

PREVENTION FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

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The Blue Book, Vol. XLVI, 1995
Winter Park, Florida

I believe that God creates coincidences. What may look like a coincidence is really an opportunity given by God. Sometimes I do not understand the why of what is happening, but the opportunities keep coming. Sometimes I pray, "Okay, God, I know you want me to do this. Show me the way." As a high school counselor in a rural high school with approximately seven hundred students, my involvement in the drug scene began while working with recovering teens. I was visiting a student in treatment for chemical dependency when he asked if we could form a support group at school for recovering teens. At that time we had one other recovering teen who was working a 12-step program. My administration approved our group, and the social worker agreed to co-facilitate with me.

We learned a lot that first year. We went to open AA meetings, we read every book we could find on addiction, and I personally talked many times to a distant relative of mine who had been recovering for twenty years. The program grew as we progressed in our understanding of the needs of the students. We added new pieces as the years went on. We based each part of the program on what the teens told us they needed — visits in treatment, cards sent to them while in treatment, visits by recovering teen(s), providing support when cleaning drugs, paraphernalia, and drug posters out of their bedroom at home. In addition, the group would go to the home of the newly released teen to decide who would take the new teen to a meeting that night, who would meet the teen in the morning at school, and who had the same lunch time. Lunch time is the scariest time for the newly recovering teens. Who could they sit with? Who would accept them and who would not? Although not working a 12-step program myself, I find that an open AA meeting helps me know my limits and decreases the possibility of my enabling. Attendance at an open meeting always brings me so much hope. When I first started working with recovering teens, two AA members invited me for coffee to check me out. I realized now that some of their concerns were part of their disease in terms of control. At the time I was not aware that they were doing some things which were not good for teens. One was sponsoring six young people at the same time.

In the time that I was working with teens in treatment, there was only one minister who visited a teen. Part of this may be that the families were not involved with churches. However, I think it speaks to a need. I had Father Bill Clausen meet with my recovering teens to talk about spirituality. But I was afraid to have this meeting in a public school, so we met at a forest preserve. They discussed their need for a Higher Power and what one's Higher Power does for them.

After the recovering teens had stabilized and had six months sobriety, we would invite them to be part of our speakers' program. This started because I was asked to speak to various groups about teen addiction. I decided that it would be better hearing the disease concept from the recovering teens. Over a period of four years, we gave over one hundred programs in the area to schools, churches, fraternal groups, and to anyone who would listen. Truthfully, I wanted the teens to speak to keep them aware of their disease, to give them some self-confidence, and to help them get those good feelings one receives when one helps someone else. After working for a year with recovering teens, doing interventions, and talking to parents, God presented another opportunity for me. I was considered the drug czar in the school even though I still have trouble recognizing the smell of pot. The State of Illinois was sponsoring summer programs for adults who work with teens to provide prevention programs. "Let us put our efforts into helping kids avoid becoming sick rather than treating them once they were sick but not ignoring those who become ill." I attended this program and learned about prevention which made sense to me.

The next year was one of looking at different programs but not finding one which attracted me or the teens. Then God provided the Illinois Teenage Institute (ITI). ITI is a week-long summer program to develop teen leadership in substance abuse prevention. I was recruited to be on the staff for ITI by a treatment provider at the Rosecranz Center in Rockford, Illinois. Another step in my development.

Approximately one thousand teens attend ITI each summer; it is the oldest prevention program in Illinois. For years it was held at a 4-H camp and is now held on the campus of Illinois Wesleyan University.

The teens returning from this program need work to do. They need to make a difference. Prevention works when it is a teen/adult partnership. Teens must be invested in the program for it to work. But kids cannot do it alone. They need the experience and advice of other humans who have experienced life. A friend in prevention says that adults and teens are the same inside in terms of needs and feelings, but the adults have had more experiences. It is a lot more work to allow teens to be involved in the decision-making, but it is important. Sometimes we as adults forget that it is not the end product that is important but the process which leads to the end product. It is through learning how to solve problems and challenges which helps all of us make better decisions for ourselves in the future.

