

Woman reaches out to help county's teens

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When Toni A. Smith enrolled her daughter in school, one of the Prince George's County resident's initial thoughts was that there are not many after-school programs available for young people and high school students. She also noticed that the schools that did have programs did not have enough space to accommodate all of the youth that wanted to attend.

So in December of 1999 Smith decided that she would begin an organization to work with children and youth. Named In Reach, Inc. it was initially started as an after-school program.

However, Smith became aware of the directional needs of middle and high school students and decided to focus more on helping to prepare students for college, work and life.

"After the first year, I eliminated the after-school program and continued with the high school program at Northwestern High School, which is really about college prep, being active in the community, better communication with adults," Smith said.

The Youth Leadership Council was In Reach's first operational program. The program was designed specifically for students at Northwestern High School interested in improving communication between youths and adults in school and the community, providing service in the community and exploring leadership including obtaining valuable life skills that support transitioning from life after high school more smoothly.

Two years ago the council began holding youth forums. The student members organized a forum around a particular topic. Past forums included, "Life after high school" and "relationships."

Smith said students plan the entire program from the agenda and speakers, to what they will serve for lunch and all advertisement to get their peers to attend.

"Their presentations were better than some adult presentations I have seen," Smith said. "They were very thorough."

Smith said input from the students was very positive.

"They appreciated being able to go someplace with their peers and adults to discuss whatever the hot issue was."

"Hopefully this [program] will be at every high school someday in Prince George's County," Smith said.

Another program begun by In Reach, Inc., is the Girls Action Council, which is a Saturday program. The Girls Action Council serves as a developmental, educational and leadership program for girls while increasing their participation and involvement in action projects that address social issues affecting them.

This year, for the first time, Smith was able to provide a small scholarship to eight seniors in the Youth Leadership Council.

“For the past three years, it has been my vision to be able to offer graduating seniors of the Youth Leadership Council some type of award or scholarship and it finally has happened,” Smith said.

Presently Smith is operating the organization part-time as a volunteer while working a full-time job. She primarily supports the needs of the organization with her own money and a few other generous donors.

Smith is currently searching to assemble a board of directors for In Reach, Inc. that would be capable of raising funds, passionate about improving the lives of children and youth, increasing the visibility of the organization and creating strategies for program expansion through education of the public. For detailed information visit the Web site, www.inreachinc.org. There you will be able to learn more about the organization and to download the board of director’s prospectus.

“While In Reach’s programs have been revised, volunteers come and go and the hours vary, one truth remains — working with teenagers is the work I was meant to do. It is the only work that truly satisfies my soul.” Smith said. “I am committed to improving the lives of children and youth — particularly girls — and so for whatever heartaches, frustrations or sheer delights that come along with the territory, I am committed to enduring.”

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