Me | Granger



While trying to increase parental involvement in their local school, Dee Keywood and Kris Thompson were glad they had plenty of napkins.

While flying home to Granger from the national PTA conference in North Carolina, Keywood and Thompson brainstormed about how they could encourage more parents to get active in Mary Frank Elementary School. They scribbled their ideas onto airline napkins and finally landed on "3 for Me."

The initiative is as effective as it is simple. At the start of the school year, parents are asked to volunteer just three hours of their time at school. Each parent who signs a card pledging those three hours promptly receives a survey asking about their volunteer interests.

Members of the PTA then enter those responses in a database. Volunteers are sorted by activity and availability, and each parent then receives a phone call or an e-mail informing them about specific volunteer opportunities.

Some of those opportunities were recommended by parents on their pledge cards. For example, a group of dads asked if they could start a pinewood derby race as well as a chess tournament. Several families with two working parents requested ways that they could volunteer from home during evening hours.

As a result: Volunteer hours in the school doubled in the first year of "3 for Me," and the average parent volunteers for 15 hours. Once a volunteer commitment is fulfilled, the parent's name is placed on the wall in a "Walk of Fame" along a heavily used school walkway.

The school also has experienced another important result. Following the program's second year, the 3rd grade ISTEP scores at Mary Frank Elementary increased by 14 percent in language arts and by 19 percent in math.

"We contact each parent directly," explained Keywood, who leads a team of PTA volunteers administering "3 for Me" on a budget of nothing more than donated printing supplies. "That personal touch makes a big difference in encouraging parents to follow through on their pledge."

Just then, a dad enters the room and asks, "Where are the supplies for Art Smart?"

After handing the supplies to her volunteer, Keywood explains, "Two years ago, we wouldn't have seen a parent, let alone a dad, volunteering for Art Smart during the school day. You should see how the kids' faces light up when he walks into the room."

Open Arms Christian Ministries Switz City



The steady and substantial growth of Open Arms Christian Ministries in Switz City is a case study in nonprofit management to help children and youth.

When executive director Vernon Reed arrived in 1992, Open Arms Christian Ministries provided residential care for seven children who either were on probation or were victims of abuse or neglect. Reed's first task involved establishing financial and outcome measurements to strengthen the ministry's services.

Next, Reed built an administration building and paid off the construction debt in just three years. The new building provided more space for residential care, allowing the ministry to serve more children while earning more income.

But Reed was not satisfied. "We saw kids making progress in the group home, but they would go back to their old ways when they went back to their families," Reed explained. "We always wondered what could happen if we helped these kids earlier. Maybe they wouldn't be in their current situation."

So Open Arms Christian Ministries added two new services - life skills and parenting skills for adults whose children were in the residential home, and foster care training and home studies for adults who wanted to adopt eligible children from the group home.

Reed then raised funds to build a duplex to house the ministry's growing staff, and a larger residential building to house more children in need. The previous residential building is now an alternative school with fees paid for by five school districts in and around Greene County.

Under Reed's leadership, the ministry has grown carefully and strategically with a mix of government dollars, foundation grants and private donations. "I have turned down several ideas for programs and services, some of which included a lot of funding," Reed said. "Just because something is offered, you don't have to say yes. Resources are limited, and you need to be a good steward of those resources."

Just as important as good management is a strong mission. "Don't let a dollar stand in the way of helping a child," Reed insisted. "You just find a way to do it."