

Parenting

Advice
Information



Ann M. Efimetz

Youths from area schools including Walsingham Academy and Williamsburg Christian Academy volunteer at the Grove Christian Outreach Center's weekly bread distribution day.

The greatest gifts

Local teens give their time, talent to make a difference

By Ann M. Efimetz
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Mahatma Gandhi once said, "You must be the change you wish to see in the world."

Those words have been quoted over the years, and are contained in the 2013-14 Youth Resource Booklet published by NetworkWilliamsburg and NetworkPeninsula for area kids, tweens, teens and young adults.

The saying rings true throughout greater Williamsburg as hundreds of area youths sign up every year to volunteer at various local nonprofit agencies. During the holiday season, there are even more opportunities for kids to get involved.

It's the fifth year NetworkWilliamsburg has published the booklet to help kids and parents find opportunities to give back to the community.

"There are so many different ways to be involved," said Karen Duto, NetworkWilliamsburg executive director. "This is a good time of year for them to be more mindful."

Youths can make a huge impact at agencies by performing a variety of duties. Community service, which is typically a requirement asked of high school students, can take many forms. Over the past decade, there has been a higher emphasis on youth involvement as the competition to get into colleges and universities has become more keen. Scholarships are often available for youths who perform community service long term.

"I think kids are more involved in community service now," she said. "Parents are better at getting their kids involved young. Often they get involved and stay involved. I think it's helpful for the parents to encourage the kids when they are young. We have opportunities for kids of all ages."

Kids are an integral part of the team at Dream Catchers at the Cori Sikich Therapeutic Riding Center in Toano. At this time of year, approximately 25 youths donate their time at the center, performing various duties. During the summer when they are out of school, that number jumps considerably.

"There are a lot of opportunities at Dream Catchers for teen volunteers," said Gwen Zimmerman, the center's volunteer coordinator. "We try to match them up with what they are comfortable with. Our volunteers are the life blood of our program. Without them, there would be no Dream Catchers. They are an absolute necessity."

Zimmerman said that teen volunteers often provide special-needs clients with peer socialization and acceptance they don't receive anywhere else.

"For a lot of students who ride here, especially the teen students, this may be their only social outlet," Zimmerman said. "It is important to match them up with volunteers who are their own age. They share and can



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Dream Catchers welcomes youth volunteers at the center in Toano.

WANT TO HELP?

Most nonprofits depend on donations throughout the year and a drive is a good way to collect needed items such as:

- Gently used clothes, shoes, purses, hats
- Coats for winter months
- Children's books
- Bottled water
- Blankets for cold, winter months.
- Toiletry items
- Food

Kids' schedules are busy. NetworkWilliamsburg offers suggestions for busy youths to still be involved.

- A group of friends, a service club, youth group or other groups can cut coupons for nonprofits to hand out for clients to help them save money on food, diapers or other necessities.
- Greeting cards are also welcome. Kids can send a greeting to families of military personnel, make holiday cards for area senior citizens, decorate place mats for groups serving meals to the homeless during the holidays or make birthday cards for shut-ins or elderly residents.

Visit www.networkwilliamsburg.org for more information and ideas.

relate to someone their own age, that is a huge part. A lot of special-needs teenagers don't have friends at all and when they come to Dream Catchers it is a social outlet for them as well."

The positive effect isn't confined to clients, she added. Kids who have had issues with a driving or underage drinking infraction may be asked to perform community service at the center. Often their reluctance dissipates when they become involved.

"Often when they get with a child and the horses you see a whole transformation in their demeanor and attitude," she said. "At Dream Catchers, there is growth in all areas with volunteers, staff. Everyone gets to be a better person by being here."

The same sentiment is echoed at Grove Christian Outreach Center where youths volunteer on a regular basis.

"Grove Christian Outreach Center is so blessed by the next generation of service-minded young people," said Deena Walls, the center's assistant director. "The gift of their time is a foundational building block for long-term volunteer commitments throughout their lives. They place

value on change and begin to focus on others, and that is a gift for the community that will be reaped for many years to come."

Youth volunteers from Walsingham Academy and Williamsburg Christian Academy regularly volunteer at the center's weekly Break Day distribution. Other youths, including homeschool students, participate in a variety of activities ranging from playing music to volunteering at the center's back-to-school festival.

"The center loves its youth volunteers," Walls said. "They breathe a fresh energy into the air wherever they go, and we are so thankful for every minute of service and their sacrifice of energy. It is a beautiful light into a hurting world. Williamsburg's youth rocks."

Duto said experiences at the various agencies can be an eye opener, especially during the holidays.

"This time of year you start thinking about Christmas," she said. "But then they see some people who just need warm clothes and shoes."

Want to help?—Visit www.networkwilliamsburg.org to access the Youth Resource Booklet. □

PARENTING

Ready for baby?

By Alexia Elejalde-Ruiz
Tribune Newspapers

On May 22, 2009, a little less than three years into his marriage, Michael Goodwin addressed a letter to his not-yet-conceived child, explaining why he wasn't ready for fatherhood.

"Your mother and I are still pretty young, and there are times right now where we have trouble taking care of just ourselves," wrote Goodwin, who was 23 at the time. "Life has given us a few lemons, as the saying goes, and I want to make sure that we can at least provide you with some half-decent lemonade before you come along."

The letter, Goodwin said, was an effort to clarify his reluctance to his wife, Nicole, who was eager to start a family. Mostly, he wanted more time as a couple, with the freedom to pop into a movie after work if they pleased.

Not many months later, however, Goodwin felt a shift. Watching the joy his infant niece and nephew brought into his sisters' lives and marriages, Goodwin started to feel that something was missing from his own. Though still beset with fears — about finances, job stability, the potential toll that inconsolable crying could have on his marriage — Goodwin declared himself as ready as could be.

No one can ever be fully ready for a baby, parents and experts say. The nursery might be painted, the crib assembled and the folic acid loyally consumed, but the life-altering, physically exhausting, emotionally overwhelming experience of caring for a newborn takes even the best-prepared new parents by surprise.

But you can be more ready than not. And for the prospective parents who have the luxury of making the decision (about a third of U.S. births come from unplanned pregnancies), it's wise to do some soul-searching to ensure you have at least a few ducks in a somewhat tidy row before a toddler comes in and throws them across the room.

Now a dad for several months, Goodwin, 25, has found he doesn't miss spontaneous after-work dinner plans, because the greatest anticipation is getting home to see his daughter.

Many people have no doubt that they do or don't want kids at some point in their lives; others are more ambivalent. Before weighing all the practical concerns about how a child will change your life, it's important to know what you desire.

"When you're looking at your fears without knowing your desire, it creates gridlock; you're forever stuck," said Ann Davidman, a licensed marriage and family therapist in Oakland, Calif., who runs programs to help men and women decide if they want to be parents (motherhoodisitforme.com).

If you highly value having a spotless home or a sexy job that takes you around the world, be ready to pare down and give up trying to be the best at everything. "People talk a lot about work-life balance, but I would forget it," said Jean Fitzpatrick, a psychotherapist and marriage counselor in New York. "Instead think about making choices and not being stellar at everything."

Babies pick up on the anxiety in our bodies. For the sake of a child's emotional and cognitive development, parents should be able to manage stress calmly when under pressure — of which there will be a lot, Fitzpatrick said. Exercise, yoga and meditation can help, she said.

Rather than blaming each other or blowing up when conflicts inevitably arise, parents need to feel like a team working on their problems and adapting to changes together, Fitzpatrick said. □