

NEW LIFE FOR TROUBLED TEENS

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The view the other morning from the Governors Club atop Phillips Point in West Palm Beach was a postcard panorama, as it usually is. But the new day dawning outside wasn't any more beautiful than the perspective of new lives dawning inside.

This was a breakfast sponsored by Growing Together, a drug and alcohol rehabilitation program for young people that has struggled from obscurity two years ago to become a viable community resource today. The idea was to give some height to what has been a relatively low community profile.

Growing Together is patterned after a program called LIFE-- Life Is For Everyone-- in Sarasota that uses peer pressure productively: It trains former clients to work with present substance abusers.

The Lake Worth program, aimed at youngsters 12 to 22, is licensed as a residential facility. However, teenagers attend the program during the day but spend the night at homes volunteered by families of young people further along in the program.

A particularly good aspect of this program is the emphasis on family involvement. As young people are guided to change their thinking and behavior, parents and siblings need to understand the changes and grow along.

In fact, that's why the founding parents wanted such a program in Palm Beach County. They were driving across the state twice a week to attend the required family meetings at LIFE.

Today, Growing Together provides one more local option in substance-abuse treatment. It's long-term-- 12 to 18 months-- and costs \$5,000, excluding food. Some insurance policies pay much or part of that. A few scholarships are available.

"Someday," says director Barbara Griffith, "we hope never to turn away anyone for lack of money."

The program uses cognitive therapy-- defined by Ms. Griffith as "taking action based on our thoughts; we are what we think"-- and the very successful principles of Alcoholics Anonymous. It seeks not only to free young people from chemicals but to bring families together again.

For parents who think their youngsters need treatment, initial discussions are free of charge. If the program seems appropriate, staff members will help families intervene to convince teenagers they need help.

Warren Blanchard is president of the board of directors. He got involved two years ago after the grades of two of his three sons took a sudden plunge and he learned they were skipping school. It was a counselor at Palm Beach Gardens High School who told him about LIFE.

Today, his boys are "great," he says. "Their whole outlook and attitude has changed."

Growing Together has served about 100 teenagers and family members to date. Anyone is welcome to attend their open Friday night meetings, as long as they call 72 hours in advance. The number is 585-0892. These large group meetings can be an education as well as a moving experience.

Many parents of teenagers think changes in dress and attitude are just adolescent phases and don't pay close attention. Growing Together's literature offers signs parents can watch for that may indicate drug use. It also describes, in kids' own words, what some do as cries for help.

In many cases, Barbara Griffith says, the family unit isn't functioning well, which is why they believe in treating the whole family. For instance, Mr. Blanchard's family was going through a divorce, an experience they now understand was harder on them than they realized.

During the recent breakfast at the Governors Club, two young people described their individual journeys to hell and back without mincing words. Hearing from such kids what they and their parents have been through always makes for misty eyes.

What's important is that they did come through. They have new lives and second chances. They're proof it can happen.

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Fran Hathaway is an editorial writer for The Palm Beach Post.

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