

Culture opens up avenues to self-expression

This is the first in a two-part series of articles exploring how Oakland County Youth Assistance relies on cultural exposure as part of a program to help troubled young people.

By Virginia Lee Clark
special writer

From the beginning of time man has reached out to enhance his surroundings and express his feelings. The cave man painted pictures on his walls. The sound of the wind sighing through standing reeds and the beating of hands on hollow trees led to future flutes and drums. Early Egyptian and Greek dramas afforded emotional relief and satisfaction to their spectators.

No law decreed man do these things. He had to obey an inner drive. Members of the Oakland County Youth Assistance Program and its volunteers recognize this basic need for self-expression. They understand that cultural exposure gives troubled young people a broad base from which to start building an improved self-image.

"When these kids went from only wishing they could play the guitar to actually strumming a tune, their faces lit up. They also were looser with me and seemed happier. I know it did a lot for their self-esteem."

So observed Chris Fleming, a college sophomore from Royal Oak, who is one of 1,200 Oakland County adults who volunteer in the Youth Assistance Program. He teaches guitar at Children's Village, the county's juvenile detention facility which also houses residents. He learned first-hand that this improved sense of self-worth is critical in the prevention of juvenile delinquency and neglect, the whole thrust of the Youth Assistance Program.

YOUTH ASSISTANCE is the prevention arm of the Probate Court of Oakland County which is one of its three sponsors and also funds it. Local communities and school districts comprise the other two-thirds. Their offices are in the county courthouse building in Pontiac.

The county's 26 school districts provide local facilities offering family centered case-work and counseling services as well as community based prevention agendas.

Case aide volunteers, like Fleming, work one-on-one with youths involved in the juvenile court. The Plus Program is designed for children ages 9-15 with no court history but come from broken homes, do below average work in school or exhibit disruptive behavioral problems. They are matched with volunteering adults in their area who also work with them on an individual level. The Plus workers spend two to four hours weekly with their "matches" as they are called offering time, attention and encouragement.

Both professional counselors and volunteers have focused on widening the horizons of these young people. This includes bringing various forms of the arts into their lives and conducting field trips.

"You would be surprised to know how many teenagers who live only 15 miles from Detroit have never been in the city," said Virginia DeBorja, director of Oakland County Cultural Affairs whose department helps with these events.

"For several years we have organized these trips at the county level," said Dr. Scott Westbrook. He is the director of Vocational Education in the Pontiac school system and serves as vice-chairman of the Youth Assistance Coordinating Council.

We would visit the Center for Creative Studies, for instance, where the kids could actually attend a class in session. They talked to both instructors and students. It was an eye-opener to them that people actually made a living in art-related jobs. The boys were fascinated by the auto design labs."

TRIPS WERE MADE to the Detroit Institute of Art where they were introduced not only to paintings and sculpture but to the numerous



"I have discovered she has an artistic soul and I hope to expose her to more cultural events as time passes," says Mary Ellen Terao (right) of her new 'sister' - Lisa Marie Donaldson.

Volunteers rely on arts activities

By Virginia Lee Clark
special writer

Mary Ellen Terao of Birmingham always wanted a sister.

She answered an ad in the Birmingham-Bloomfield Executive for Plus Volunteers in 1989 and met with local workers who explained the program to her. She liked what she heard and went through the two-month training program in Pontiac required of all Plus volunteers. She promised a one-year commitment to the program a requirement, and to continue as long as it was mutually desired.

Her match is a 16-year-old girl a little older than the usual participants. We plan our activities more often spontaneously. I have discovered she has an artistic soul and I hope to expose her to more cultural events as time passes. When I'm with her, I really do feel I have a younger sister.

Terao, a personnel executive, found laughter has brought them closer together even though it took her match a while to reveal her feelings and problems. She decided to art as a sounding board and just listen. She learned the teen-ager needed to have her self-esteem validated, particularly concerning her looks and abilities.

NANCY LANDRUM, an attorney from Birmingham, became aware of the Plus program after reading about it in the Daily Legal News. She

had been involved in a similar program when she lived in Chicago. Her match was 16 years old when they met two years ago and it was the girl's mother who wanted her in the program.

"She is a single parent and her son had been on the big brothers which he liked. There are four older siblings and she was afraid my match wasn't getting enough attention."

Activities include cookie baking, kite flying, eating out, going to a music lesson of a friend with a physical handicap and reading together to strengthen the young lady's reading skills.

I have been invited to accompany her and her mother to school functions where I am introduced as a

family friend. Her mother even suggested that we all hold hands.

TERI PAGE found that the mother of her match felt very threatened by her presence and she has taken patience to get past the hurdle.

We have held hands and cried together and it is working out.

Page is another newcomer to the program as Oak Park Youth Assistance has just adopted the Plus concept. A school counselor recommended that her match might benefit from such a relationship.

Page has plans for various activities which include the arts that they can share together. She will be slowly in deference to the mother.

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