

On the ropes

North students take to obstacle course, learn about teamwork

This story marks the second of a two-part "Today's Lesson" series about peer mediation efforts in Farmington Public Schools.

By TIM SMITH
STAFF WRITER
tsmith@oc.homecomm.net

As student peer mediators at North Farmington High School, knowing how to go with the flow and communicate are essential job skills. It also doesn't hurt to know more about themselves before trying to figure out other students, as to why they are hung up in an argument or conflict.

A dozen North students recently ventured out to the Challenge Ropes Course, located at the Boys and Girls Republic, to parlay teamwork and communication into solving difficult physical problems. Those included banding together — armed only with themselves, a piece of rope and a two-by-four — to jump from Point A to Point B to Point C without falling off. Each platform "island" was stationed several feet apart, too far for them to merely make the jump.

Making those jumps constituted virtual leaps of faith, and trust, for the students as they plotted how to get everybody from the first platform to the third.

If one teammate fell off the platform onto the ground, dubbed "toxic waste" by North social worker Darci Layne, everybody had to start over again and determine where they went wrong and how to make it the next time.

The platform jump was just one of six hour-long challenges undertaken by the students, accompanied by Layne and North teacher Linda Lethemon, coordinator of the high school's conflict resolution program.

Learning the ropes

"I just think it's a wonderful opportunity for kids to use decision-making skills, problem-solving skills, communication skills," Layne said, watching the students negotiate the island-jumping exercise. "And kids learn something about themselves every time they come out here." Layne emphasized, however,



Careful: Alvin Mansour, Gjon Djokaj and Sushma Lahitsu attempt to set up the beam that the team will use to cross to the next platform.

that going to the ropes course wasn't just a field trip. But it's easier to learn when you're having fun."

According to Lethemon, who oversees about 50 peer mediators at North, the outing promotes "active" listening. That, and being able to adjust how they approach certain situations, is important because of the variety of sticky situations confronting them — including verbal abuse, physical fights and even "lover's quarrels."

"Part of the mediation process is to have an opportunity to listen to other people who have problems, help them come up with solutions," Lethemon said.

In the conflict resolution program, both parties must agree to



Beam me over: During their recent excursion to the Challenge Ropes Course at the Boys and Girls Republic, North students in the peer mediation program made the crossing from one platform to the next and then returned the wooden beam so the first group could cross to the next station.



Helping hand: North peer mediator Lauren Zakalich reaches for a hand offered by Brian Watha while Alvin Mansour (right) waits his turn to move to the next tire.

take their dispute to the peer mediators. If one or both do not, the case goes directly to North administrators.

Numbers suggest the program is catching on. So far during the 1998-99 school year, there have been nine successful "mediations," compared to 15 all of 1997-98.

Other adults working with the students during the recent excursion were Pat Sala and Chad Burgess, both of the Boys and Girls Republic.

Try again

"They challenge themselves more because we don't force them to do it," Burgess said. "We support them in their decisions."

Sala noted one important lesson that students learn on the ropes course, that not being able to complete a task should not be considered failure.

"We emphasize that failure is practicing, discovering a plan of action with very little interaction from the adult facilitator," said Sala, adding that many other

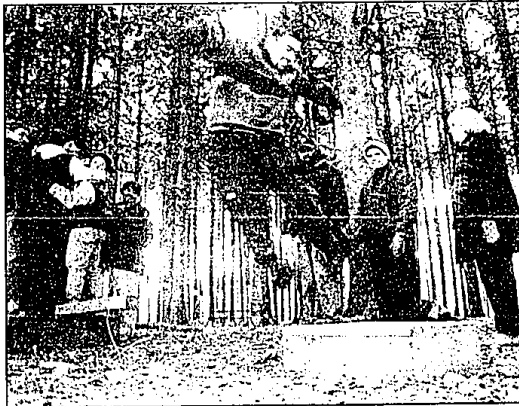
school districts and corporations book outings to the course.

"We allow them to discover how to do things."

"With this group, they have to go through a series of attempts" to have success against obstacles that arise, she continued. "And that's real life."

The Boys and Girls Republic is located on Shilohssee Road, west of Inhster Road. For more information, call (248) 476-9550.

No fear: Deep in the woods at the Boys and Girls Republic on a cold morning, North's Alvin Mansour daringly leaps to the next platform. He was one of 12 peer mediators to participate in the excursion, designed to build teamwork and communication skills.



HOLIDAY HAPPENINGS

HOLIDAY TOUR

See the Longacre House decorated for the holiday season inside and out 12:15-5 p.m. Sunday, Dec. 6. Enjoy light refreshments and listen to music for \$5 per person. Children 15 and under are admitted free with an adult. Call 477-8404.

HOLIDAY COLLAGE

The Farmington Community Band will begin its format concert season with its annual winter concert titled "Holiday Collage" at 8 p.m. Sunday, Dec. 6, at Harrison High School in Farmington Hills.

KING'S FEAST

The King's Feast, a true-to-life, medieval celebration will be presented by the William Tyndale College students, faculty and staff at 6:45 p.m. Friday and Saturday, Dec. 4-5, on the main campus in Farmington Hills. Enjoy an evening of feasting, pageantry, authentic costumes and music celebrating the true spirit of the Christmas season. Tickets are \$25. Call (800) 483-0707.

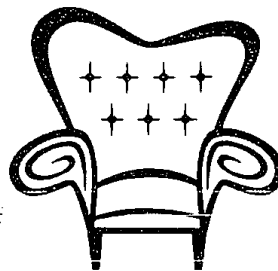
WORLD HOLIDAYS

Celebrate "Holidays Around the

World" 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday, Dec. 5, in the downtown Farmington Center. There will be a treasure hunt, hot cocoa, stroling musicians and the holiday fire truck.

TREE LIGHTING

The Farmington Area Jaycees will have their annual Christmas Tree Lighting ceremony at 7 p.m. Saturday, Dec. 5, at the Warner Mansion in downtown Farmington. This event is free of charge. The Jaycees will be collecting can goods for the Farmington Neighborhood House. Call 477-5227.



WE'RE SAVING A SEAT FOR YOU.

The Holidays are very exciting times.

And at the Somerset Collection, amid all the festivities, shoppers can also find a nice, quiet place to relax and be pampered. A haven of cushy sofas and chairs. An oasis where purchases are courtesies wrapped, where you can savor a hot beverage, and, well, catch your breath.

Welcome to the Holiday Suite in the South Rotunda of the Somerset Collection, sponsored by Michigan National.

Won't you sit and relax for a while?

SOMERSET COLLECTION

Michigan National

Coolidge and Big Beaver in Troy. Just west of I-75 • (248) 643-6360