

A TIME OF DECISION FOR A UNIQUE ANTI-DRUG PROGRAM

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Over the coming weeks, Lexington will be making an important decision.

Unlike some decisions, this one will not be made by the mayor, or the planning commission, or any corporate board of directors. Instead, it will be made in the minds of many Lexingtonians, particularly parents who fear that their children are susceptible to drug abuse.

The decision is whether to support Possibilities Unlimited, a drug treatment program that is unique in this area and has been hurt, perhaps fatally, by the recent court trial of its director, George Ross.

Ross was charged with holding three young people in the program against their will. The jury acquitted him after an eight-day trial, which left him not guilty in the eyes of the law but badly damaged by taint of scandal.

Was Ross really in the wrong? Did he get off on a technicality?

Mrs. Candace Dwyer, foreman of the jury, told me: "It was unfair what was done to him in those eight days. We not only felt he was not guilty, we felt he was innocent."

Possibilities Unlimited's legal travail is not over, either. Three participants in the program still face charges of unlawful imprisonment, a misdemeanor, and are expected to be tried next month.

The program, situated in an office building off Wilhite Drive, is a no-nonsense outfit. Here is how Susan White, a Herald-Leader staff writer, described part of a Possibilities Unlimited meeting at which parents sit face-to-face with about 75 children:

"The full weight of the adults' burden seems to settle - almost visibly - on their shoulders, as their children rise to talk to them from across the room.

"Emotions, and sometimes tears, rise quickly to the surface as children tell how they lied and stole from their parents to pay for their habits; how they spent weekends drinking and driving; how they broke into homes, were drawn into unsavory sexual relationships, and even carried weapons in their quest for drugs. Parents, in turn, share their hopes and their disappointments in their kids.

"The entire meeting is rigidly structured, to force parents and children to go public with their most intimate feelings. Each time a parent and a child talk, they must close by saying, 'I love you,' no matter how heated their words may have been. The kids sing songs like 'I Am a Promise.' The parents respond with 'You're Someone Special.' "

Ross and his board of directors have designed the program to be financially self-sufficient, but that depends on the willingness of parents in substantial numbers to enroll their children - and pay a fee - for treatment.

Since the criminal charges became a public issue, enrollment has fallen off badly and the program has found itself in a financial bind.

A group of supporters in business, the clergy and the professions, led by James S. Mahan III, chairman of Citizens Union bank, has been raising money to tide Possibilities Unlimited over until it can pay its own way again. Others who have pitched in include businessmen Catesby Clay and Lee Eaton.

As a group, the supporters tend to be somewhat conservative - people who would think a long time before associating themselves with a disreputable program. Many of them have inspected Possibilities Unlimited first-hand.

For my part, I have listened to the testimony of young people and parents involved in the program, and I have no doubt that it has done much good for people who need help in the worst way. I believe, too, that the Possibilities Unlimited board and other supporters have taken steps to make sure that it is responsibly run.

Will Possibilities Unlimited survive? For the short term, yes. But, without the support of the community, it probably won't be here a year or two from now.

If the program sounds worthwhile to you, check it out. Possibilities Unlimited invites your scrutiny.

One person who checked it out closely is Mrs. Dwyer, the jury foreman, who heard a week of testimony for and against Ross. After the not-guilty verdict, she wrote him a letter about the trial.

"Thank you for caring enough to risk such an experience," she wrote, adding: "May the Lord continue to bless and heal you, your staff and the families so cut and torn by such devastation."

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