

WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR?

How to Teach Caring to Academy Students

BY STEPHANIE JOHNSON

A certain lawyer asked Jesus, “Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” Christ asked him what was in the law. He replied, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself.”¹

The lawyer responded, “And who is my neighbour?” Christ answered by telling the parable of the good Samaritan. But the lawyer’s question is still being asked today.

Unfortunately, love for our fellow man is not presently very fashionable. Our young people live in an “I”-centered generation. They are learning all too often to disregard the needs and feelings of others, to put “me first” at any expense. However, Christian growth depends upon one’s relationship with God and humanity. Bound up in this relationship is a vital step in the moral development of a young person—service to others.

One answer to the question, “Who is my neighbor?” is addressed in this article. It describes a program that instills within adolescents on Adventist academy campuses the desire to serve others through a Student Esteem Program (StEP), which includes peer counseling, tutoring, and peer mediation.²

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Forest Lake Academy’s Model for StEP

Forest Lake Academy, located near Orlando, Florida, has operated a StEP pilot program for the past two years. The program is based on a mission statement that seeks to help students learn

more about themselves so they can gain self-confidence to overcome obstacles and make choices that will leave them feeling good about themselves. These choices will give them respect not only for themselves, but for others as well. The goal of StEP is to help students reach out to each other, encourage one another, and pray for each other’s well-being. This goal can only be realized when students are willing to yield their power to Christ through whom they can become powerful; then students can apply the concept of caring as seen through Christ’s eyes—meeting people where their needs are as a way of introducing them to a caring

*Saviour—and thus become caring Seventh-day Adventist Christians.*³

Components of StEP

The peer helper program centers around six components: (1) peer counseling, (2) tutoring, and (3) mediation; (4) student-facilitated support groups (“Can Openers”); (5) support groups facilitated by the program director and a graduate peer counselor (“Hassles”); and (6) courses in human relations, social issues, peer tutoring, and peer mediation.

In order to qualify as a peer helper, students must sign up for training instruction in area(s) that match their interests. The program is directed by Stephanie Johnson, who holds a Master of Arts degree in counseling, and is carried out under the leadership of two head peer counselors. In addition to classwork, students must attend weekly group sessions for peer helpers, keep a log of counseling contacts, know when to refer students to professionals, and maintain a strong commitment to confidentiality. The peer helpers also meet individually with Johnson on a weekly basis for supervision.

Program Description

Peer Counseling. To qualify as a peer counselor, students must first take a

course in human relations and social issues designed to teach them how to

- (1) become sensitive to problems experienced by their friends;
- (2) become better listeners through active listening techniques;
- (3) competently use questioning techniques that help counselees pursue solutions to their problems;
- (4) become aware of nonverbal communication;
- (5) take responsibility for their own values and decisions so they can, through the use of good problem-solving and decision-making skills, help friends pursue their own goals;
- (6) become knowledgeable about current teen issues; and
- (7) become aware of the importance of confidentiality and the necessity of referring serious problems to qualified personnel.⁴

Peer Tutoring. To teach student tutors to effectively help students do their own work and not to do the work for them is the goal of peer tutoring. Training requires strengthening one-to-one communication, relating, management, record keeping, and evaluating skills. Tutoring helps the tutor increase self-awareness; develop a positive self-image; become more sensitive and tolerant of individual needs and differences; develop positive attitudes toward school, teachers, and education; improve skill development and academic achievement; develop a sense of responsibility; and make better use of time and records.⁵

Peer Mediation. Peer mediation helps students learn to deal with their conflicts creatively and constructively. Typical conflicts on an academy campus deal with roommate disputes, rumors, "put-downs," lost or damaged property, and disputes with teachers over grades or classroom behavior. The peer mediation program teaches students that conflicts can be opportunities to grow and learn. It also helps improve the overall school climate through improved communication and mutual understanding between individuals. The program helps young people learn to handle confrontational situations as Christ would handle them. Peer mediators are trained to conduct a mediation session by stating ground rules, gathering information from each student, focusing on common interests, creating and evaluating op-

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A "Can Openers" group at Forest Lake Academy enjoys spending time together.

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Head peer counselors meet with "Can Openers" group facilitators for a planning session.

