

Y.O.U.'S YOUTH AND FAMILY SERVICES MUCH MORE THAN AN AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAM



Youth and Family Counselor Rafael Rivera counsels a young man in his office.

necessary furniture. "You can't get much done if you don't have the basic needs of food, clothing, and shelter met," Price said.

Students who are affected by financial issues at home aren't always going to talk about it, but the staff notices if they are wearing the same clothing every day or if hygiene is becoming an issue – cues that indicate some kind of help is needed.

If you ask an Evanston resident on the street what they know about Y.O.U., chances are they'll respond that Y.O.U. works with youth, or that the organization offers an afterschool program at various Evanston public schools. And while both statements are true, working with youth in the afterschool programs is just the beginning of what Y.O.U. has to offer.

"The piece that gets missed I think is how much behind-the-scenes stuff we do with kids and families," says Y.O.U. program director Jason Price, explaining that the staff of the afterschool programs from grades 3-12 are attuned to deeper issues that might be at play in a student's life just by interacting with them on a frequent basis.

Finding Financial Assistance

Quite often, if a student who has not previously struggled academically is having trouble completing homework, there may be something going on at home. "If the family's electricity has been turned off it is very difficult to do homework," Price says. "The staff finds ways to help the family access resources in the community."

If financial assistance is needed, the staff helps the family get access to food banks, clothing donations and

"As (the students) grow to trust us, they tend to confide in us what is going on," Price said. "We can get them linked to the resources they need."

Staff members recognize that some of the Y.O.U. participants' families are not able to afford Thanksgiving meals. This fall, the staff pooled agency resources and also received contributions from several Y.O.U. board members for 23 Thanksgiving meals.

"That's not something we do every year, but there was a need that we saw, and we responded to it," Y.O.U. assistant program director Leah Seligman said. "That's sort of the heart of the agency – that's who we are, that's the people we hire."

Helping With Crisis Situations

A Y.O.U. contract with the state enables Evanston police to contact Y.O.U. when a youth is locked out of his or her home in a domestic crisis. Rather than treating such a scenario like a criminal matter, police can alert Y.O.U. staff members 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

"We get the housing situation stabilized first," Price says. "Then we'll do some intensive therapy over the next couple of weeks to reduce whatever conflict is there."

If a family situation can't be stabilized right away, Y.O.U. works with area shelters to make sure the family and child are safe while the conflict is being resolved. Crisis calls like this come in about three to four times a month.

Providing Formal Counseling

Some of the crises lead to formal counseling provided by Y.O.U. Youth and family counselor Rafael Rivera is one of the licensed social workers who follows up with families after crisis situations. He also meets with Y.O.U. participants on a regular basis for counseling if they have been referred to him from the afterschool programs.

Rivera has worked with an Evanston Township High School student twice a week for the past year and a half and has seen remarkable progress in the student during that time. When the student first started attending counseling, he was a new high school freshman.

"He had a lot of problems, mainly socializing," Rivera said.

While Rivera saw that the student had low self-esteem and difficulty relating to peers, through regular counseling, he was able to recognize and point out the boy's strengths.

"He was athletic and very talkative to adults," Rivera said. "He was willing to talk about what his concerns were with what was going on in his life."

Rivera encouraged the student to pursue athletics, and after joining the wrestling team at ETHS, there was a marked increase in the boy's confidence.

"He started interacting with other teenagers on the team," Rivera said. "(Wrestling) helped him to communicate well with other peers."

The student decided to try a new sport after wrestling season and began training with a hapkido instructor. Now a sophomore, he has achieved a yellow belt and is training white belts in order

to get to his own green belt level. He has formed numerous friendships, as well.

"We still have our ups and downs, but I think his confidence has gotten better in the past year," Rivera said. "He's very connected in school and knows where to go when he needs emotional help."

Promoting Family Involvement

Oakton site coordinator Normalee Gallimore spends a great deal of time visiting families in their homes to get a clearer picture of what is going on in a student's life.

"I worked with Metropolitan Family Services before coming to Y.O.U. and was very involved in home visits," Gallimore said. "I realize the importance of the buy-in from parents with whatever program you're doing. If parents are involved... then it is most likely the child will succeed."

One home visit revealed a family's need for basic cooking essentials to prepare Thanksgiving dinner. The mother didn't even have a bed to sleep in, something Gallimore said she would not have suspected based on the seemingly happy disposition of the woman's daughter. Since the home visit, Y.O.U. has gathered food, clothing, and beds to help this particular family take care of their basic needs.

Emotional support for parents is also a priority. Gallimore has initiated a parenting support group at the Oakton site, a forum where parents can talk about how to support other parents who are struggling, share stories in a non-threatening environment, and help each other cope with the difficulties of raising a family.

Parents are also taking their own initiatives to reach out to Y.O.U. for emotional support.

The single mother of a student in the summer program contacted the staff person in charge of the program almost every single day, Seligman said. "It was more than just about... concerns about her daughter," Seligman said. "She needed support from us as well." The staff member took the time to respond to each e-mail, answering all of the mother's questions and assuaging her concerns.

"That's what the mom needed," Seligman said. "Someone to respond to her and listen to her. She sent us an e-mail saying how her daughter felt safe with us and how grateful she was for that."

