

# Volunteerism by Students at Risk

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## BACKGROUND

At a time when the dropout rate among students who attend public schools in New York City is estimated to be as high as 33%,<sup>1</sup> The Jewish Home and Hospital for Aged, Bronx Division, (JHHA) is working with neighborhood schools to address this problem. Junior high and high schools students who are at risk of dropping out of school because of a history of poor attendance and below grade level basic skills achievement, are being encouraged to complete school through their participation in intergenerational work/study programs. The objective is attendance improvement and dropout prevention.

In September, 1988, the New York City Department for the Aging approached the Volunteer Services Department to discuss bringing its Intergenerational Work/Study Program to The Jewish Home. This program had been launched in 1987 to address the problem of "students leaving high school before graduation who were consequently unable to compete successfully in the job market or to qualify for higher education."<sup>2</sup> The program gives teenagers the opportunity to establish meaningful relationships with older adults in senior centers and nursing homes. It provides role models, particularly older adult role models, which may help these students to succeed. Studies show that the loss of role models is:

... particularly problematical for at-risk youth. Recent research suggests that

meaningful relationships with caring, interested adults are a key factor in helping young people who grow up in disadvantaged and stressful circumstances to forge, against great odds, successful and self-sufficient lives. Such relationships are critical to developing emotional and social survival skills such as self-esteem, resistance to stress, the capacity to adapt, and the ability to plan for the future.<sup>3</sup>

Students growing up today do not have the role models that existed in the extended family of two or three generations ago in which grandparents, aunts or uncles were part of the household. Many of these at-risk students live in single parent families. The premise of The Department for the Aging program is that supervised part-time work at agencies serving older adults would give these youngsters the role models and relationships missing in their lives.

These at-risk students, when successful, are often the first in their families to graduate from high school. In attempting to do so they are forging uncharted paths. Not only is the road much more difficult without an experienced guide, the benefits to be gained often do not seem real to a teenager who has not had the chance to see them at close range. In addition, financial pressure at home can make dropping out to pursue employment seem more important than remaining in school. When what they see at home is the need to survive from day to day, the immediate

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need to be gained from dropping out to pursue employment becomes the only recognizable goal. Students at risk often have a feeling of isolation or alienation, whether it is at home, in school or in their communities.

Students who drop out of school often cite the lack of a single person who cared about them as one of their primary reasons for leaving. Their attachment to school was weak and they have no close social bonds with teachers and staff.<sup>4</sup>

With the same needs showing up in junior high school students, the local school district began a pilot intergenerational work/study program in the fall of 1988 for eighth- and ninth-grade students.

#### *Setting Up the Programs*

Since the fall of 1988, 113 students identified as at risk of dropping out of school have participated in the work study programs. The students range in age from 14 to 18 years old. They come to the Home from three neighborhood schools: a junior high school, an intermediate school and a high school. All are public schools.

All participating students are selected to become a part of the program by their teachers and guidance counselors. Students who have been absent 20 to 75 days out of the school year, whose academic achievement is below grade level, and those who are teen parents are all candidates for this special program. Schools select students whom they believe to be capable of improving their school performance with the added incentives the programs provide.

Several elements are built in as incentives to motivate these students to stay in school and to graduate. All students receive a stipend from the Board of Education. In addition, the high school students receive class credit. Students are permitted to serve at The Home only on days when they attend school. The key element in motivating these at-risk youngsters to stay

in school is the opportunity the program affords them to form relationships with the residents at The Jewish Home. The students offer the residents companionship and the residents, with their wealth of experience, reach out to these students and give them the acceptance, recognition and guidance they need to succeed in school. The staff who supervise these youngsters serve as role models. They give the students the one-to-one attention and support the students so often lack.

#### THE PROGRAM

The initial group of high school students began in the fall of 1988. As this was the first experience with the program it was decided to start with four students. In that way the Home's Department of Volunteer Services could determine the special needs of these students. The needs of the students were discussed with their teacher before the interview to determine if the student would benefit from placement in a large site such as the 816-bed Jewish Home and Hospital for Aged.

An initial site visit by the teacher helped the teacher and the Director of Volunteer Services to establish a good working relationship. At that time a structure was set up to insure that the Volunteer Services Department would be notified of absences from school or other problems that needed monitoring. It was vital to the success of the program that the teacher have the time necessary to interact with the program that the teacher have the time necessary to interact with the work site, so that any problems could be communicated and solved quickly. It was important that the students knew that problems picked up at the work site, such as poor attendance or problems with job performance, would be communicated to the teacher for the weekly meetings with students.

#### *The Program Method*

The students are interviewed by the staff in the Volunteer Department to assess language skills, interpersonal skills

and academic background in order to screen for appropriateness to the nursing home setting, as well as to determine an assignment. Students are assigned to work in particular departments and are supervised by the department in which they work.

