

An editorial on Focus: Hope, a Detroit-based organization serving kids.

OVERVIEW

This program is discussed in an editorial in the *Detroit News* and in Lessenberry, J. (1998, December 20). Message of hope evolves in Detroit. *The Boston Globe*, p. A45.

Born out of the Detroit riots of 1967 as a food relief program named, "Focus: Summer Hope," this program has grown into a non-profit corporation covering 40 acres in Detroit's devastated West Side. This great multi-purpose project has a primary emphasis on education and job training. It has been visited by the President and cabinet members, a delegation from South Africa, as well as by thousands of visitors (each year) from cities around the U.S. Focus: Hope thrives on an annual budget of \$63 million, employing 800 staff and 49,000 volunteers.

MISSION STATEMENT

In its second year this program (started by a suburban housewife with five kids and a Roman Catholic priest) developed a Mission Statement which still remains its core belief and aim—despite the program's unusual growth.

Recognizing the dignity and beauty of every person, we pledge intelligent and practical action to overcome racism, poverty, and injustice. And to build a metropolitan community where all people may live in freedom, harmony, trust, and affection. Black and white, yellow, brown and red from Detroit and its suburbs of every economic status, national origin and religious persuasion, we join in this covenant.

PROGRAM GOALS

- To provide food and other relief for the desperately poor.
- To provide motivational, remedial education, and advance technical training that will lead to employment in skilled areas.
- To run a day care center allowing a parent to be trained while the child receives pre-school education.
- To attract corporate partners and private funding.

PROGRAM METHODS

- "First Step" is a four-week program to assist those in need of mathematical and communication skills.
- A follow-up seven-week course moves motivated students to readiness for the year-long machinist course. Ninety percent of those completing the seven week course, in which absence and tardiness or any drug use are not tolerated, go on to the machinist course.
- Machinist Training Institute. The year-long machinist course prepares skilled machinists. Job placement is almost 100 percent. Forty percent of its graduates are women.

- A food bank feeds 47,000 children and elderly each year.

BEGINNINGS

Eleanor Josaitis, a housewife in her 30s, she was watching "Judgment at Nuremberg" (a documentary about the Nazi war crimes trial) in the mid-sixties. The TV movie was interrupted with a news brief on the civil rights troubles in Selma, Alabama. As Josaitis watched the police dogs attacking young black demonstrators, she made the connection between what happened in Germany and what was going on in her own country. The violence of 1967 led her to team up with an urban activist priest, Fr. William Cunningham. He preached and she organized food banks; their partnership was not always smooth. Still, he remained the public face of the organization until his death from cancer in 1997.

PROGRAM TESTIMONIES

In an editorial in the *Detroit News*, Thomas Bray wrote of "Focus: Hope":

The real secret to Focus: Hope's success, though, may be more a question of attitude. Josaitis is a firm believer in the idea that benefits must be earned.

Thomas Murphy is manager of Focus: Hope. He says:

We do have drop-outs. One apologized to me for quitting, but with what he'd already learned, he got a \$60,000 job at Boeing. For those who graduate—more than 1,500 so far—job placement has been virtually 100 percent.

Zygmund Nowak's background was different from most trainees, but his graduation from the Institute prepared him for an advanced degree:

I used to be a high school teacher in Poland. My first two years in the United States were the toughest of my life. I then saw an article in the paper about the machinist institute. That was the key to my success.

OTHER PROGRAMS OF FOCUS: HOPE

- Annual Walk for Justice.
- High School Journalism Olympics.
- Neighborhood arson prevention.
- Neighborhood block meetings.
- Health department screenings.

IMPLICATIONS

1. Hope can rise from despair when there is the right leadership, the right strategy, and community cooperation (from government, to local organizations, to the grass roots).
2. Too many programs are begun without learning from other successes and failures.
3. This million-dollar program began with a few hundred dollars and grew to a program with a budget in the thousands. Small programs need to be as carefully thought through and have as much integrity as larger ones. They can also have as much success proportionately.

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