



A sober Valentine for children by Alexandra Bowers

February 15, 2006

Yesterday was Valentine's Day, the day of sweethearts and candy and red roses. It's also the week of another kind of caring—National Children of Alcoholics Week runs from Feb. 12 through 18.

Helping kids is the goal of the Children of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse program hosted by the Charlestown Boys & Girls Club. Maureen McGlame, COASA's director, said that the program is aimed at kids between the ages of 7 and 13 who have been directly affected by someone with an alcohol or substance abuse problem.

"It's a 10-week series [that meets] every Monday at 4 p.m. at the club for an hour," said McGlame, adding that ongoing support is also offered. "We finished [the fall series] and started it up again [this January]. The kids have been recruiting. Some kids came back and some kids are new."

McGlame said that the program uses special games, music and artwork—whatever the kids find as a fun way of communicating—to start a conversation about substance abuse.

"One thing that happens in the group is that kids learn about safety first of all," said McGlame, adding that once the children learn that it's safe, then they can break the 'rules' of alcoholism. "The rules are 'don't talk, don't trust, don't feel.' So the children are isolated because of the denial and the disease. It's a safe place for them to come and talk and meet other kids who know what they're talking about."

McGlame said that she started the COASA program to Charlestown in the Spring of 2005 after speaking with Kevin Smith of the Charlestown Recovery House and learning of the need for support services for children. She hopes that the Charlestown program becomes a model for other communities.

"The issue [is] that there are no services for children in the communities," said McGlame. "These kids are pre-teen and middle-school aged kids. [There are] some resources for teenagers who develop substance abuse problems, but this isn't about that. This is about children that are directly affected by alcohol in their own families, which is very different."

McGlame founded COASA as a non-profit organization over 8 years ago. When it became clear that the program needed a more formal infrastructure, it was brought into the Robert F. Kennedy Children's Action Corps. The two organizations share the mission to provide services for children. In addition, the Corps is the local affiliate for the National Association for Children of Alcoholics and COASA uses its curriculum.

Other COASA initiatives include a day camp held at the computer museum called 'Club COASA.' In addition a three-day training session was held for people who want to help.

"We would like to do those things again," said McGlame. "We don't have funding but we have models." Both volunteers and financial support are welcome.

"I would like to get to the point of training people in the community so they can do this—kind of like the Peace Corps," said McGlame. She hopes that the Charlestown program will gain momentum as it helps kids deal with the issues, and she stresses that she is available to the community. "[People] can just pick up the phone and call and I'll be happy to talk with parents and kids."

"Some people think that parents won't allow it," said McGlame, referring to kids' participation in the program and the shame and secrecy often associated with the disease. "It's a disease of denial. But

parents love their kids and want the best for them.”

For information about the COASA program call 617-227-4183 or visit the RFK Children’s Action Corps Web site at www.rfkchildren.org and click on the ‘programs’ link.

SIDEBAR: The Seven C’s of coping

The Children of Alcoholics and Substance Abuse program gives children tools to help them cope with substance abuse in their lives.

“They learn about the seven ‘Cs,’” said Maureen McGlame, director of COASA. “They didn’t Cause it—sometimes kids think these things are their fault—they get blamed and they believe it. They can’t Cure it. They can’t Control it but they can take Care of themselves and then they can Communicate their feelings. They can make healthy Choices and they can learn to Celebrate being themselves.”

“They learn how to talk about what’s going on,” said McGlame. “We teach them what they can do, regardless if a [family member] is getting help or is struggling with the disease.”