Before beginning service, students participate as a group in an orientation process. The goals of orientation are to educate students about aging; about the mission, programs and services of the nursing home; to inform them of the policies and procedures of the Department of Volunteer Services; and to discuss the special role they will fill with residents. The orientation includes demonstrations by staff of proper wheelchair use, infection control procedures and feeding techniques. These sessions include hands-on practice by the students. They experience being confined to a wheelchair, play the role of a resident being fed, try to read with a yellow plastic over their eyes to simulate cataracts or try to hear with cotton in their ears or tie a shoe lace with their fingers taped together to simulate the effects of arthritis. These experiences open the eyes of the students to the aging experience.

An equally important byproduct of the orientation process is the chance the students have to come together as a group. One of the goals of the program is to overcome the feelings of isolation they have experienced. A student group that begins to bond during orientation is more likely to support its members and work together to overcome personal conflicts.

As students learn to set new standards for themselves, as they learn to follow instructions, to conduct themselves with courtesy and respect in order to aid in the mission of providing the highest quality of care to the residents, they begin to identify with The Home and the residents. This sense of loyalty to a common mission can help further group bonding.

The participation of first semester students in the orientation of new students

who join the group in the second semester is very helpful in maintaining the status and sense of ownership the students feel about the facility and their program. It also allows new students to feel accepted as they are shown the ropes by their fellow students.

The program has grown to include as many as 16 students a semester. The students serve at The Home four days a week, three hours a day, and are given school credit for their efforts. They engage in a variety of activities at The Home which includes feeding, friendly visiting, transporting residents to activities and appointments, and assisting in the Geriatric Day Center Program, Occupational Therapy, the Therapeutic Recreation Department, the Accounting Department, the Pharmacy, the resident Canteen, Medical Records Department and the Kittay House Senior Apartment Residence.

Students from two local junior high schools, who are at risk of dropping out of school, participate in an intergenerational work study program, *Attendance Improvement Means Success* (A.I.M.S.). Between 15 and 18 students from each school are selected by their counselors and teachers to work directly with residents. Each group, accompanied by a teacher/supervisor is on site two afternoons a week. The students participate in a resident visiting program in which pairs of students visit residents. The residents have been referred to the program by The Home's recreational therapists because they have no visitors. They are able, however, to interact with the students. In addition to visiting residents, this is the third year in which junior high students and their teacher are working with residents and the Therapeutic Recreation Department staff on an intergenerational musical theater production.

#### *Visiting Activities*

Students involved in the visiting program visit several residents each time they come. Visits last about twenty min-

utes, which is a comfortable time period for students to engage in conversation with residents. Students also read to residents, write letters for them, learn craft skills from residents, discuss current events and learn about the lives and history the residents have experienced. The students help fill the void in the lives of elderly residents, whose families may live far away and cannot visit as often as they might like, or who may not have friends or family.

These junior high students, together with the residents, put on an intergenerational musical theatre production each spring. Residents, many in wheelchairs or using walkers, learn their lines with the student with whom they share a role in the play. Students do "wheelchair dancing," holding the hands of residents in wheelchairs, while moving to the music. They turn pages in the script for their resident as they rehearse. Students learn what it means to help someone who cannot do everything for himself or herself. Students may visit these residents as part of the visiting program.

The intergenerational musical theatre production is unique in that the youngsters have been selected because they are at risk and not because of any talents in the performing arts.

The junior high school students participate in an orientation process much the same as the high school students. In addition they participate in role playing exercises to prepare for visiting residents. Students play themselves as well as staff and residents, both those interested in having visitors and those who are less enthusiastic. Students feel more comfortable about visiting when they have learned how to initiate conversations, handle problems and plan activities to do with residents. The orientation process takes place over a three week period. The gradual process helps this group of 14-year-olds prepare for their new roles. It also allows for students whose behavior is not appropriate to be screened out of the program.

## RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN STUDENTS & RESIDENTS

Many of the young people refer to the residents they have befriended at The Home as their "adopted grandparents." The residents talk with the students about school, their friends and their families—indeed many of the topics grandchildren and grandparents might discuss. The students perceive the residents as adults who are non-threatening, a perception which enables them to build relationships with the residents more readily.

In one such relationship, Lisa (age 15) gets advice from her adopted "grandma" Birdie, a participant in the Geriatric Day Center, one of the Home's community programs. "Birdie tells me that I should do well in school. She wants me to have a career." On Birdie's 83rd birthday, Lisa displayed certificates she had received at school for academic and attendance achievement. Birdie was delighted with this birthday gift. Her relationship with Lisa is something she says she never dreamed would start at this point in her life.

