

## **Creating a Legacy: Changing young lives**

Adolescence is a developmental stage wrought with conflict, indecision and endless self-doubt. This stage is further intensified by the choices that teenagers feel must be made, in order for them to feel a sense of belonging to some sub-group. Our adolescents are exposed to so many negative role models and distorted values on a daily basis. This is a stage of life when they are forging their identities and deciding how they wish to be known by other people. They are attempting to fit in to a society that values power and excitement at all costs. Modern movies reward characters for indecent behavior, hostile acts on fellow human beings and wicked vengeful plans against people they dislike. Just for the thrill of it. Coupled with these significant influences are stressors that face teens who are at-risk. Teenagers at-risk in the broadest sense can be defined as individuals plagued by poverty, lack of opportunity, little parental involvement, or poor academic progress. At the other end of the spectrum, one may find severe behavioral problems, substance abuse, and involvement with the legal system.

While adolescents are navigating this world fraught with danger and experimentation it is critically important for parents to become involved. Most adolescents will deny the need for parental involvement and will lash out at parents in an assertive way in an effort to protect their privacy. This is, however, the very situation that calls out for increased parental involvement. Parents can serve as translators, helping children to understand the long-term consequences of the choices they make. By providing examples of children that the family has noticed have taken a wrong path, parents allow children to think critically and to come up with well thought out decisions on their own. Parents can make it their priority to become aware of the friends with whom their children choose to associate. If their children spend time with a negative crowd, then it is likely that their children are involved in maladaptive or negative behavior.

Having worked with at-risk youth and delinquent youth for over a decade, I have learned that when children fall through the cracks it becomes a difficult journey to guide them to a place where they can feel hope and benefit from opportunity. Parents are not alone in this endeavor; we can all have an impact on young lives. We as parents, teachers and members of the community cannot afford to allow children who need guidance to become invisible. A nurturing conversation, a priceless relationship, or a rewarding opportunity could turn our lost adolescents into our future leaders.

The Eckerd Family Foundation and the School of Psychology at Florida Tech have attempted to make a contribution to the community and to adolescents by supporting G.I.R.L.S., Inc. They have provided a much-needed prevention program, an opportunity that may result in profound changes in the lives of troubled, at-risk youth. They have endeavored to become involved before teenagers make the kind of mistakes that will haunt them for the rest of their lives. Rarely have organizations made the bold step to fund primary prevention projects of this magnitude.

One cannot underestimate the profound impact that an alliance of community and academic institutions can have on the lives of individuals. Finally, as we at Florida Tech School of Psychology continue to serve underserved populations, we remain current with our mission and strive to meet the needs of the community.

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