

on the MOVE!

A DEPARTMENT OF CATHOLIC FAMILY CENTER



CYO:

Athletics and a whole lot more

Perhaps you've played on Catholic Youth Organization basketball or softball teams, or been a CYO cheerleader.

But did you know that CYO offers support in such areas as employment and teen pregnancy prevention?

Today's CYO programs are much more than just athletics. Since the early 1970s, CYO programs have emphasized community outreach while also embracing traditional athletic and recreational programs. This is especially true in such large cities as Rochester, said Deborah Cummings-Brown, who directs the CYO department at Rochester's Catholic Family Center.

STORY BY MIKE LATONA
PHOTOS BY MIKE Mergen



"As the cities began to change, the needs for residents began to change," Cummings-Brown said.

Both CYO and Catholic Family Center are agencies of Catholic Charities. In Rochester, CYO offers assistance in career preparation as well as workshops and seminars on such topics as teen pregnancy, leadership training, conflict resolution and cultural sensitivity. The programs are available to young people ages 11-25.

Several youths who are active in these programs eventually become members of CYO's Youth Advisory Council, a group of 15 to 20 teens who perform community service on behalf of CYO. For example, the current youth council helps coordinate panel discussions at high schools in Monroe County. Council member Mancee Perry noted that dating violence and the influence of rap-music lyrics have been among the subjects for past discussions.

The youth council gets involved in political matters as well: Mancee and another council member, Anthony Hairston, have traveled to Albany to campaign for increased state funding for CYO. During one of those trips, Anthony said, he had the pleasure of meeting Gov. George Pataki.

Such leadership roles, he added, have helped him to realize his own potential during the five years he's been involved in CYO programs.

"At first I was hesitant. I didn't think youth had anything to offer to the community. I wasn't motivated or focused, very immature. But my opinion was changed," said Anthony, 17.

Youth council member LaShonda Bowman likewise has had a positive experience with CYO.

"I have gained better self-respect

and more confidence in myself. I became a better person," said LaShonda, 17.

LaShonda and Mancee, both members of single-parent households, said they've also benefited from the moral support offered by CYO administrators and staff. Mancee recalled an especially tough stretch two years ago, when her mother was in the hospital for cancer treatment and other family members were sick as well.

"My brothers were leaning on me, but I had nobody to lean on. Here (at CYO), it's like a counseling service. They've been by my side every step of the way," said Mancee, 18.

"People who don't have that person to talk to at home, the people at CYO can provide the best safety and love and care for you as possible," LaShonda said. She explained that her mother works a night shift and is rarely home when she is.

Cummings-Brown said such stories reflect the personal touch that CYO extends.

"We don't call these people clients. They're our kids," Cummings-Brown commented.

Cummings-Brown said that her office strives to erase stereotypes that CYO is only about athletics, and that you must be Catholic to join.

"A lot of times, in the parishes, it still is thought of that way. That's one of the things we're trying to change," she said, noting that CYO operates on Catholic principles but is open to all denominations.

In addition, she said, CYO currently places a heavy emphasis on asset-building.

"Kids didn't used to come to CYO, because they thought they had to be bad or poverty-stricken. For so long, we developed programs for kids' problems," she said. "Now we ask, 'What is happening in your life that makes you do well?'"

COMING NEXT WEEK: Racism



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