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Beyond Punishment: Restorative Community Service

BY ABBEY J. PORTER

It's Saturday morning, and the residents of Neshaminy Manor nursing home in Warrington, Pennsylvania, USA, know what that means. They walk, wheel and shuffle their way into the home's activity area to take up their regular stations at tables scattered throughout the room.

It's time for cardingo.

The cards/bingo hybrid is a favorite among the residents, and today's game promises to be especially exciting. As on the first Saturday of every month, the residents are joined by special helpers: teen-agers performing community service through the Community Service Foundation (www.csfbuxmont.org) in Doylestown, Pennsylvania, a sister organization of the IIRP. The boys and girls belly up to the tables next to the residents, where they help to shuffle, deal and read cards. Outside, another group of youngsters is busy weeding a garden.

Most of the teens are on probation—their offenses range from infractions such as underage drinking to crimes as serious as felony assault—and have been court-ordered to perform community service. All of them are part of CSF's in-home supervision and foster care programs, which include individual and family counseling, recovery support, drug testing and restorative skill-building. As with all its programs, CSF brings a restorative focus to community service; teens not only complete service hours but are also helped to make positive changes.

At first blush, troubled teens might not seem an ideal match for elderly nursing home residents, but the youths step up to the responsibility and are warmly

received. "It's nice to have somebody young around you," says avid cardingo competitor Ginni Pileggi. "They make you feel not so old, you know? They're nice kids. They're all so polite...and they really have a lot of respect for us."

Cardingo is followed by bowling. The teens set up plastic pins, retrieve the rubber bowling ball, help residents navigate to the head of the "alley" and—most important—cheer vociferously. Marci Whiteside, the facility's director of recreation, says they are "a great help" with the activities. "Almost every resident here has hearing limitations and visual limitations," she says, "and when you've got 60 people that can't see or hear playing a game, you really need help."

Whiteside also points out the results of the teens' landscaping prowess: a beautifully manicured garden area outside the facility's Alzheimer's/dementia wing, where residents can enjoy the scenery and fresh air. "They're certainly worker bees," she says of the teens. But more important than the mulching and weeding is the "TLC" the youngsters provide to residents, sometimes just by taking time to talk. "It makes them feel like a person again," Whiteside says. The experience also teaches the kids about aging and, she believes, helps them to feel "worthwhile."

Engaging troubled kids in activities they can be proud of is a primary aim of the program, through which some 300 youths have completed more than 7,000 hours of service at various organizations in the past year. Rather than merely punishing young offenders, the program strives to hold them accountable while also empowering them and



CSF youths visit Neshaminy Manor.

building their skills. "A lot of the other programs are punitive, in that it's just about the accountability," says Craig Adamson, director of CSF's supervision programs. "The difference is that we're holding kids accountable but supporting them at the same time."

That combination of support and accountability is called restorative practices—the cornerstone of every CSF program. In addition to serving community service hours, the CSF teens meet in restorative "circles" to discuss everything from their relationships with friends and family to maintaining sobriety and dealing with school. The kids are asked to take responsibility for themselves and for each other and encouraged to become invested in their own lives and choices. One teen notes that the circles give kids an opportunity to talk about problems they might not want to share with adults. "You can really get things out and then get feedback on how you can help the problem, or how you can help yourself," he says. The program also includes "life-skills" training designed to engage and educate the kids, help them cope with problems and teach them skills such as

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applying for jobs. Counselors also may give assignments; for example, a teen caught drinking might be asked to do a group presentation on the effects of alcohol consumption.

Adamson believes it's important for the kids to not only "give back" to the community but also to get something out of the experience. In addition to Neshaminy Manor, CSF teens work at organizations ranging from nature centers and community parks to camps and equestrian ranches for people with disabilities. They plant trees, help build houses for Habitat for Humanity and sort toys for Toys for Tots. Adamson admits that people often are skeptical when first contacted about working with "at-risk youth"; however, they warm up quickly once the group starts working. And the activities provide the kids with "a sense of accomplishment at the end of the day," he says. "They feel like they've accomplished something meaningful, rather than picking up cigarette butts by the side of the road."

The program has evolved since it began 12 years ago. It used to take a more punitive approach, and tasks like cleaning up garbage were the norm. "We learned over the years that all that was really doing was making the kids more and more angry, more and more resentful of the system," says CSF community service coordinator Jerry Bradley. The restorative approach implemented in recent years has brought vastly different results. "We've actually had kids finish our program and volunteer to come back, just to do community service," Bradley says. "They actually get a sense that they really accomplished something, that they've done something that really helped somebody."

Bright and early on Saturday mornings, counselors start off by gathering the teens in a circle to "break the ice" for those new to the program and prepare the kids for the day's activities. They also go over a list of rules: smoking, cursing

and complaining are prohibited, while respect for self and others is encouraged. "We have a very high level of expectation of behavior when we go out anywhere," Adamson notes. Counselors encourage the kids to hold each other accountable. After working for several hours at the service site, the teens reconvene in a circle to process how the day has gone, "grade" themselves and each other and

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address any problems. By this time, kids who started the day scared, grumpy or withdrawn are laughing, talking and interacting with the group.

The program benefits not only the teens but also the community. "We're very thankful for this organization, because we really get a lot of things done," says Diane Sears, coordinator of volunteers for the Churchville Nature Center, where CSF teens have worked for the past eight years. "I think it's one of the best groups we've ever had. They're dependable, well-organized; the kids show great respect for the counselors...We've never had any problems."

The teens help with mass mailings of the center's newsletter, work in gardens and wetlands ("They're not afraid to get down and get dirty," Sears notes), and run children's games at the center's annual pumpkin festival, its biggest fundraiser. "Financially, it's a big, big help," Sears says. "If we had to pay people to come out to do the work they're doing, it would break the bank." But beyond dollars and cents, she is pleased to provide an opportunity for kids who "just need a little bit of direction."

There is little doubt that CSF's community service program helps kids to "do good." Andrew, a 17-year-old who has completed 50 hours of service, credits the program and CSF with giving him a new direction. "From the point where I got in trouble to now, it's been 100 percent improvement," says the teen, explaining that he has become "more responsible" and learned to get along better with his family. "CSF has really helped me...If I was going the way I was going before I got in trouble, I probably would have screwed up big-time." Now determined to avoid the "bad cycle" associated with behaviors such as smoking marijuana and drinking, Andrew is looking forward to entering college or the military and working with computers.

Even Sara, a community service veteran who admits she had "an attitude problem" when she entered the program nearly three years ago at 15, says she has "grown up" a lot and is now more "willing to do stuff." She also has felt good about activities such as preparing food at a homeless shelter. "Doing something for somebody else—I like that," she says. "It makes me feel better."

The teens say they benefit from their interaction with each other, as well as with the CSF staff. Seventeen-year-old Corey also has experienced an attitude change during his seven months in the program, thanks in part to the positive relationships he has formed with CSF counselors. "When I first came in here, I had an 'F-you' attitude," he says. "Now, I'm real good friends with all the staff."

Corey also takes some satisfaction in his service projects; his favorite was at the Churchville Nature Center, where he helped to construct a garden. "I can go there and be like, 'I made that!'" he says. And though he "hated" the program when he first entered it, Corey now figures he might as well make the best of it. Besides, he says, "It really makes you feel good at the end of the day." ☉