

## Mothers get helping hand in Owego

By Mike Latona  
Staff writer

OWEGO — As wood sticks were distributed around at this picnic last week, participants weren't sure what was coming up. A wienie roast? Toasted marshmallows?

No, Joe Federowicz's activity had nothing to do with eating. Instead, he asked this gathering of young women to try breaking their sticks.

As snapping sounds filled the air, Federowicz explained that individual branches can easily be shattered, but when tied in a bunch they cannot be broken.

Federowicz is the one who keeps that bundle intact in his role as director of the Tioga Teen Pregnancy Project.

"You'll never see all the results, but hopefully you can grab these people in some way," said Federowicz during a special picnic for his agency's clients and children last Wednesday, July 21, at Hickories Park in Owego.

Tioga Teen Pregnancy Project, located at 231 Main St., began in 1988 and is funded through the Southern Tier Office of Social Ministry. Since its inception, TTPP has served approximately 200 pregnant and/or parenting women in Tioga County as well as their male partners and family members. In addition, the project has provided extensive instruction at schools around the county regarding family life and sexuality.

Clients are normally referred to TTPP through either school officials or support services. The agency's range of free confidential services for pregnant teens is wide: home visits, telephone support calls, childbirth and parenting classes, and referrals for financial support and additional education.

"We usually start by going to their home. In each unique circumstance we try to find out what the issues are, then we try to develop a plan," said Federowicz.

Pregnancy is often just one of several difficult issues with which TTPP clients must grapple, Federowicz observed.

"Probably 50 percent of them are on public assistance of some sort. Also, many have been subjected to substance abuse, or sexual, physical, mental or emotional abuse," he said.

Federowicz noted that agency workers purposely avoid preaching their personal views surrounding sensitive issues such as premarital sex, birth control and abortion.

"We just try to teach decision-making," he said. "If we try to impose our values on these kids, we would scare them off and they wouldn't get the help they need."

Instead, he said, "We try to reflect our values by the way we live our lives."

Federowicz, who began his association with TTPP following his retirement from IBM in 1987, can relate to the struggles his clients are facing because his own daughter was 15 when she became pregnant.

"We had to deal with it very early," said Federowicz, who also serves as deacon at Apalachin's St. Margaret Mary Church. In addition, he is the part-time chaplain at the Elmira Psychiatric Center.

The project's five staff members and 20 volunteers are currently handling 63 cases, including 19 pregnant teens



Tiffany Washburn (left) and her mother, Wanda Wheelan, enjoyed a picnic at Owego's Hickories Park July 21. The picnic was sponsored by the Tioga Teen Pregnancy Project. S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer



Autumme Dunlap (left) and her mother, Angie Chase, take a moment for themselves.

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and 44 parents.

One of those young mothers, 19-year-old Tammy Perham, recalls being "scared" when she discovered two years ago that she was pregnant. Through the efforts of TTPP counselor Joan Hickey, the Waverly resident received guidance for her impending childbirth and also found a suitable apartment in which to live.

"Joan is a wonderful person and a

very good friend," said Perham, whose daughter, Samantha Brown, turns 2 next month.

Asked what she would advise to any teenage girl who is considering the possibility of motherhood, Perham replied, "I would sit them down and tell them it's an awfully big responsibility. You have to devote most of your time to it. It's like a full-time job; I should get paid for it."

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