

# MOVE on the



# SELF-ESTEEM

Story by

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Photo illustration by

Kim Parks & Matthew Scott

# Being as good as ever

Kelly Dunford knows that when her self-esteem is shaky, even a meaningless glance from a schoolmate can send her into a state of brooding.

"You walk down the hall and you think about what you're wearing, and how you look. If somebody gives you a look, you say, 'What's wrong with me?' You don't think they might be looking at you because you look nice," said Kelly, 15, a parishioner at St. Lawrence Church in Greece.

Len Statham, self-help coordinator for the Mental Health Association of Rochester, said that Kelly's feelings are typical of most teens.

"Almost every teenager experiences times of feeling bad about themselves," Statham said. He explained that teens grapple with rapid changes in their body and appearance, and must also struggle with criticism from their peers.

"Teens can be pretty cruel to one another," Statham remarked.

Another St. Lawrence teen, Amanda Judkins, can relate to Kelly's struggles with self-esteem.

"It was always kind of hard for me, but I've think I've become a lot better in dealing with it," said Amanda, 15. "It took a lot of me not being so hard on myself, and telling myself that God loved me no matter what.

"And that helped," Amanda continued. "Now, when people look at me, my first thought isn't about what's wrong with me. I know in my heart that I'm a good person."

Kelly, also, said that her self-esteem has improved through the knowledge that "God will accept you because he created you."

Jenna Rosati, 15, agreed that a strong spiritual life helps her self-image.

"If people know they're God's creation, they wouldn't have problems with self-esteem because they know they'd be loved by someone - God," said Jenna, from St. Paul of the Cross Church in Honeoye Falls.

These insights are backed up by Statham. "People with high self-esteem, more often than not, have a religious component to their lives that they feel good about," he said.

Along with religious influence, Statham cited adults as key figures in the development of self-esteem in teens. His organization conducts several workshops on this subject for parents and professionals.

One emphasis, he said, is for adults to *guide* teens toward healthy choices - but not make all their decisions for them.

"Allowing them to make their own choices is important," Statham said. "It allows them to have successful stories about themselves."

Kelly noted that affirmation from parents - or lack of affirmation - is another vital factor in teens' self-esteem level. For instance, she has a friend who got mostly A's on her report card - but was chastised by a parent for receiving a single B-plus. "When somebody says something like that, it totally diminishes what you feel you accomplished. So why even bother trying?" Kelly remarked.

Hannah Delles, 17, has seen several close-up examples of low self-esteem in teens. Her family has housed foster children for several years, and during that time Hannah got to know teens who struggled with pregnancy, dropping out of school and depression.

All these situations, she maintained, can be traced back to low self-esteem.

"So many kids today don't have the confidence to make decisions that are good for them," said Newman Community at SUNY Geneseo.

Hannah remembered one foster child in high school, but still carried deep scars from abusive childhood.

"She would cry and cry and cry, and I'd feel worthless when she was at her (child's) house. She didn't understand she was just a foster child."

Hannah recalled that another foster child called an idiot by her mother. In tears, she said, "I'm so stupid."

On the other hand, Hannah said her own high level of self-esteem has stemmed from positive parental support.

"I can look at other situations, and that makes me more appreciative of the kind of love I'm surrounded by," Hannah said.

Although parents are vital in self-esteem development, Statham stressed that it's not impossible for teens to develop self-esteem on their own.

"Emotional nurturing ultimately comes from the parents, but a lot of parents just don't have that to give. So I think that kids - and adults - need to be able to do that for themselves," Statham said.

One vehicle for raising self-esteem, he suggested, is to help others.

"There are decisions you can make that will help another person as well as yourself," Statham said. "And that's done by giving of yourself."

"J." Redding said his self-esteem has improved by following such a philosophy.

"I'll give people rides home, and makes me feel good that I took the car for others," said J., 17, from St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Church in Hamlin.

The self-esteem grows even deeper, when he is thanked for such a simple act. "If I get a compliment, that really brings it up. If someone says, 'Oh, you was so nice of you, I can feel that today,' J. said.

Such simple deeds, Statham noted, can be taken lightly by the people carrying them out.

"They will accomplish great things if they just try."

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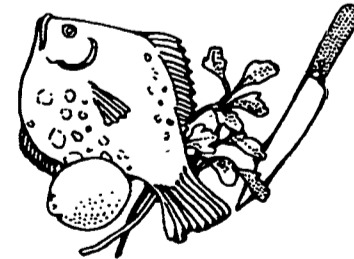
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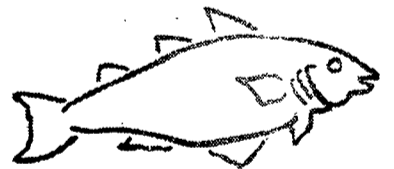


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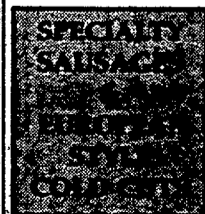
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