

Villa program designed to help teens find healthy lifestyle

Moving home is hard for former drug users

By Karen M. Frañz

Although they readily admit that their 15 beds can have only a negligible effect on the problem of teenage substance abuse, staffers at St. Joseph's Villa are enthusiastic about their new LIFE Program, which stands for Live in Freedom Early.

"Fifteen does nothing to correct the problem. To say it's a drop in the bucket is an understatement," says Marianne M. Virgilio, director of community relations for the Greece youth agency.

But 15 beds is a step in the right direction for Monroe County and New York state, which previously had no follow-up facility for teens readjusting to life without drugs and/or alcohol. Virgilio notes, in fact, that Gov. Mario M. Cuomo recently set a goal of establishing 200 beds for teens by the end of the year.

LIFE is the first program to be dually licensed and co-funded by the state Division of Substance Abuse — which deals primarily with young people who abuse drugs — and the Division of Alcoholism and Alcohol Abuse — which is principally concerned with adult alcoholics.

The LIFE program is housed in a 5,500-square-foot facility on the southeast corner of the villa's 40-acre campus. It was dedicated in late February and can accommodate as many as 15 teenagers.

Its purpose is to provide "after-care" for teens who have participated in treatment programs like that offered at Park Ridge Hospital. Through six- to nine-month stays in the LIFE house, the youths will firm up their decisions to stop using substances before returning to their homes and former schools.

"Prior to this program, teens from our county couldn't find (a residential program) here ... and were being referred to programs in Minnesota, Ohio and Pennsylvania," Virgilio says.

"These kids are not ready to go back to their old settings, old schools, where they were known as users," she explains. "The program will help complete that transition — help firm up the decision (to quit using). They will find recreation and friendships that are not based on junk."

The concept of a residential program in Monroe County originated with Roger Battaglia, the villa's assistant executive director, who believed aftercare for youths was a societal need that had not been addressed. From inspiration to execution, St. Joseph's personnel worked with the two state divisions for three and one-half years to develop the exact components of residential therapy.

"Because there's no program like this that involved two state divisions, there had to be a lot of give and take," Virgilio explains. "It's new for some of these people to consider residential programs for teens — they're used to working with adults, and (adults') needs are different."

LIFE provides for individual and group therapy; involvement in such self-help groups as Alcoholics Anonymous; and educational, vocational and recreational activities. Family members and "significant others" of the residents will also be encouraged to participate in the overall treatment process.

The 15 participants — nine boys and six girls — range in age from 13 to 17. To be accepted into the program, youths must be Monroe County residents entering voluntarily, have a history of abusing alcohol or other substances, be substance-free at the time of admission, be willing to participate in an ongoing treatment program, and be able to attend "community school" — the Greece public school system.

The teens are supervised and counseled by a staff nearly their equal in number — the director, Stephen C. Hanson; a social worker; a family therapist; a nurse; a teacher, who also serves as liaison with Greece school district; a recreational therapist; and residential counselors.

As Virgilio discusses LIFE, she keeps coming back to the residential nature of the



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The LIFE program residence on the St. Joseph's Villa campus has recently been completed. It can accommodate 15 residents.

program. "This is what sets it apart," she asserts. Program Director Stephen C. Hanson makes the same point. LIFE's advantage, as compared to outpatient therapy, is "the amount of support we can put in (within) 24 hours a day vs. outpatient program where support stops at the door."

"We don't close on weekends and at night," he says. "Outpatient facilities usually run from 9 to 5, and most people's problems run 5 to 9."

In the months to come, as the LIFE Program demonstrates the advantages of residential therapy, both Virgilio and Hanson foresee the development of similar facilities throughout the state. "The idea has been let's get the first one going and then the others will follow," Virgilio remarks.

"There's an expansion in the works right now," Hanson chimes in, noting that a program is being established in Long Island. Moreover, several agencies — including Park Ridge Hospital — have expressed an interest in developing houses like LIFE.

Even though LIFE's sphere of influence will be limited to 25 to 30 Monroe County teens each year, Hanson believes its eventual impact will encompass a larger population. "Now we no longer have to send kids away to Minnesota," he says. "This is a model program that gets kids back into the community in a healthy way, and they can act as role models for other kids."

"I think it's important that kids see that the (LIFE) kids are still working" at getting off drugs, he continues. "It's not a magical process; We don't cure, we treat."

Within their new classes in the Greece school district and in their own neighborhoods during home visits, the LIFE teenagers will be a lesson to their peers, Hanson believes. "The impact of those 25-30 kids a year — just the impact of those kids alone — would have a wide effect on the community," he reflects.

That effect will depend largely on how candid LIFE participants are with their new and old friends. Recognizing that such candor implies a "scary situation," Hanson remarks that "several of the kids are very emphatic about letting people know where they are (at the LIFE residence)." Rather than being ashamed of their circumstances, these youths are proud that they have had the willpower to give up drugs and alcohol.

Hanson quickly adds that LIFE participation is no worse a stigma than the labels teens attach to students who are currently using drugs. "Kids know who of their classmates ought to be in treatment," he notes.

According to Virgilio, social stigma is "something that the villa deals with on a regular basis" by working "to lessen the obviousness of the difference."

Partly, that is accomplished through the normal middle-class appearance of the LIFE residence. Except for the ceiling sprinklers

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