Operation Snowball

Now I want to tell you about the most important program in my life. That program is Operation Snowball. Snowball rolled out of the Illinois Teenage Institute. Twenty years ago teens from Rockford, Illinois, after attending ITI, got together and decided to host a program locally based on the ITI model but shorter in nature. They wanted more teens to experience what they had experienced at ITI. Thus was born Operation Snowball which now has over one hundred twenty-eight chapters in the USA, Canada, and Lithuania.

The primary goal of Snowball is to keep healthy teens healthy. The program consists of:

1. weekend events which are similar to retreats; and
2. ongoing meetings.

The program is not therapy but is therapeutic. It is not a treatment program although we have recovering teens involved. Snowball does not replace the need for a 12-step program for the recovering teen but supplements it. At the last event a student asked for help because he recognized that his use was a problem. Snowball builds a support system of friends who can be relied upon when things get rough. The system is similar to that which exists in the AA community. Our teens are from ten different high schools, and we find them attending each other's plays, sporting events, etc., with little rivalries, supporting healthy activities.

We believe in attraction rather than forcing teens to attend. I might strongly encourage a student to attend but never would require it. I would fight any attempt on the part of my administration to force a teen to attend. Our best recruiting tool is our involved teens. There are no fees except to cover the cost of the weekends. There is no initiation. Membership is for those who are committed to not using.

The Snowball program is a child of the Illinois Teenage Institute but has now become the parent. A recent survey of Snowball chapters, with a response rate of forty-seven percent, showed sixty-three hundred teens and nine hundred ninety-one adults attending a Snowball event in 1994.

The weekend is staffed by teens and adults, with ninety teen participants. As much responsibility is given to the teens as possible so that they develop their leadership skills. There are two teen directors and twelve teen co-facilitating staff members.

Before any event is held there is staff training. The staff receives training in the group process and how to keep discussion in the here and now which avoids having the program look like therapy.

There are many components to a Snowball event: general sessions, workshops, small groups, free time, and fun time. The heart of the program is the small group which gives the participants a safe environment to discuss what is on their minds. For many, this is the first time they have ever been able to open up. General session topics include addiction, enabling, STD's, It's a Wonderful Life (a session during which a few teens and adults share what has happened to them, what they did about what happened, and how it is now), etc.

Ten workshops are offered during the weekend and have such topics as creativity, volunteerism, cultural diversity, etc.

The teens are encouraged to take off their masks. Vince, our event director and a police sergeant in real life, models taking off masks by showing his warm, caring nature, very different from our stereotype of a cop.

He is Italian and says he has separation issues when he takes empty pop bottles back to the store. The teen staff always tries to write a skit which requires him to wear a dress and wig — he has been the church lady from Saturday Night Live and Snow White, or to be politically correct, a woman of no color. The teens wrote a skit for our last event which was entitled "A Woman of No Color and Seven Vertically Challenged" (Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs).

We always have a skit at the beginning general session of the weekend on warm fuzzies and hugs. We

use tangible warm fuzzies which are small yarn balls hung around the neck to get the teens to start hugging. A piece of yarn is tied onto the neck piece of another's fuzzy and a positive statement is made — I appreciated the support you gave me, I am glad you are here, etc. Various hugs are demonstrated which are not appropriate for Snowball, and then the Snowball hug is demonstrated. Hugs help develop closeness.

Religious services on event weekends are available and are an important part of the weekend for teens and adults. We have a Catholic Mass and a non-denominational Protestant service which the teens can opt to attend. Every part of the weekend is rated, and the services always rate high. Last fall the teen planners asked if we could get the two groups together at the end of the services and sing a hymn together. This we did. It was very meaningful to both groups with more than half of the participants in attendance.

There are always special moments at the weekend. A boy at the last event said about his Snowball experience, "In this age when parents are killing their children and children are killing other children, I prayed to God that He would send me something that I could value. Boy, did He outdo Himself." An environment is created that is accepting and caring.

