

FEATURE

Mentoring program forges bonds at Nazareth

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — Seated in a circle of desks, nine Nazareth Academy students and teacher Jean Kearsse shared how their school creates harmony among students and faculty: mentoring.

Started five years ago by Olena Lylak, Nazareth's director, mentoring matches each of the school's faculty members with groups of 10-12 students from various grades. In confidential, closed-door, monthly meetings, the students discuss various topics, and are not allowed to interrupt one another.

Kearsse's group spoke with a reporter about its experiences on the last day of classes this year, June 16.

As the mentor of this group, Kearsse guided the students through discussions during the year on such issues as drugs, AIDS, women's self-images and school violence. Kearsse is a religion and health studies teacher, as well as campus minister.

Amy Havens, a junior, echoed many of the other girls' comments on what it's like to share her views regularly with her fellow students and Kearsse.

"I think it's a great way to express your feelings on certain topics," Amy said.

"You get to know people you wouldn't know otherwise," said Kristin M. Cox, a freshman. "It's kind of breaks apart the cliques because you're not in a clique when you're mentoring ... You learn about how other people think about things."

Junior Jennifer Hammond added that the mentoring group encourages relationships between girls in different grades.

"I know that I probably wouldn't be in a group like this because I'm a junior, and these are all freshmen," she said. "I can help them through the years."

Melissa A. Carey, a freshman, described herself as "shy" and said that the group has given her the confidence to talk more in public. She added that the mentoring group enables her to discuss serious issues.

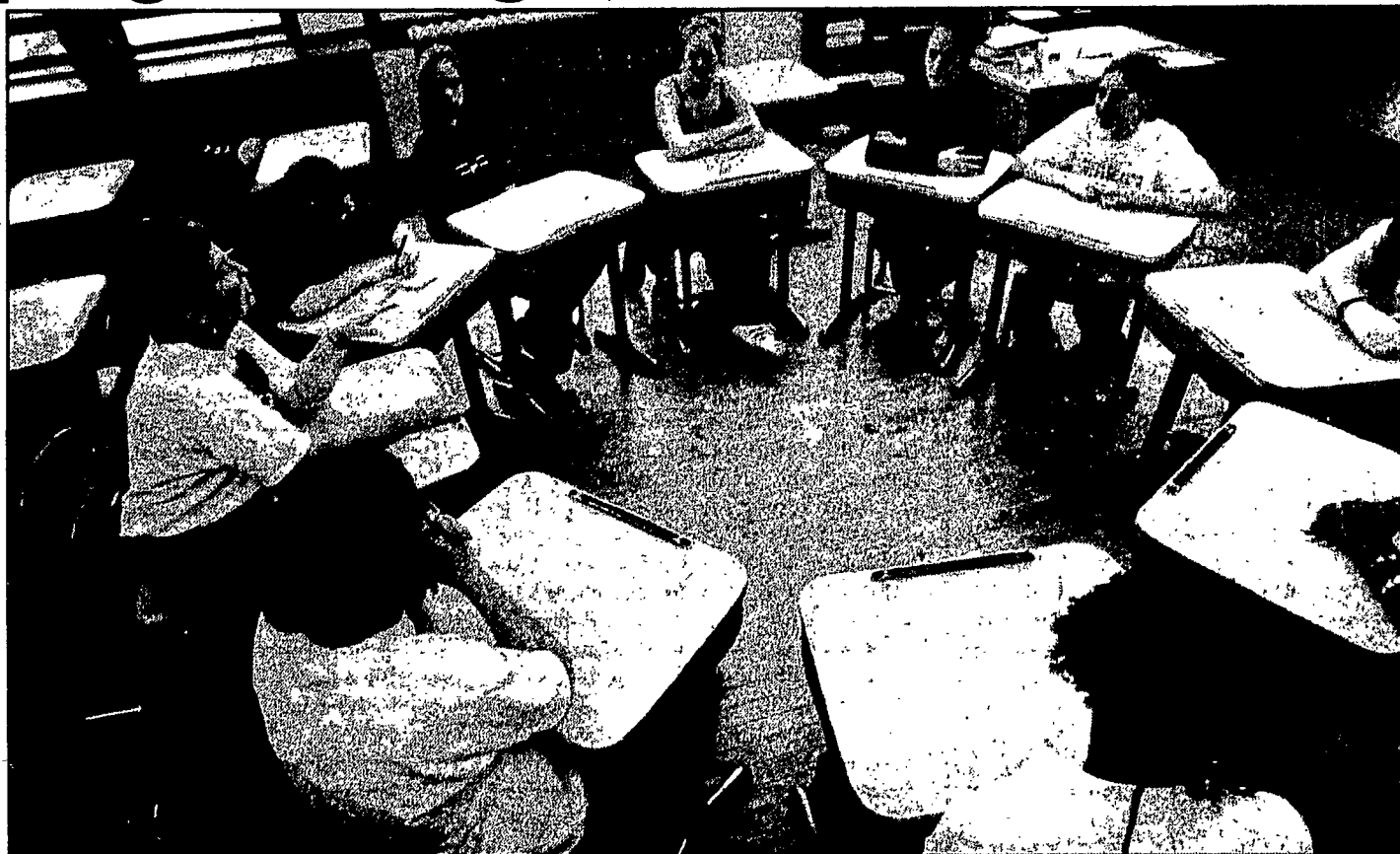
"We talk about things that teens really need to know," she said.

