

DIAKON

Many Hands. One Heart.

WILDERNESS CENTER SUMMIT

Diakon Wilderness Center ♦ 717-258-3168

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New program empowers young women

An innovative female empowerment program is redefining the services that the Diakon Wilderness Center offers to adolescent females. The course combines the power of the wilderness experience with a gender-responsive curriculum that offers a chance for each young woman to have a new perspective on herself and her life.

Piloted during the summer of 2007, the curriculum appears to have had a significant impact. Of the 24 participants who started, 23 graduated, resulting in a 96% success rate. Many of those first summer graduates are back on track in their home communities, having no new probation violations. Most are in school and on target to graduate, and one has

entered college. Final statistics will be released later this spring.

An important new feature of the program is the additional training staff members have received in managing the trauma and stress commonly linked to at-risk females. Additionally, the girls participate in daily relaxation, stretching, and visualization activities before the main physical activity of the day. The staff guide the youths to reflect on their relationships with family, authority, and peers at home; they are encouraged to put changes into practice while on the challenge course. New and more effective elements continue to be added, making the service an even more powerful and transformative experience for the young women whose lives we touch.



Violence awareness curriculum helps unlearn behaviors

A new violence-awareness program is helping youths served by the Diakon Wilderness Center reach an important goal.

The center's Weekend Alternative Program serves about 75 students each weekend, providing an alternative to longer-term, more costly juvenile placement. The program challenges each student to set a goal of being off supervised juvenile probation within six months of completion of the program. The new violence-awareness component is focused on accomplishing this goal.

The five-week curriculum cycle of the weekend program now contains five components:

- Wilderness challenges;
- Drug and alcohol awareness;
- Community service;
- Group counseling workshops (including decision-making, communication skills, or emotional management); and
- Violence awareness.

Each student participates twice in each program unit. Gender-responsive activities are included for the young women being served. Program Direc-

tor Anthony Stukes reports that the new violence-awareness curriculum will enhance the program's ability to reach participants.

In the new curriculum's first unit, "Violence and Me," creative learning activities teach three key topics:

1. Violence is learned (and can be unlearned);
2. Violence is a mindset (including a discussion of street values versus pro-social values), and
3. How to step out of the box (based on the idea that the media and

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Offering restitution opportunities and new skills

Students participating in the Diakon Wilderness Center’s 120-day Foundations Residential Program can now earn money to pay court costs and fines to victims while also learning valuable skills that can help them reach success in their futures.



The restitution component of the program began Jan. 1 in the program’s vocational department, through which students complete a five-week course that takes them from learning how to hammer a nail to the complete construction of storage sheds. Along the way, students earn credits (each credit being worth one stipend) for completion of various segments of the course.

The completed sheds are sold to community members, and the proceeds placed in a restitution account from which is drawn the stipends the students earned. Money earned is paid directly to the student’s referral county.

In April, a culinary program was introduced as the second leg of the resti-

tuition program. Similar to the vocational program, students earn stipends for completion of segments of the overall culinary curriculum. This curriculum is being designed with the help of Cura Hospitality, food service provider for the Diakon Wilderness Center.

In both the vocational and culinary programs, students can earn up to \$300; those completing the full program also receive a certificate of achievement and a letter of reference that they can present to potential employers. “The reference letter,” says Dave Crowther, Cura’s food service director at the center, “should give these kids an advantage over their competition when going for their first food service job.”

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negative peers almost conspire to keep students in a “box” of sorts, making it difficult, and unpopular, for students to handle conflict in a responsible, pro-social manner). Role-playing and thought-provoking videos challenge students to re-think their options for responding to conflict and disrespect back in their communities. The media’s influence concerning how men are (often violently) portrayed in the media is explored. Students are given an opportunity to

share how violence has affected them personally.

The second unit, “Violence and We,” introduces materials and activities designed to help students re-think how they view handguns, gangs, “snitching,” violence toward women, racism, scapegoats, and the violence cycle. Understanding the role of forgiveness as a means of breaking the violence cycle is also explored.

The Weekend Alternative Program serves juveniles who are relatively

new to the juvenile justice system. Male and female students ages 13 to 18 are referred by their counties for 10 weekends. The program utilizes all of the key principles of Pennsylvania’s Balanced and Restorative Juvenile Justice Act ... to support, motivate, and educate juveniles to make the necessary changes, and complete the necessary tasks, so they can begin to experience success, stability, and hope in their home communities.