Adults in Snowball are not all professionals in the field of teaching or social work. We have a lawyer, two policemen, and a factory supervisor on staff. We have one young adult who is recovering. She went from a coke whore at fourteen, to recovery, to Snowball as a participant, to teen staff, and now to adult staff. She began her recovery when she heard our recovering students talk in her health class.

One parent was afraid that Snowball was a cult because of the difference in his son. When he came to pick his son up at the end of the teen's first weekend, his son ran up to him and said, "I love you." The father decided to go on a weekend to find out what this was all about and is now the president of our chapter board. The teen's older sister, who is a nurse, has also been involved as staff member. At the last event, we had two families of three involved. Our first Snowball marriage will take place this spring. Prevention can be a family affair.

We invite twelve adults to attend the event as participants so that they can experience the program before joining us on staff. We have found that the first event can be emotionally over-powering for an adult, and we feel it is better to have them have the experience without the added responsibility of being on staff. We have a problem (a wonderful problem) in that we are turning kids away from our events because we do not have space for all who want to attend. We are trying to develop more interest among adults so that we can do some alternative programming in order for more teens to be involved.

Snowball is not just an event but an ongoing program. The general membership meets every two weeks for two hours. The core group of adults and teens meet every week to plan the general meetings, put together a newsletter, and plan other social activities. For our first few years of existence, we planned fund raisers. But four years ago the board decided that we would charge the actual cost of an event. The local schools pay a portion of the fee from their Drug Free Schools monies. We receive funding from various organizations to support our biweekly program. This has freed the biweekly meeting for programs that the teens want to hear about — street ministry, eating disorders, the differences among the helping professionals — psychiatrist, psychologist, social worker, etc.

An outgrowth of Snowball is Snowflake for middle-school age youngsters which is staffed by teens and adults, and Snowflurry which is staffed by high school teens and middle-school youngsters and is given for fourth, fifth, and sixth graders. The Snowflake program is usually a full day, and the Snowflurry program an after school and early evening program.

Lithuania

At each stage of my life, I always think that this is what God intended me to do, and now it is over. However, God's plans seem to be different because the biggest challenge so far came in the summer of 1994. Let me give you some background.

I am part Lithuanian and visited Lithuania for the first time in the summer of 1992. Lithuania is one of the Baltic countries which was taken over by the Soviet Union at the time of the Second World War. The rule under communism was not to talk because it was dangerous. Neighbors turned in neighbors. A country can be dysfunctional just as a family can be dysfunctional. Communism infiltrated every aspect of life.

I got excited by what I saw there and joined the Lithuanian museum in Chicago when I returned. This

led me to taking Lithuanian language classes, which led me to the American Professional Partnership for Lithuanian Education (APPLE). In the summer of 1993, a friend and I taught substance abuse prevention to a group of teachers, psychologists, and doctors in Marijampole, Lithuania. Our approach was — this is the problem in the USA, this is what we are attempting to do about it; take what you can use and adapt it to your use.

We taught them that what feels uncomfortable may not be wrong. The culture uses alcohol frequently — in the schools, in the homes, and even in alcohol treatment centers. A host or hostess in Lithuania will ask if a guest wants a drink, then will pressure the person if he/she says no. The type of alcohol will change as the pressure is applied. I was offered five different alcoholic beverages when I visited one home.

We introduced AA to our class by using two recovering speakers, one an American man of Lithuanian descent and a Lithuanian woman. It was the first time most of the class had heard a recovering person speak. The woman had gone through the only treatment program in Lithuania based on the Minnesota Model. AA has been in Lithuania for seven years, begun by a group of recovering American Lithuanians. Every major city now has a group, and Al-Anon is rapidly spreading throughout the country. Both AA and Al-Anon are being helped by the Family Center movement in Lithuania. These are counseling centers sponsored by the Catholic organization called Caritas.

Of course, one of the programs we talked about in the class was Snowball. We had a video of our spring event with our teens saying hello in Lithuanian. Two of the psychologists in the class said that they wanted to hold a Snowball in Lithuania. We met with them after our teaching stint and decided to proceed. In the States a chapter is formed using a mentor chapter which helps the new chapter do an event. We agreed to mentor their group by bringing ten American teens and three adults to Kaunas, Lithuania, to hold a Snowball. We agreed that the first Lithuanian teens who attended would be English speaking, and that the Lithuanian adults who staffed would have been in our APPLE class in the summer of 1993 or 1994.

