

Role Models, Assets and our Young People

By Gisela Rots

I'd like to ask you to think about something for a moment. If you are a parent, or have a young person you care about deeply (whether you're an aunt, a teacher, a coach or a neighbor), think about them for a moment. And then think about what characteristics would the perfect role model for them have?

Would she be a go-getter – always eager to take on the next challenge?

Or would he be more studious thinking about every challenge in its own time?

Or would she spend her free time volunteering with the local animal or homeless shelter?

Or would he be a teacher, or someone else who spends their days making this world a little bit better for everyone else?

These are the kinds of things that we talk about when we talk about assets in reference to drug abuse prevention and building a healthier community. Assets are resources in a community and the foundations young people need to ensure becoming healthy, caring and productive members of our society. The role models that we identify in Medford help us to know what kind of a community we have – regardless of whether the role models are older or younger. The health, lifestyle and character of these role models help to define what we value (ie, being healthy, being courteous, making good choices, etc). The most important asset we can offer our youth is relationships – positive, healthy relationships.

I've talked before about how parents can begin a conversation about drug and alcohol use with their children and how important it is for parents to be involved. But assets, and developing assets, are a topic in which everyone in the community can take part.

The Search Institute is the most well-known contributor to our knowledge of assets in the community, researching and publishing items on the 40 Developmental Assets. These 40 assets are divided into 2 groups: things in a youth person's surroundings, such as role models, meaningful involvement in the community and clear expectations and boundaries (external assets); and things within the young person, such as resiliency, compassion and being responsible, especially in regards to school and school work (internal assets). The role models we provide are vital to encouraging the development of internal assets.

External assets are further broken up into various categories, such as supporting our young people (this is where positive relationships with adults comes in), empowering them, setting clear boundaries & expectations and giving them the opportunity to constructively use their time.

By supporting and empowering young people, we also help build their internal assets, building their self esteem, honesty, integrity and caring. (It is all interlinked! ☺)

If there are 2 key words that we, as adults, should think about when trying to build the assets of a young person, they are empowering and supporting them. By empowering them through having opportunities for young people to contribute to our community in a meaningful way, we are letting them know that we believe they can make important decisions and can lead the way. This is a fundamental building block to how I work with our Team TADD/Youth Advisory Council – they are an integral part of the decision-making process and help plan our goals and events for the year.

The Peer Mediation program at the High School is another example of empowering and supporting our youth.

There are, of course, also more tangible, definitive assets (or resources) that Medford has. In fact, last fall, Medford Health Matters went through a map of the city and identified the numerous assets we have in our fair city. These assets include everything from the local, neighborhood schools to the many opportunities for getting involved with the arts (the Chevalier, for one), from the ground-breaking for the West Medford Community Center to the amount of walking space. The map with all the identified assets really surprised and impressed all of us, and will be on display at Tufts Community Day (Oct 1).

These tangible assets also help foster the assets that we want to promote among our youth – they further confirm with them that we care, and that we want to build a healthy, diverse community.

By supporting our youth, we also show them that we care and that we not only pay attention to what they do and say, but how they act. Supporting their positive, good decisions in turn empowers them, and gives them the opportunity to learn from their own mistakes.

So remember, being a positive role model for a young person helps to shape our community into a healthy and pleasant place to live. The decisions we make, whether it is what to eat or the language we use around young people, shape their idea of what an adult does, and should do (That being said, it is also important to allow them to be young people, to play and to not always be shouldered with responsibility and stress). Whether we like it or not, they're watching us. And we have a responsibility to show them how positive choices now, can lead to a better life later. If you are interested in learning more about assets, visit: www.search-institute.org. For more about regional trainings on the issue, visit the Northeast Center for Healthier Communities website at www.nc4hc.org.

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