DONORS MEET RESERVE FUND CHALLENGE

Through the help of generous donors, Y.O.U. doubled its cash reserve fund over the past 18 months. Executive director Don Baker approached long-time supporters Mark Hall, Hugh Williams, and Jackie Quern Berry of the Franklin Square Foundation to donate \$60,000 between the three of them, challenging about 25 additional donors to join together and match the amount. The challenge was a success, and \$120,000 was raised, increasing the cash reserve to \$240,000.

Baker said that donors typically like to give to projects that are "tangible or exciting," but the importance of the cash reserve is immense: It allows Y.O.U. to use and replenish its own money on day-to-day needs such as paying employees and purchasing supplies while waiting for checks from government funders, rather than borrowing from an outside institution that charges interest.

"It took having some donors who could say, 'I care about Y.O.U.'s long-term, continuing health as an organization for kids, and I see why this is important,'" Baker said. "We are very grateful to the three challengers and those who responded."

This reserve fund originated in 1981 with \$20,000 that was raised on the agency's 20th anniversary. In 1991, the fund was named the "John T. Rudy Jr. Financial Security Fund" when friends and family of former board member John Rudy added \$20,000 to the fund in Rudy's memory. In 2006, the fund reached \$120,000, and our generous friends have doubled that amount in the last 18 months.

Save the date!

Y.O.U.'S Annual Dinner Benefit
Families Build Community
Saturday, February 23, 2008
at
The UBS Tower Conference Center
One North Wacker Drive Chicago, Illinois

RSVP Required. Please contact Hannah Dallmann,
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TEENS TAKE ON THE WILDERNESS

When the opportunity to canoe the Boundary Waters in Minnesota presented itself to Evanston Township High School sophomore Brianna Jones this past summer, she wasn't sure she was up for the challenge at first.

"When I went (on a Big City Mountaineers sponsored trip) in 2005, we did a hiking trip in Michigan," Jones explained. "I had said during the trip, I wouldn't go again, because I wasn't used to all of that walking every day... but after it was over, I appreciated it a little bit more."

Jones ultimately decided to go on the Big City Mountaineers Trip once again in 2007, this time as a peer leader. "My least favorite part was the portaging – that's when you have to carry the canoes on your shoulders," she said.

But through all of the portaging, hiking, and canoeing that Jones and four other Y.O.U. participants and four adult volunteers did over the course of eight days, valuable life lessons emerged.

"I learned that if you push yourself hard enough, you can do whatever," Jones said. "After you look back at it, you think to yourself, 'wow, I can't believe I was in the wilderness for a week just rowing... I learned how to push myself and never give up.'"

For the past three summers, Y.O.U. has partnered with Big City Mountaineers, a non-profit organization whose mission is to provide underprivileged urban youth with challenging yet safe wilderness experiences in the company of adult volunteer guides/mentors.

While many outdoor programs provide recreational experience to youth, BCM offers a little bit more, BCM Chicago region program manager Bernie Rupe



Cox would tell them, "I am learning this stuff just as you are. Let's learn together. What's our end goal? To get through this in a safe way and learn these skills together."

After two days of traveling to the Boundary Waters, stopping to visit a lighthouse, hike through Gooseberry Falls State Park, and see Lake Superior, the girls reached the heart of the trip, canoeing and portaging through the Boundary Waters.

At the end of the experience, the volunteers gave awards to the girls. ETHS senior Patrice Downey received an award for her "portaging skills," something she improved upon during the trip, Cox said.

"At first, when I started portaging, it was hard," Downey explained. "But it got fun. It was frustrating at the beginning, but then I learned how to do it."

Roughing it in the wilderness gave Downey a real appreciation for her life back home. "Appreciate your shower and your bed and your house, period," she said. "Appreciate that your mom cooks you food at night!"

Cox said the girls demonstrated self-determination, cooperation and resiliency throughout the course of their journey.

"I kept saying to the girls over and over again, you may not realize what this is all about until years later," Cox said. "You might not realize what a significant thing you accomplished."

When the girls complained about the difficulty of carrying or rowing canoes,

Y.O.U. WELCOMES GINA SINENI

Gina Sineni, the newest member of the Y.O.U. staff, has been busy in the role of site coordinator for Nichols Middle School since September 24, 2007. A licensed social worker and 2007 graduate of a master's program in social work from Dominican University, Sineni said she was thrilled to be hired by Y.O.U.

"The staff is very diverse not only in age, but also ethnicity and religion," she said. "That was important and appealing to me."

Before joining the Y.O.U. team, Sineni completed internships at Albany Park Community Center working in youth services and workforce development and at La Casa Norte, a community agency in Humboldt Park, where she provided case management services. Sineni, who speaks fluent Spanish, also spent the second semester of her graduate



Nichols Site Coordinator Gina Sineni with a group of Y.O.U. participants.

program serving both youth and older adults in Mexico, while working in community development.

Sineni said she is excited to be working with the students at Nichols, and she looks forward to developing relationships in the community. Sineni stresses the importance of encouraging and fostering extracurricular activities such as art, fitness or dance. "Outside activities help to keep you invested in school," she said. "It helps a lot."

One of Sineni's projects is "Youth Smart," a 10 week partnership with the YMCA where students learn how to commit to an exercise program to see results. Another partnership is with the Open Studio Project, where students are guided in expressing themselves artistically in a supportive, nonjudgmental environment.