

Probate volunteers teach kids who need pals

By Carol Azilian
Staff writer

A Farmington Hills business executive takes time out from his busy work schedule to teach juvenile delinquents how to make stained glass windows.

A Southfield business owner spends two days a week treating boys who've been neglected by their parents to a baseball game or the movies.

The two men — David Vincent and Robert Malberger — aren't paid for their services. But they receive something money can't buy — gratitude and love from youths who are often shunned by family and friends.

"It gives me a lot of satisfaction when I can help a kid accomplish something," said Vincent, president of Audio Alert Inc. in Farmington Hills.

He sets aside a few hours from his 80-hour-a-week work schedule to teach stained glass classes at Children's Village, a juvenile detention facility in Waterford Township.

"Even if the boys make a small stained glass object, they feel good about it because they've made it with their own hands."

VINCENT AND Malberger are among the more than 400 Oakland County residents who volunteer for the Oakland County Juvenile Court Program.

Last week, probate judges, county commissioners and staff honored the volunteers for their service. The volunteer programs were started more than 10 years ago in an effort to find innovative ways of dealing with delinquent and neglected youths.

"It's impossible to overstate the importance of these volunteers," said Probate Judge John J. O'Brien. "With diminishing public resources, the work of volunteers is very important. It gives us leverage in serving families in need."

"Many of these children live in single-parent homes," O'Brien added. "Sometimes, the

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— Juvenile Court volunteer

parents can't cope with all the problems. The children need role models. That's why it's so important for a volunteer to keep in touch with the family."

Malberger, who takes that role very seriously, said he has little trouble winning the boys' affections.

"They're shy and hesitant at first. But after the first two meetings, we get to be pals," said Malberger. He owns a Southfield towing service and coaches a hockey team for 11 and 12-year-olds in Birmingham.

"THEY usually tell me their problems because I'm the first person who has shown them attention in some time."

"Sometimes they say their parents beat them and they feel like nobody cares at Children's Village. It's a well-run facility, but it's just not home. It's a lonely place."

To make their stay at Children's Village a little brighter, Malberger spends a couple days a week with the boys at the facility and occasionally takes them out to a ball game or the movies.

The newly established friendships are only temporary because most youths either return home or are placed with foster families.

"It's tough to say goodbye because I have a tendency to get involved," said Malberger. "I don't have any children, but I love kids."

"A volunteer has to know when to take a back seat. I usually build up the foster home as a big opportunity. Then they start getting excited about it because they want to leave Children's Village."

Vincent doesn't face those problems because his role is that of teacher, not best friend.

"I DON'T see my role as a counselor. I try to bring out a talent they didn't know they had."

"They're really amazed at the results. One boy, who was working on a stained glass window for seven weeks, told his mother 'you've got the best surprise coming.' He said his mother wouldn't believe he made it for her."

Vincent decided to volunteer after his company was hired to install an "emergency reporting system" at Children's Village. The system allows staffers to call for help when youths have medical problems or cause disturbances.

"It took us nearly a year to design, build and install it. During that year, I spent a fair amount of time at Children's Village overseeing the project."

"It struck me that the staff must have their hands full keeping those kids occupied. I thought the boys must get pretty bored at night."

"So I asked if they'd be interested in learning how to make stained glass items because that was my hobby."

The response has been overwhelming, Vincent said. "They tell me it's one of the most productive programs."

Vincent, who spends a lot of time traveling, said he hopes to keep up the volunteer efforts. "I really don't see it ending," he said.

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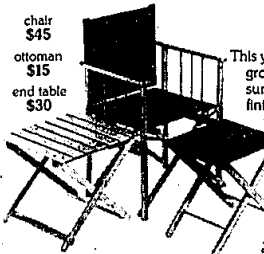


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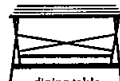


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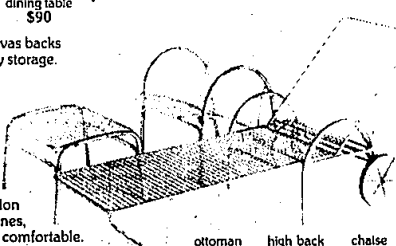
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