

Teens help peers beat addictions

By Barbara Ann Homick
Staff writer

AUBURN — When students in Cayuga County reach out for S.O.D.A., they are thirsting for strength and support.

Students Opposing Drug Abuse, or S.O.D.A. for short, isn't just a drug awareness group that offers hypothetical situations concerning addiction problems. On the contrary, group members don't need to imagine drug-related problems because many of the teens have lived — or are currently living — through nightmares that most kids only hear or read about.

For the more than 100 Cayuga County youths enrolled in the group, S.O.D.A. has become the main source of support and encouragement, according to group organizer Henry A. MacDonald.

"These are real kids with real issues and concerns and real life problems," explained MacDonald, outreach director for the Community Services Department of the Auburn YMCA-WEIU (Women's Educational Industrial Union). "(The group) is a safe, positive clique."

According to MacDonald, S.O.D.A. got its start five years ago after he was approached by a teenage girl seeking to find out about support groups for children of dysfunctional families in the Auburn area. When he didn't have any information to give her, MacDonald said he decided to get such a group started.

Troubling statistics show the tremendous problem that drugs and alcohol pose to today's youths, the outreach director said. He noted, for instance, that accidents related to drug use are the number one cause of deaths among teenagers. Drugs and alcohol are also responsible for more than 80 percent of teenage suicides, more than 80 percent of teenage pregnancies, and nearly all date rapes.

Despite the obvious need for a substance-abuse support group, MacDonald said S.O.D.A. struggled during its first two years. S.O.D.A. had just 15 members until the group received a boost from the Au-



Above, members of Students Opposing Drug Abuse perform a skit entitled 'Turnaround.' Heather Finnegan (middle) finds herself circled by fellow S.O.D.A. members portraying various drugs.

burn School District.

The school district asked members of S.O.D.A. to team up with those from C.H.A.D. (Confidential Help for Alcohol and Drugs) to present a drug awareness week, which has since become widely known in the Auburn community.

Yet the awareness week represents only one small aspect of S.O.D.A.'s community involvement. The group also visits area schools and performs skits focusing on such issues as child abuse, family violence or date rape.

The youths create and rehearse skits during their meetings held each Wednesday evening. Each meeting begins with a session called "Good Thing/Bad Thing," providing an opportunity for members to talk about their experiences of the past week.

Members also break into smaller groups during the evening to talk with an adult volunteer about their individual problems. Afterward, a spokesperson from each group conveys some of the concerns

brought up.

"It gives them a chance to brainstorm alternatives and solutions," said MacDonald.

Normally, about half of S.O.D.A.'s members attend the weekly meetings. Several of those members are parishioners of St. Mary's Parish in Auburn.

Colleen Gower, a member of St. Mary's youth group, has been involved with S.O.D.A. for almost two years. Gower said she decided to join the group after watching several friends abuse drugs.

"Because of several of our performances they have turned away from drugs," Gower said about her friends.

She noted, "The student population at Auburn High School is reaching out when things seem too much to go on."

Gower, a senior at Auburn High, said the group focuses on supporting abusers, not preaching to them.

"All we do is listen. We are one big, happy family," said the 18-year-old Gower.

Adult volunteer Sue Whitehead, who helps MacDonald coordinate the group, agreed with Gower.

"They (the kids) don't preach. They say, 'these are my experiences, these are my truths,'" explained Whitehead, who is also the supervising substance abuse counselor for C.H.A.D.

The truths that Auburn High senior George Doebler tells stem from the re-

alities of his addiction to alcohol and drugs. Thanks to S.O.D.A., Doebler said he has been living drug-free for the past two years.

"If it wasn't for the group, I wouldn't be sober," said Doebler, a parishioner of St. Mary's. "I'm happy and proud."

Melody Roach said she has the ability to help her peers struggling with addiction because she was recovering from her own drug problem when she joined S.O.D.A. four years ago.

"We have people calling us for help at 2 in the morning because they saw our performance," said the 17-year-old Roach.

The Auburn High School senior added, "Everyone has had problems in one way or another and that's what makes it so real when we see others on drugs."

MacDonald noted that it is important to build up young people's self esteem while helping them overcome a drug problem. It's also important to let the youths know that they have a support-system to fall back on if they falter, he said.

"It's not just an entry-level situation," said MacDonald. "We will be there through the whole thing."

MacDonald emphasized that the group has to be flexible to meet the special needs of its members.

"We focus on behaviors and their results, not on right or wrong," he explained. "Concepts of right or wrong change with the times."

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