

REHAB PROGRAM A FAMILY AFFAIR - VOLUNTEER DRUG COUNSEL GROUP PUTS KINFOLK AT CENTER STAGE

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During a recent Crime Watch Community Night at Lake Worth High School, a middle-aged man from Delray Beach boldly told strangers about his family's darkest days.

His daughter tried to commit suicide even before he knew she had a drug problem, he said.

"We knew there was a problem," said the father, whose name is being withheld to protect his daughter's identity. "But we didn't know it was drugs until there was a crisis."

A nonprofit, therapeutic drug rehabilitation program that runs a counseling center in Lake Worth helped his family get through that crisis.

Today, his daughter is off drugs, he said, and his family is "growing together" - the name of the program.

To help the program that helped them, the man, his wife and daughter recently agreed to become a host family.

His family will get a stipend from Growing Together to pay for food and other expenses it incurs while helping care for a child in crisis. But since the stipend is only \$5 a day, his family essentially will be volunteering their efforts.

Growing Together runs mostly on volunteerism - people offering time, money, or both.

A group of local parents and professionals founded Growing Together in 1987. Today, the program runs a counseling center in Lake Worth, where children spend their days; and a network of host families, who take the children in at night.

During the Crime Watch Community Night, the middle-aged man sat at a table and answered questions about the program. He knew what most parents were thinking: "There's nothing wrong with our kids."

But there's a word for that kind of reaction. It's called "denial," he said - the refusal to admit there's a problem.

The first thing that Growing Together does is help a family in crisis recognize and deal with the specific problem it's facing, said Mickey Blanchard, program director.

During a crisis, children spend their days at the center, their nights with a host family. Their parents pay for the care.

"This is not a place where parents can leave their children to be fixed. We have to have 100 percent commitment from the parents [because] the whole family is involved on a daily basis," Blanchard said. "That's the critical difference" between Growing Together and other local therapeutic programs, she said. Another difference is the use of host families, Blanchard said. That keeps the cost of care down.

During the daytime, children talk regularly to peer-group counselors at rap sessions. They also meet and talk with their parents at least twice a week.

The meetings are always confidential and often emotional, Blanchard said.

"The anger comes out," she said. "That's part of recovery."

And that's why the center's rap room is equipped with heavy, wooden benches fashioned from church pews, Blanchard said. So a child who "acts out" can't lift and throw them.

Other rooms are similarly furnished and equipped with makeshift materials. But that soon may change.

Growing Together just received a \$10,000 grant from the Barker Welfare Foundation, administrators said.

The center will use the money to buy medical equipment and create an in-house infirmary.

Meanwhile, the center still needs money to build an outdoor recreation and activity area.

"It'd be great to fence in the lot and have a basketball court," Blanchard said.

- **Memo:** Informational box at end of text.

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