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Students Take the Lead in AIDS Education

Julie Coar, Student, Gig Harbor High School,
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I've found that even though I'm only a seventeen-year-old high school student, people value what I'm doing. . . . What I do matters.

Gig Harbor is a small, conservative community located on Puget Sound in Washington State. The local high school, Gig Harbor High School, is one of few schools that offer a service leadership class. I was fortunate to be able to take this course during my sophomore, junior, and senior years.

I became interested in HIV/AIDS education as a result of my friend's uncle dying of AIDS and my concern that young people were not receiving the education needed to protect themselves. They don't see it now, but in 10 or 20 years *they* may be the ones testing HIV-positive. I want to prevent that from happening. I felt that our school was not doing an effective job of educating students on this subject. Although HIV is a life-threatening virus, it was never discussed in detail or addressed by people to whom the students would listen. Peer education has a greater impact for many young people because they are more open to discussing their concerns when interacting with peers. It also serves as a model, encouraging students to become involved and take action.

This chapter was written when I was a senior at Gig Harbor High School; currently, I attend the Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington.

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take place through training are experiential, engaging students in role-plays modeled on real-life situations and requiring them to use their newly acquired knowledge and communication skills. After students complete their training, they take part in authentic assessments, in which they are carefully assigned school conflict cases and monitored by the school's mediation coordinator. The period of debriefing that follows a mediation includes processing and self-evaluation and clearly corresponds to the reflection component of service learning. Incidental and related outcomes include applying these skills outside the school community, in their neighborhoods and families, as well as developing an awareness and sense of concern for the larger community. Clearly, the peer mediation model meets the standards for a CSL program.

Although an effective peer mediation program has most probably used CSL methodology, it may not be recognized as such. Responsive and perceptive mediation coordinators, sensitive to the developing interests and skills of the peer mediators, may begin to consider other learning opportunities for those students, as we did with the Fleet Youth Leadership Program.

APEX Group

For these reasons, we formed a local chapter of the APEX group (AIDS Peer Education Exchange) and developed a peer HIV/AIDS education program. Even though this was a new approach to the state-mandated HIV/AIDS education, our teacher and principal encouraged us to explore it.

In the process, I learned about curriculum development. As a student, I was unaware of how complex a specific curriculum must be. Developing our curriculum made me more focused on the goals of each section and clear about the desired outcomes. In addition, I wanted to help create a program that was both interactive and inclusive—not boring with lectures exclusively addressing a minority of the students' needs. Our presentations became more creative and humorous . . . and one of the results was a videotaped skit we produced called "The Brady's Get Tested!"

Because we wanted more information about AIDS, I took workshops along with adults. It was interesting to listen to other's points of view. I think the adults valued hearing the youth perspective, while I found it fascinating to discover how adults viewed the issue of AIDS, and their reactions to young people's involvement in AIDS education. Unfortunately, we don't get this opportunity very often in regular classrooms. In addition, the adult workshops helped me find resources and people who could help me with my project. A healthy relationship between adults and youth is essential to a successful community project.

Learning skills such as how to run meetings and how to manage conflict became familiar and comfortable when applied to our project. We gained the needed skills to make a point coherently and to organize information into a presentation for the school board or for the state Office of Public Instruction. The whole process enhanced our communication skills as we learned to set meeting agendas, follow up with thank you's, and interact with people effectively.

We also learned to see a job through to the end. APEX members met for two or three hours in the evening once a week to gain more knowledge and plan the presentations. In 1992, we presented 100 minutes of HIV/AIDS education to small classes. Most of our presentation involved interacting with the class because our goal was to stay away from typical and ineffective preaching. Many students were inspired to see peers taking education into their hands, and our presentations empowered students to use their intellect and creativity to educate others and make significant positive improvement in their school and community.

Dealing with Community Concerns

After our first year, a small vocal group in the community asked the district to abolish the program. The school administration formed a committee consisting of teachers, students, parents, community members, and health professionals to resolve this conflict. Although these meetings were intense and sometimes hostile, we gained valuable communication skills.

Resolving this conflict required that we listen to the opposition's point of view without interrupting or making judgments. It also required that we compromise. Though I had practiced these skills in the past, it was more helpful for me to learn as I applied them to this tense situation. These meetings made positive changes in the way we presented ourselves and received other's opinions. With a great deal of help from members of the community, we presented our finished curriculum to the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction. This year students' parents may choose whether they are more comfortable with an APEX student educating their child or a qualified adult. Although we are disappointed that students are seen as not being competent enough to make their own choice, it is a step in the right direction.

New Student/Teacher Relationships

Our teacher is more of a mentor than an authority—a person who inspires and empowers us. He helps us to discover, and he has helped our class overcome personal doubts and strive for excellence. He broke down the wall between student and teacher, enabling us to work together. Not only does he allow us to question and explore our educational experiences, he demands it. Most important, our teacher treats us with respect—he has faith that *we are capable of accomplishing anything we set our minds to.*

I believe there's a great need for more hands-on programs in other subject areas, such as science or math. It helps me to know that I have knowledge that enables me to *do* something, not just take a test.

I'm aware that not all people learn best in this interactive approach to learning. But I know that I am more successful when I feel a sense of accountability and independence, along with support and encouragement. It is for that reason that I intend to go on to a college which also encourages this type of independent learning.

ENRICHING THE CURRICULUM THROUGH SERVICE LEARNING

In retrospect, our program was possible only with the integration of service leadership into the curriculum and the continual support of our teacher and principal. The typical student/educator relationship is one of listener/lecturer. The unique structure of the service leadership class allows the students to create programs while the staff act as facilitators and supporters. All members of our group feel a deep sense of accomplishment, a feeling unique to service.

I hope that other schools will follow the lead of Gig Harbor High School and allow hands-on learning to take place through service leadership classes. Although I'm not sure what I will do for a career, I know that I enjoy working with people and that my experiences with HIV/AIDS education will have a big influence on my choices for the future.

Part IV

The School as Community Partner