

COURIER-JOURNAL

Southern Tier-Auburn Geneva

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'AVP' Offers Personal Approach to Violence

By Martin Toombs
 Southern Tier Editor

Owego — Public outcry concerning violence on television, in schools, and in the society in general, usually is simply hand-wringing; nothing is done about it.

But that is not always the case. Begun in New York State prisons in 1974, a Quaker-sponsored program, Alternatives to Violence (AVP), has been available on a community basis only recently. Rather than hand-wringing about a violent society, the program tries to help individuals reduce or eliminate the violence in their own lives.

One community where AVP is available is Tioga County, where the program was founded by two county probation officers.

AVP involves three consecutive 12-hour days during which participants learn about their own impulses and reactions, and how to control them. Participants are led through a variety of group activities and discussions, with the goal of eliminating violence as a reaction to tension or difficulties.

Patrick O'Connell recalled that he got involved in AVP on the suggestion of a fellow probation officer, Edward Witte, who is a Quaker and was interested in offering the program locally. Last fall, he said, he attended an AVP weekend in Delhi, and returned with a commitment

to offer the program in Owego.

That Delhi weekend was only the second offered outside a state prison, O'Connell's wife, Rose, noted, commenting that the community effort is still a new idea to those who have been involved in the prisons.

The O'Connells, and Witte and his wife Mary Ann, gave the program for the third time the first weekend in August.

Participants have been about half probationers, they noted; the others haven't had troubles with the law. One weekend, they said, an elder of a local church participated.

Sister Mary Kruckow, on the staff of the Tioga Rural Ministry Project, also participated in the May session, and then in a training session to lead the program.

O'Connell pointed out that while the program can be valuable to those who have had difficulty with the law, "I believe this program has something to offer anyone."

The participants who join the probationers are important the O'Connells said. The probationers, primarily teenagers, find out that people who they think "have it made," also have problems. Mrs. O'Connell noted that the teenagers also discover that they can interact with other community members.

The weekend program depends a great deal on how each segment goes, the leaders noted, commenting that they

come in on Saturday morning with a carefully prepared agenda, and as soon as the first session is over, begin changing it.

At first the exercises are designed to make participants feel good about themselves, O'Connell said, commenting that violence against oneself also is a target of the program. As the weekend progresses, people learn to trust one another, he noted, through a variety of problem-solving and role-playing situations.

Also, O'Connell said, "we have a lot of fun."

Like any other weekend program, he said, the effect is hard to explain, and depends on building experiences with the various exercises. Sister Mary compared it to a renewal weekend.

Monthly reunions provide followup.

Continuing the program on Mondays hasn't been a problem, they noted, as employers and the schools have been cooperative. While they considered cutting the program to avoid the Monday scheduling, O'Connell said that he doesn't think the program could be as effective if it was shorter.

O'Connell noted that while he and Witte recommend AVP to their probationers, their involvement is voluntary, which is important for the weekend to be effective. He and Witte are involved as volunteers, he noted, and not as part of their jobs.

The O'Connells and Sister Mary noted that they would like to see the program expand

to adjoining counties, and O'Connell said that it would be possible for his group, now grown to seven trainers, to present the program in other areas of the diocese if a local group would provide a location and meals for the three days.

Mrs. O'Connell said that they don't mention religion or God during the weekend, although sometimes participants do. They would like

to do a weekend for a religious group, they said, during which the Christian faith could be involved in the entire program.

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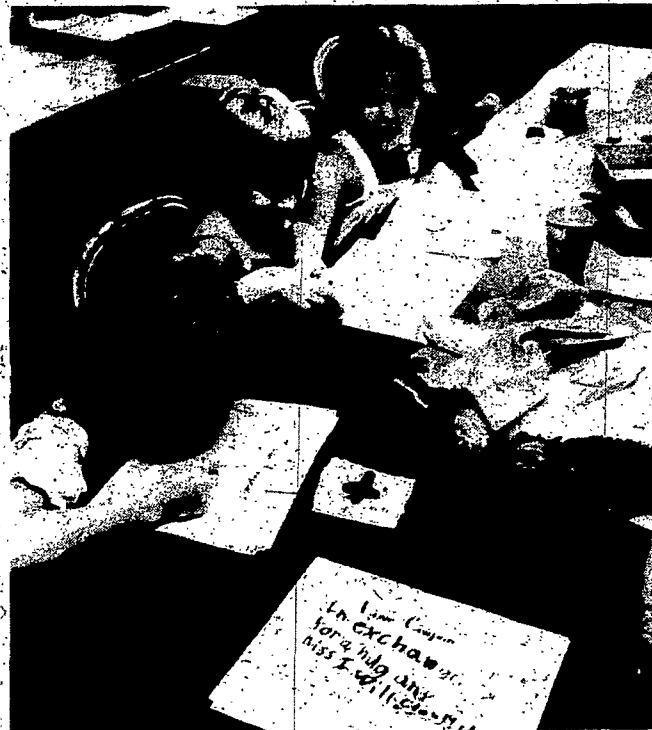
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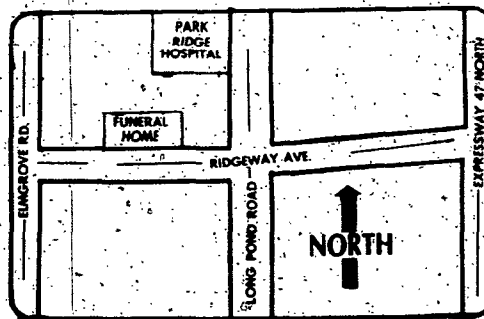
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Summer School

At left, students at the St. Margaret Mary, Apalachin, Vacation Summer School draw "Love Coupons" to present to their parents. The students were promising to do a task around the home in exchange for a hug and kiss. Above, the children at the school encircle Father Elmer Schmidt, pastor, as he offers Mass Aug. 1 ending the week-long program.

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