Another volunteer, Maria, takes Helen, who is wheelchair bound, to the boutique and helps her to select her purchases. Helen looks forward to their visits. Maria says: "I entered the program for the school credit, but I would do it again without the credit. I hope someone will help me when I am no longer capable of doing for myself."

The students' own comments in their daily journals tell of their feelings about being in the program. One student, involved in the intergenerational play, wrote, "When we are doing the play I get very happy, because I feel good about what I am doing for older people. Another reason why I am so happy is because I never got a chance to see my grandparents, so now I feel that the residents are my grandparents. I treat them just the way I would treat my own grandparents." Another student writes, "I like working here because we get to share our feelings and thoughts with the residents." One student summed up the mutual benefits this

way, "I enjoy working with older people. I can teach them and they can teach me."

Students need the outlet which the journals provide. One student explained that after visiting with a resident and "being sad to leave him," it helped to be able to write about it. The journals provide an opportunity for students whose written skills are weak to gain experience in writing without concern about being graded.

In summing up their feelings about the intergenerational programs at JHHA one student and resident describe their experiences this way: "The residents and the students have learned that inside we all have the same kind of feelings." Said the resident, "Ours is a mutually beneficial interaction. The students make me feel young again. I contribute to them and they contribute to me. These children are beautiful."

## RESULTS

Participating in the program gives these youngsters an opportunity to start something brand new. Where they associate school with a failure to achieve, at The Jewish Home they can give all they have to a new endeavor and find out that they can do the job well. Some of the students have had difficulty with authority figures. However, they relate well to the residents, whom they perceive as non-threatening adults. They can build relationships with the residents as well as with the staff because these are adults who accept the students as they are. Students benefit from the role models our staff provide. They have the opportunity to see that jobs are a way out of what they see on the streets. Many of our students are quite open about the fact that there is much drug related activity in their neighborhoods and that being in the program keeps them off the streets.

The students have seen their peers hired for summer and permanent staff positions. They see that there is a reason to finish school and that it can be done. Students have been known to work extra

hours, for which they are not stipended, because they feel, as one student put it, "that The Jewish Home is like family." One student's industriousness and willingness to stay to do extra tasks enabled him to be hired to work in the Dietary Department, on a part time basis, while still in high school. He plans to graduate and is interested in becoming a chef. To do so would be to break the cycle of poverty from which he comes.

Success feeds on itself. As students learn new skills, become more competent, and receive recognition for their achievements, they want to do more. Students whose home life is disorganized find the stability of The Home particularly helpful.

High school students who do well during the school year program and who return for the summer have the opportunity to assist in managing the summer program. These students serve as team leaders, helping to supervise the summer junior volunteers. For students who have been identified as "at-risk," a leadership position is a new experience that elevates them to a position of status. This role gives the students a new challenge while providing assistance to the Volunteer Department. Team leaders assist with the sign-in and -out procedures, check for adherence to dress code and alert staff to absences. Leaders monitor lunch time activity, both in the cafeteria and in areas designated for recreational use by junior volunteers.

Students in the two intergenerational programs have achieved impressive results, turning around a record of excessive absences and below grade level academic achievement. In a recent letter, the teacher/supervisor for a junior high shared with the The Home's Director of Volunteer Services what he termed the fine academic and attendance achievements of the students who took part in the work/study program.

The school attendance of these students was 93.5% as compared to an 84% attendance rate school wide. Seven of the 18

students made the Honor Roll and three of the students had perfect attendance for the year. These results would not have been possible without the intergenerational experience at The Jewish Home.

This kind of turn-around is particularly remarkable because the same student who attained perfect attendance initially qualified to be in the program because of excessive absences. One student who achieved perfect attendance had been absent 52 of 180 school days before entering the program.

In fact, at a time when other programs aimed at preventing students from dropping out of school are not succeeding, there are impressive results. At the end of the last school year, two-thirds of the "at-risk" high school students achieved an academic average of 81%. Their absence rate was cut in half and all seniors graduated.

#### SUMMARY

This program has made it possible for students to experience some important firsts: the first report card they are proud to share, the first award they receive at an honors assembly. Students have gained a

new awareness of the elderly: "I never used to look up to them," one student said. "Now I really understand that they are history. I will have more respect for the elderly, because I will want respect when I am older."

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>New York City Board of Education Office of Research, Evaluation and Assessment, April 1990.

<sup>2</sup>Between Friends: Creating Intergenerational Work/Study Programs for Youth at Risk and Older Adults New York City Department for the Aging/New York City Public Schools, December 1990, p. 5.

<sup>3</sup>Between Friends, p. 2.

<sup>4</sup>Between Friends, p. 1.

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#### REFERENCES

New York City Board of Education Office of Research, Evaluation and Assessment. (1990, April 2). Private communication.

New York City Department for the Aging/New York City Public Schools. (1990, December). *Between friends: creating intergenerational work/study program for youth at risk and older adults.*