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"THE TRUTH SHALL SET YOU FREE"

Task force turns young lives around

By Deborah Kohen
Sentinel-Voice

David Wallace eschews lumping youth into the typical good-child/bad-child category.

"I don't believe that there are bad kids out there," said Wallace, director of the Youth Diversion Task Force of America, a group aimed at empowering at-risk youth. "There are (simply) good kids making bad decisions because of a lack of supervision and good examples."

Wallace's group develops leadership, interpersonal communication and work skills in its participants and helps them uncover hidden talents, learn to function within a team, acquire knowledge on resolving conflicts peacefully and build self-esteem.

A former peace officer, Wallace has been working with troubled teens since the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department charged him with starting a Youth Diversion Department four years ago.

Though the department cancelled the program last year, demand for its services remained. So Wallace teamed with Harry Thomas, director of the Ollie Gator drug prevention program and an 18-year veteran of working with emotionally disturbed and at-risk children, to continue the task force. The drug prevention program falls under the auspices of the West Las Vegas Pride Community Development Corporation.



Sentinel-Voice photo by Ramon Savoy

Taking the extra time to work with his students in the program, David Wallace, Youth Diversion Task Force of America director, tries to explain the purpose of the exercise to Maurice Andrews during last Monday's meeting at the center.

The family court system refers youth to the task force. After an initial assessment, a youth specialist is assigned to each case and an individualized treatment program, combining education and behavior monitoring, is developed.

Besides attending school regularly, participants must attend Monday and Thursday evening task force classes. The Monday classes discuss ways to change troubling behavior and attitudes and broach topics like anger management, problem solving, building

communication skills, learning responsibility, gaining self acceptance and giving and receiving respect. Basic life skills — cooking, cleaning, vocational training and financial planning — are also taught.

In the Thursday offerings, participants put into the practice the concepts they learned on Monday via role playing, encounter groups and 15-minute seminars where students lecture on how they're learning to cope with problems using the information they've been given.

Monthly field trips to local prisons flavor the experience with a harsh dose of reality.

But it's not all doom, gloom and the classroom. The youth attend special events every other Saturday afternoon. Local businesses pick up the tab. Last week they skated for four hours at the Santa Fe Ice Rink.

Mentors drawn from a network of local volunteers function as sounding boards, supervise community service for youth assigned by the juvenile court system to complete it, but most importantly, provide positive reinforcement and good adult role models.

Monthly parenting classes help parents reinforce what the program teaches. Parent participation is optional; parent cooperation is mandatory. Community service helps foster civic pride in the teens. They have helped Habitat for Humanity build new homes.

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Event honors foster parents, launches new recruiting drive

By Deborah Kohen
Sentinel-Voice

A bevy of state dignitaries kicked off May as Foster Care Awareness Month with a meeting last Friday touting the merits of foster parenthood.

"Each one of these children is special to God and you're making them special in your homes," Rep. John Ensign told foster parents at a May 1 meeting inside the Grant Sawyer State Building.

Standing in for her husband Lt. Gov. Lonnie Hammargren, Sandy Hammargren didn't issuing a proclamation as other state officials did. Instead, she got personal.

"I'm very emotional when it comes to children," she began, her voice quavering. "I've not been fortunate to have my own," she said, later announcing her intention to sign on as a new foster parent.

The May 1 meeting was the first event the state of Nevada Division of Child and Family Services scheduled as a way to thank foster parents for the work they do and increase public awareness about the need for foster homes, especially in the African-American community.

"We'd like to encourage the minority community, the African-American community, to come forward and participate in our foster

care programs," said Gerald Robinson, a DFCS social services specialist responsible for recruiting and marketing for the Foster Care Program and host of the meeting. "We prefer to place children in same-race families. We're not against placing an African-American child in a Caucasian home, but if the culture of the foster family is familiar, it will minimize some of the difficulties the child may experience."

Robinson said simple things like food, clothing and hair care make a difference.

The state's child and family services division has 2,700 children, ranging from infants to 18-year-olds, in guardianship, but a pool of only 511 foster homes.

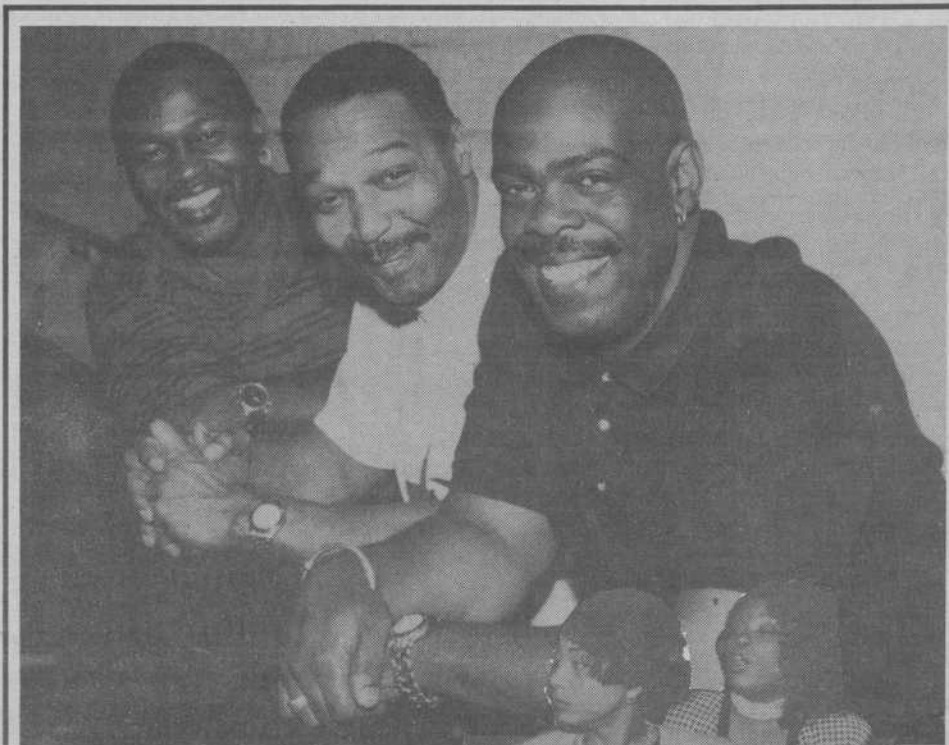
When the children are removed from the care of their natural parents, most live at Child Haven for a specified period; some are kept there longer than because of the shortage of foster homes. The number of children under the state's care grows weekly, widening the demand-supply gap. Parents determine how long their children remain in foster care.

"We'll work with natural parents to solve problems they may have, by putting together a case with a social worker, the court, the judge," Robinson said. "Hopefully they can complete

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GERALD ROBINSON



New E.R.A. begins

(Top photo) Founders of the new Ensemble of Rising Artist, Earl Harrison, left, Rick Davenport, center, and Alexander Mervin take a few moments to discuss last minute changes in their inaugural production "Long Time Since Yesterday." (Right photo) Dorothy Williams (Alisa) tries to calm down Patrease Ashley (Panzi) after some heated words exchange in the P. J. Gibson drama.

Sentinel-Voice photos by John Broussard

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