Freshman Jennifer F. Byrnes agreed with Carey's point.

"The things you talk about in your mentoring group are things you wouldn't talk about with your friends," she said.

Kearsse pointed out that the group's members set personal goals for themselves at the beginning of the school year, an aspect of mentoring that's attractive to Kamilla Coleman, a freshman.

"It think it's made me more mature and



Greg Francis/Staff photographer

Nazareth mentor Jean Kearsse, left middle, leads a discussion group June 16 at Nazareth Academy.

more focused in my work," she said. Her goals during the past school year included doing better work and being more polite to people.

Freshman Keri Close seconded Kamilla's point about setting goals.

"If we weren't coming here, I don't think anyone would set goals for the year," she said.

Freshman Bethany Calberg also pointed out that the mentoring group has taught her to listen better to others.

"One of the things is that it's good to hear the other side of the story," she said.

Theresa M. Covell, a freshman, credited the group's emphasis on mutual respect for creating an atmosphere in which the students can politely disagree from time to time.

"I think that because everybody is treated equally, you don't have to be afraid to say anything," she said. "They take what you say seriously." Jennifer Hammond also pointed out that the monthly meetings are opportunities for the students to seek counsel from each other and their mentor.

"It's not a gripe session," she said of the meetings. "We don't come here to complain, complain, complain."



Nazareth Academy freshman Kamilla Coleman jokes with others during mentoring group discussion June 16.

The girls agreed that the monthly meetings build up trust between themselves and Kearsse, something the teacher said she welcomed.

"I think it's important that the students

realize I follow the same rules," she said, noting she has to adhere to no-interruptions and confidentiality rules. She added that the meetings give her a break from the traditional teacher-student relationships she must otherwise maintain.

"(Mentoring) provides me with an unstructured opportunity with no guards to it," she said. "I look forward to it in that this group itself ... is willing to share in the process."

Lylak, a British immigrant, said she brought the mentoring concept to Nazareth from her homeland where many schools use it. Mentoring has helped Nazareth's students and faculty forge close bonds, she said, adding that she believes young people today need much guidance from adults.

"The whole purpose of the program is to set up a different kind of rapport with the kids and the teachers, to break down barriers," she said. "Unfortunately, our kids today think they are very worldly and full of wisdom, but when it comes down to the nitty-gritty, they're still children."

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