

Story of Service 2005-2006

AmeriCorps *NCCC - Wraparound Family Teams of Pierce County Pierce County, Wisconsin

You'll read no devastating report of an F5 tornado, no thrilling story of a family's survival sitting out Hurricane Katrina's gales on their rooftop, no recounting of an amazingly undaunted spirit to overcome life's tragedies.

These words will tell of a silent menace among our communities - one that often takes its time, slowly ripping and tearing apart families and homes from the inside out. It's mental illness: a pervasive, generational pounding on families that often results in isolation, low self-esteem, addiction and sometimes death.

I've witnessed a middle-school student withdraw from the world, huddle under a scoreboard on a vacant athletic field and somehow sleep, risking hypothermia. I watched a 16 year-old boy escape his reality with alcohol and drugs, only to discover he will be a father in the fall. I've seen another refuse to leave his room, his safe-haven, for an overwhelming fear of failure grips him even though he is academically capable, charming and handsome. A teen-aged girl caused harm to herself to intentionally abort her unplanned pregnancy. I've learned that our school faculty and social service workers still believe in these kids, but our greater society either doesn't know about the underlying issues these kids face or perhaps our society doesn't care to know.

Through AmeriCorps, I serve families like these. They are referred by the school district to a process called Coordinated Services Team or *Wraparound*. The child/ren, parents, teachers, social workers, extended family, counselors, community members, clergy - any one appropriate to support the family is invited to the team. Together, we meet several times a month, tapering off to once or twice per month depending on the families' needs. Although this is not a typical AmeriCorps member service position, it is one I embrace with great passion. Having eight years experience as a foster parent working with families in crises, my skills were well suited to organize and facilitate team meetings.

The silent menace called mental illness is anything but silent within these families' homes. Raging outbursts are common; tears flow freely or are dried up by years of refusing to feel. A family team can provide a peaceful, more controlled environment. We establish team rules in the beginning while building relationships within and among our team members. Together we determine the highest levels of need for these families and children; very often families need support and encouragement as fellow community members.

The stigma associated with having an emotional, behavioral, or mental disorder is daunting. Parents may blame themselves or may be too embarrassed to discuss the possibility of a mental disorder with an outside source.

Family teaming offers a safe environment of dedicated people assisting families in crises. Parents begin to share more openly about the daily realities they face. The children watch as adults speak respectfully and work out problems peacefully. They learn that what happens at home doesn't have to happen everywhere or forever. Roles of team members begin to shift from teacher to empathetic parent, Social Worker to number one fan. These shifts in perspective are keys to the success of a family team. Community and relationship begin with an equal level of respect for one another.

Resources are shared and ventures are created to help strengthen the family in need. Isolation becomes less of an issue. The family is guided by the team, becoming actively involved in their child's education, their neighborhood and/or community. Some may in turn become advocates themselves for other families referred to *Wraparound*.

My AmeriCorps service experience has humbled me. A parent myself, I'd learned that raising healthy, well adjusted children takes more than just my influence. Serving families suffering from generational mental illness, offering them support, sharing knowledge and skills, proves that it truly does take a community to raise our children.

When we invest ourselves into our community's children, the world is the benefactor - one family at a time.