

Richardson, L. Staying the Course: Gum Springs Center Helps Guide Youth. (1989, August 17). [The Washington Post](#).

OVERVIEW

According to the article

[Gum Springs](#) is a predominantly Black enclave that was settled by descendants of former slaves, about two miles north of Mount Vernon. It is a community rich in history but sagging economically. Public assisted housing lines both sides of Fordson Road leading to the center (off Route 1 in southeastern Fairfax County).

Nearly 75% of the community's 1200 residents are unemployed or underemployed...Many of the children come from single-parent homes...the rate of babies born to teenagers is 35%, the highest in the country.

The Gum Springs Community Center provides a kind of summer camp for hundreds of children growing up in the shadow of the Route 1 corridor, where budget motels, trailer parks, housing projects, and fast-food outlets form a tawdry canvas of life.

Sponsored by the Fairfax County (Virginia) Department of Recreation and Human Services and operating a government-funded, anti-poverty agency, this center is meeting the needs of many children and young adults.

A group of ten to twelve year-olds came to the director's office with a petition for new programs. The topics these youngsters wanted to discuss included

- Sex, money, and drugs.
- Jobs and ways to make money.

Counselor Rusty Walking Eagle, who came to this program from a similar one at a Montana Indian reservation, was eager to follow up on these youthful suggestions as he gathered material for the encounter from a book entitled, [Changes, Becoming The Best You Can Be](#).

During the day, older youth play table tennis; swim; and sell candy, soda, and potato chips at the center's snack bar. Summer is a good time for

discussion sessions on delinquency and pregnancy prevention. They typically talk about the nice things that boys are buying girls with tainted money from their drug trade.

Donita Hankerson lives with her divorced mother in the Richmond Square low-income housing complex. This fall, Donita will be a senior at Mount Vernon High School. She credits the center with keeping her away from less desirable hangouts as she states, "There's so much trouble out there in the streets. The center pulls you from it. It's like a second family...It just made me take a second look at myself."

Counselors from Mount Vernon and West Potomac high schools also work in an adjoining program called SCRAP (School/Community Resource Advisory Program). The aims of this program are three-fold—enhancing academic achievement, self esteem, and entrepreneurial skills.

Gavin Palmer was struggling in his European history course for gifted students until he received help from this program. His mother beams as she reports, "A program like SCRAP shows you how to work and learn. The road isn't going to be easy, but you don't give up."

Seventeen year-old Anthony Hyman, junior at West Potomac High, works part-time at the Center. He has participated in its programs and trips to the Kennedy Center, Dance Theater of Harlem, Howard University. Concludes Anthony, "It's a good experience. They encourage you to do better, and it's fun."

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

- What services do such programs provide communities like Gum Springs? How important are they in meeting the needs of children and youth—and encouraging their parents? How important are such programs in the nation's war against drugs?
- How should such programs be funded and run?

IMPLICATIONS

- There has to be a beginning for all good programs and ideas. They are not discovered overnight.
- One good idea or program may not meet the specific needs we

experience in our individualized work with kids, but these are good foundations for brainstorming or adaptation.

- Youth leaders have a heart for kids and feel called to serving them. Be open to others' successes and failures. Learn from and build upon them for the sake of the kids.

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