

In Good Taste

with Sheryl Popp

Newer Program at Nova Producing Tremendous Results

Several years ago I profiled Nova Services in this column. Staff there, including Tom Bozewicz, Executive Director and Business Manager Kathy Fies, has told me that exposure in the Sunday Post really helped explain their mission and their programs to the community. I'm very pleased to have the opportunity to again assist. To recap, Nova is a non-profit organization dedicated to helping troubled, in trouble and at-risk youth in the community through various programs.

Restorative Justice Week is Nov. 12-18, so this is a great time to introduce this program, and laud its results. Restorative justice is not a new concept, or one unique to Nova. Restorative Justice is "a different method of understanding and responding to crime and conflict, and represents a new way of thinking about the justice process and the victim, offender, community and justice professionals who are involved in that process." To better understand this program, I met with Tom and Kathy, as well as Tina Pohl, Restorative Justice Program Director, and Larry Thomas, who will be coordinating a portion of the program. Also present was Mike Bloedorn, Director of Social Services for Washington County. Social Services has worked with Nova throughout their 30-year history. About two years ago, Tom and Mike began connecting some dots when they thought about the climate they worked in and the job before them. Several things were apparent: Diversity in the city and county was changing, and economic need in the community was increasing. Additionally, there were increasing requests for help from law enforcement agencies - in fact, the juvenile crime rate doubled between 2001 and 2003. This was especially true of property crime, but other crimes such as burglary increased. Juvenile detention by authorities doubled, and more youth came under supervision of Social Services. Within the Project Payback program (already in existence at Nova), dollar amounts required to make restitution to victims increased, and the age of offenders between 12 and 15 years old was increasing. The men decided they needed to talk to community leaders and see how they could increase the effectiveness of their programming. Both directors had realized they could no longer effectively handle the situation alone. A project board of 25 was formed, including youth members, to define issues. This led to a funding proposal to the State for a juvenile restorative justice initiative.

Concepts of restorative justice, making restitution to community and victim, are by no means new. Many societies have employed their own models throughout history. Similar programs are in place on an international level. As utilized by Nova



Nova staff involved in the Restorative Justice program include, L-R, Tina Pohl, Larry Thomas, Tom Bozewicz and Kathy Fies. Next to Kathy is Mike Bloedorn from Washington County Social Services.

and Social Services, restorative justice was to be the tool whereby the agencies made systematic changes to the way they looked at community needs, and used their combined resources. To illustrate, a youth or a family might already be sharing the services of two or more agencies, without the agencies realizing it. With not only Social Services and Nova, but also The Council on Alcohol and Drug Awareness and The Youth and Family Project sharing information and referrals, the best use of available services could best match the needs of victims and offenders, or as Mike termed it, "stream-line consistent response."

Both agencies are committed to making this a community-based program, as it must be to achieve maximum impact. Goals of the program include meeting community expectations, ensuring the community supports the methodology of the program, increasing juvenile accountability, increasing family involvement, increasing mentoring programs and assisting victims. Also, to gain earlier access, the agencies are working with municipal court. Where might they intervene before criminal court, they wondered? They proposed having youth pay back their own traffic fines by working through the same Project Payback programs already in place at Nova.

The judicial system is firmly behind any type of restorative program, and in fact, retribution can help keep families of offenders together. Punishment for offense is not bad, but it is not enough to change behaviors. "We looked at existing evidenced-based programs," said Tom, "and those that took a broader look at the child are the ones that have been most

successful. What other factors led to the offense?" Family issues, school issues, drug or alcohol issues must all be considered, and of primary importance is early intervention. That's where referrals from other agencies factor in, and where involvement with community and schools, including middle schools, can be critical. What must be done to bring the offending individual back into society? In large part, the answer is victim-based. The offender must help heal the wrongs and repair the harm done to his or her victim. They must learn to be accountable and make amends. The Crime Impact program was developed to help meet that goal. A crime victim makes a presentation to a group of offenders and details the many ways in which the crime impacted them, their family and the community. After this presentation, the offenders write letters, in their own words, to the person their offense affected. (Naturally, these letters are not always delivered to victims; the writing itself is the intended goal.) Parents of offenders are invited to these sessions, and they have their own post-meeting meeting. Nova uncovered a tremendous need among these families to share their experiences and create their own support system. Larry was hired to coordinate collective mentoring circles - a concept originating among Native Americans, whereby a high risk offender commits to and signs off on, an agreement developed by the circle members. The group can include community volunteers, the leader (Larry), victim representatives, offender family members and others, some chosen by the offender as a person or persons they respect. Again, this program has been proven to work in

other social agencies. Four circles have been held so far, and a pool of volunteers is being established. Please call Nova if you feel you are qualified to volunteer for participation in the circle. These and other aspects of the program have had a ripple effect, and produced some dramatic results.

In about one and three quarters years, 200 youngsters in Project Payback have returned over \$50,000 to victims. Not a misprint - and keep in mind, some of these offenders are children too young to have regular jobs. Of those, said Tom, when they analyzed how many re-offended - there was only one, and he has come back to them. Over 75 youngsters and 80 parents have participated in the new crime impact sessions - and the staff finds themselves holding more sessions than originally anticipated. This has only been the briefest overview of some of the strategies employed by the Restorative Justice Program. There is much more to learn, and the staff at Nova is very anxious to have the community be more aware of what they can offer - and of course, what means are available for the community to easily help them. For example, they are still in need of work for the Project Payback program, because the jobs offenders do must not take a paying job away from another individual in the community. So they do work for non-profits, public agencies, the elderly and the disabled. To learn more, call Kathy Fies at 262-338-8842, who can make many materials available to you, or refer you to a number of websites. Nova Services is located at 702 Elm St. in West Bend. You may also learn more at www.novaservices.org.

The following recipe is from Tina Pohl. She tells me it's a big time favorite of her entire family.

Tina's Banana Split Torte

Crust

2 cups graham cracker crumbs
1/2 cup butter (melted)
1/2 cup sugar

Mix and spread into a 9x13 pan

Filling:

2 eggs
2 sticks oleo or margarine, softened
2 cups powdered sugar
Large can crushed pineapple
3 or 4 bananas
Cool Whip
Nuts

Dried Cherries

Beat oleo, powdered sugar and eggs at med. speed at least 15 minutes. Spread over the crust. Drain pineapple and spread over egg mixture. Slice bananas and spread over pineapple. Top with Cool Whip and add nuts and cherries for color if desired. Refrigerate overnight.