The Lithuanians received a grant from the Soros Foundation to cover the cost of our land transportation, the food for the event, and for translation services. After months of our emotions being up and down, we are going, we are not going, we had finally raised funds to provide for the airfare and other expenses. We prepared our teens for the experience by teaching them a few Lithuanian phrases, by taking them to the Lithuanian Museum in Chicago, by giving them packing tips, and by developing a team spirit among the group. We prepared them as we would prepare them for an event here.

We held three days of staff training in Kaunas with a matched group of Lithuanian teens, Lithuanian adults, and our American teens. The Lithuanian teens often acted as the translator for their co-facilitation group. One young Lithuanian girl said after the first day of staff training that she had never had such a good time.

Then the sixty-five Lithuanian teens came, and our Snowball started. It worked very well. After the first day, our teens said that they felt the small groups would be better in Lithuanian because the ability of the Lithuanian teens to speak English varied so much. I was proud that our teens were willing to give control to the trained Lithuanian teens.

A highlight for us came when a Lithuanian boy said, “Now we know what a free people can do.” Freedom to Lithuanians meant being able to express one’s feelings and one’s ideas without fear of being punished or ridiculed. The dysfunction which affects a family can also effect a nation. Under communism we can see blatant forms of repression. In our society the repression may be of a more subtle nature. We see ads for various products using slender attractive people making them the norm. This may be as repressive on a more subtle level. Both forms of repression lead to difficulties in life based on a lack of acceptance of self. One of the sayings we use in Snowball is, I am lovable and capable (IALAC) or, in Lithuanian, AB esu mylintis ir sugebantis (AEMIS). The statement does not say, “I am lovable and capable because I wear a size three, because I wear Calvin Klein, because I drink Millers, because I smoke Camels.” It says that I am lovable as I am.

At the end of the Lithuanian Snowball, after working with the staff for a week and the participants for three days, one of our teens did a general session on how to start a Snowball chapter. Halfway through the hour he said to the Lithuanians, “You have experienced Snowball, you have learned how to start a chapter, NOW THE SNOWBALL IS YOURS. Come on Americans, let’s go.” We felt like a parent who says to his/her child, it is time for you to do it on your own. We sat in the back of the auditorium and waited. For about a minute nothing happened. Then the two Lithuanian teen leaders got up and led the group in a Snowball cheer

— “SNOWBALL, HOW DO YOU FEEL? WE FEEL GOOD, OH. WE FEEL SO GOOD.” Within ten minutes they had scheduled their first reunion meeting, and we felt that the Kaunas Snowball had taken its first step.

The Snowball program we began in Lithuania is active and growing. We have received letters saying that between forty and sixty teens and adults are meeting every two weeks since the event. The Lithuanian teens and adults who were on staff meet on the off week to prepare for the upcoming meetings and to study the Snowball manual. They are planning their first event. They are lovable and capable! It is hard but rewarding work. Progress is slow and criticism is loud. Drug use is down some among teens, but a problem still exists. We are now starting to use reality based statistics to help teens avoid use. Our drug surveys tell us that a certain percentage of kids are using, and prevention people and society focuses on that figure. What we do not highlight is the percentage of teens who do not use. Many teens assume the reality is that all teens use. We can use our drug surveys to show that their assumption is incorrect.

We have read criticism of DARE in the papers. DARE is not enough. Snowball is not enough. Just as we go to church every Sunday because of the need for constant reminding of what we need to do, so too at each level kids need to be reminded and encouraged to be drug free. Progress is slow, but it is encouraging to hear that certain Catholic churches in our area no longer allow alcohol to be served at parish functions.

I was recently in Puerto Rico and found an article in a diocesan newspaper about a family gathering without alcohol. In the Catholic church? Are we becoming more aware as a people? Can we role model healthy living, having a good time without use?

Answer God's call as He provides ongoing coincidences for us.

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