

## **Medford Embraces its Youth**

By Gisela Rots

For the past 5 months, members of Medford Health Matters have been attending a monthly training sessions with other area organizations on how to build a healthier community. Training topics have ranged from diversity to identifying assets in the community. This past session, however, focused on youth, an issue central to the fabric of our community. In this month's column, I'll share with you some of what we learned, as well as some information about youth development (preparing youth for adulthood) , how that relates to substance abuse prevention and protective factors and some programs in Medford that are using this type of a program.

The trainer, Della Hughes, from the Center for Youth and Communities at Brandeis University, was inspirational. She helped us identify ways to not only involve youth in our activities, but to do so in a meaningful way. And this, we realized, is directly related to some of the protective factors that we, as a community, need to strengthen.

Protective factors are aspects of a community that support young people in a way that makes them less likely to participate in risky behaviors such as having unprotected sex, drinking alcohol or using drugs. Mainly, Dr. Hughes focused on central aspects of personal and social assets that help facilitate *youth development* and make our youth healthy, both mentally and physically. Youth development means to focus on preparing young people for adulthood (making appropriate decisions, learning to live healthily, etc) instead of focusing on programs young people may have. In other words, youth development is a proactive way of working with our youth, instead of a reactive way of dealing with their problems.

There are four developmental aspects: Physical Development (such as having good healthy habits and having healthy risk management skills); Intellectual Development (such as knowing basic life skills, succeeding at school and having good decision-making skills); Psychological and Emotional Development (such as being in good mental health, having good coping skills and having good self-esteem); and Social Development (such as being connected with their surrounding community – both the people and the social network, having prosocial opportunities and being involved in the community). Here,

prosocial means to have the opportunities for youth to feel as though they are contributing to their community (in a general sense) in a meaningful way.

These last 2 developmental aspects are, in my eyes, the ones that we as a community, need to be sure to address in order to provide a strong support system for our youth and to promote the protective factors within the community. Specifically, these are the protective factors that include promoting a variety of opportunities for prosocial involvement in 3 areas: family, community and school. Coupled with the opportunities for prosocial involvement is the need to ensure that the youth feel as though they are being rewarded for their prosocial activities.

So what exactly are *prosocial activities*? In the family and in schools, this could be that young people are included when decisions are made that affect them, such as when a family dinner should take place, or planning activities at school. In the community, prosocial activities are opportunities for young people to get involved in activities such as sports and in community organizations. Rewards for prosocial activities can be as simple as young people feeling as though those around them are proud of them for their involvement, or that they feel others value their opinions.

Although this all sounds very technical, it boils down to two simple rules: give youth the chance to get involved in any and all aspects of life, and make them feel appreciated.

Above all, we must support our youth, and listen to their opinions.

At Medford Health Matters, we have taken this need very seriously. Within a month of beginning to work with MHM, I began meeting with a group of youth, our Youth Advisory Council. Our weekly meetings not only give us the chance to get their input on programs that we want to use in the city, but also give them the opportunity to design and implement their own projects. I have come to respect and admire these youth for their candor, their dedication and their creativity. They have certainly made an incredible impact on our coalition, as well as on me, personally.

MHM is not the only organization within the city to cherish the youth who live in our midst. Various faith-based organizations develop youth groups to encourage youth to get involved in their groups. The Malden YMCA, which operates the Recreational Center on Exchange Ave, encourages young people to do well in school by providing Tufts University students to tutor them to help improve their school performance. At the same

Rec Center, the Medford Police Department hosts weekly Teen Nights for teens in the area. The Medford Family Network helps families to provide a supportive environment in which their children can grow up, by holding regular play groups as well as special events and activities. The Early Childhood Education Department at the Medford Public Schools spearheads a group on the Social and Emotional Education Initiative, which works closely with the elementary schools to promote the coping skills and emotional development of the young people in our community. And I am sure there are many other ways the young people in our midst are valued everyday.

But there is always room for improvement. We can always give young people a bigger role to play in our community. We, as adults, as parents and as members of our community, can take it upon ourselves to provide supportive, caring relationships for every young person we come into contact with, even when that young person seems to create more problems than they do smiles. For that young person, that one caring adult may make all the difference.

*Do you know of a youth development project in Medford that you think other residents should know about? If so, contact Gisela at 978.618.4533 or [gamrots@glfhc.org](mailto:gamrots@glfhc.org). We'll be sure to include it on our website!*

Gisela Rots is Project Coordinator for the Drug Free Communities program of Medford Health Matters. She can be reached at the above phone number and email address.