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tions, choosing a solution, and by writing a contract of agreement that each student signs.⁶

Student support groups. The group experience is important to developing self-esteem. Groups can enhance trust and confidentiality. They also can provide students with support during difficult times. Groups allow students to test new behaviors and establish values. Members of student support groups support one another by providing positive feedback on issues that come up in

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Peer counselors lead out in a fifth- and sixth-grade group at Forest Lake Elementary Education Center called "Molecules."

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The peer mediation class practices using role-playing for problem solving.

each session.⁷

The groups on the Forest Lake Academy campus, "Can Openers" and "Hassles," were established to enhance personal growth and self-exploration. Students use these groups to explore their concerns about school, friends and family, and their relationship with God. Members of these groups form ground rules centering on confidentiality, no "put-downs," and no pressure to talk. An idea to group philosophy is this: in order to gain control of your life, you must yield control to the Lord. Through Him students can learn to love themselves as they learn to love and understand one another.

Program Implementation

The working process of the StEP program is as follows:

I. Peer Counseling

A. Training: Human relations and social issues classes

B. Be available to serve as a counselor two hours per week.

Options include:

1. Individual counseling;
2. Facilitating a "Can Openers" support group;
3. Counseling students who have received poor grades;
4. Serving as a big brother/sister at Forest Lake Elementary Educational Center;
5. Conducting new-student orientation;
6. Serving as peer educators in the classroom.

C. Supervision: Thirty-minute conference each week with Mrs. Johnson.

II. Peer Tutoring

A. Training: Five seminars during the first nine weeks.

B. Dorm tutoring: One to two evenings per week.

C. Teacher's assistant: upon request by individual instructors.

D. Time management/study skills tutoring.

E. Supervision: Thirty-minute conference each week with Mrs. Johnson.

III. Peer Mediation

A. Training: Five seminars.

B. Availability: Two class periods each day.

C. Supervision: Thirty-minute conference each week with Mrs. Johnson.

Requests for all of the above services should be made by a friend, teacher, parent, dean, or the individual through the program director's office.

Evaluation

Forest Lake Academy's head peer counselor (1991-1992), Ly Nguyen, conducted a student needs assessment survey in May 1992. She surveyed 100 students (45 dorm, 55 village) to find out how the StEP program could help them. Nguyen's findings pointed to the need for peer counselors, as students stated that they felt a peer counselor could be trusted to keep a confidence. Nguyen says, "Teens these days need something that they can lean on and feel safe. That is why this program (StEP) is so important, because if students can't feel comfortable talking to their parents or teachers, and if they don't trust their friends, then they need someone to open up to."⁸

She also found that the majority of students involved with a support group were pleased to belong to it. Comments about the group experience made by its members in a closing evaluation included (1) "a chance to talk about problems," (2) "finding that others have similar problems," (3) "liking ideas received about dealing with problems," (4) "meeting new people," (5) "knowing that there are others who care," (6) "family feeling," (7) "getting to know self better," (8) "learning to trust others," and (9) "confidentiality" as things the students like about the group experience.

Nguyen recommended a continuation of the StEP program. She said, "Kids need people to talk to. It's hard growing up, so we need to stick together for support."⁹

Conclusion

Unfortunately, our opening story of the young lawyer does not end on a happy note. When Christ asked him, "Which of these three, thinkest thou, proved neighbour unto him that fell among the robbers?" the lawyer, reacting to the story of the good Samaritan, replied, "He that showed mercy on him." He could not bring himself to even call the Samaritan by name. Christ still made one final plea to the lawyer, "Go, and do thou

The human relations class trains peer counselors to use active learning skills.

likewise." The lawyer, given an opportunity for moral growth, rejected both the plea of the Master and the two great principles of Christianity—love for God and love for humanity.

It is vitally important for our young people to understand their duty to their fellow human beings. So much is at stake, for in rejecting one's duty to a neighbor one rejects Christ. Christ came to this world to minister to the bruised, robbed, and discouraged. The lawyer's question, "What shall I do?" is being asked today by Adventist young people. We must have an answer for them, not just in word but also in action. We cannot afford to continue to pass by on the other side of the road, keeping our distance from those who need our help. Christian young people are watching, taking their cue from adults. 1 John 4:20 says, "If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?" We must teach the next generation the concepts of a caring church as seen

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through Christ's eyes—meeting people's needs as a way of introducing them to a caring Saviour. ☞

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

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6. Fred Schruppf, Donna Crawford, and H. Chu Usadel, *Peer Mediation: Conflict Resolution in Schools* (Champaign, Ill.: Research Press Company, 1991).
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