

Boys get a boost

CAROL A. CLARK
lanews@lamonitor.com
Monitor Senior Reporter

May 30, 2007

There's a new program in town. It's kid-driven, putting success in the hands of youth and not the program. Envision Your Future (EYF) is a strength-based, non-clinical, positive youth development program. It's designed to guide kids in exploring their future and helps them establish the foundation needed to successfully realize their dreams.

EYF encourages youth to make life-giving choices. They learn to develop self-respect and respect for their parents, other adults, school, property and community. The program can be applied to both boys and girls. The current class is aimed at boys.

Certified facilitator Keith Lewis is guiding the eight-week program held at the Family Strengths Network in the Pueblo Complex on Diamond Drive.

"This program was developed by Dr. Patty O'Sullivan," Lewis said. "It's meant for young people with a lack of focus related to the future or who have maybe fallen through the cracks."

Men and women communicate in different ways, Lewis said, adding that EYF allows boys to communicate in ways they feel most comfortable.

"What's the dream of your life?" Lewis asks them. "What makes you enthusiastic about things and what makes you angry?"

These are questions many kids have never been asked or their answers listened to, he said.

Lewis asks who helps them develop their dreams – many don't have anyone. He talks to the boys about respect, "If I want you to respect me, what do I need to do?"

All discussions are kept within a positive framework. Some kids hear only negative things such as "you're late, your room is messy, your clothes are sloppy."

"Today was a 'priorities' day," Lewis said. "I try to write down everything the kids say because that says to them that what they say is important. I call them by name to re-enforce their importance."

Jennifer Bartram does graphic design and facilitating for the program.

"I think it's an incredible program," she said. "When you ask kids what they want in their lives, they know, they just need our guidance. It is so amazing to watch the kids come to life through this program. It's a program that crosses all age barriers."

The EYF mission is to guide youth in creating their own "winnable game" in school and life; and to assist parents, educators and youth workers to better understand today's youth, respect their differences and support them in their quest.

O'Sullivan conducted a study on youth as they move through school and discovered they still had dreams of success in middle school. In high school, many had lost their dreams. She found that a lack of dreams often leads kids to drop out and engage in risky behavior. O'Sullivan found that today's youth, having been brought up with computers, video games, cell phones and iPods, have the ability to go beyond linear thinking and they want to find their own answers.

EYF is designed to put kids back in touch with their dreams.

“One wants to do pyrotechnics because he is interested in chemistry and how that works,” Lewis said. “Others want to become a lawyer, police officer, SWAT member and one wants to be an auto mechanic. A goal for all of them is to finish high school.”

Lewis has been a youth pastor at United Church for two years. He came from Wichita Falls and said in his 13 years of working with kids, he finds they want to be productive and make positive contributions.

“These kids do a lot of homework, a lot of extracurricular activities,” Lewis said. “They have the pressure of parents and the community. They are good kids who are learning to walk a path for themselves and they’re going to make mistakes. Some need to make better choices. Some just need to know that someone cares.”

Excerpts from letters written by current participants include:

- We don’t get yelled at for our ideas.
- It is a positive environment that encourages by positive reinforcement as opposed to a vindictive environment that teaches with fear.
- They respect us, no yelling.
- It gives me something positive to do on a day in a week.
- I like the person who does this program – he’s cool and gives us good food.
- Food, I love food.
- It is fun and enjoyable, better than I thought it would be.
- Being able to get to know other people.
- This keeps me out of trouble.

EYF guides youth to realize a commitment to creating a positive future, which leads to continuing their education, making life-giving choices, the building of developmental assets and individual protection factors, self-concept, self-control and social responsibility. This results in an improved high school graduation rate, a significant decrease in school bullying, drugs, gangs, crime, teen pregnancy and teen suicide.

EYF is a Juvenile Justice Advisory Board-funded program. “Los Alamos cares about kids and this is one of many programs directed at helping them,” Lewis said.

Kids are referred to the program through Teen Court or by their school counselor or parents. Each participant is asked to give 10 hours of community service.

EYF meetings are held in a relaxed atmosphere. Classes are limited to about 12 kids. Another class is planned for the fall. To become an EYF participant or facilitator, access www.envisionyourfuture.org.