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Program trains seniors to take freshmen under their wing

By MEG NUGENT

Roger's mood was nothing short of dismal.

In one day, the high school student had been branded a loser by his mother, a mama's boy by his best pals and a failure by his teacher.

Granted, the teenager forgot to do his homework, had a lousy report card and, when he reported late to class, gave the feeble excuse of getting lost in the hall.

"He brings it on himself, but it doesn't help to have someone ripping out his confidence," observed a friend, who joined a dozen of Roger's peers in noticing his depression and coaxing the reluctant boy to talk about what was bothering him.

He was hugged, comforted and made to feel he wasn't alone, especially when another friend told him, "You know you're not a loser. We know you're not a loser. You're number one."

Roger was a role that Roger Fidalgo, an 18-year-old senior at East Side High School in Newark, played out recently in an improvisational skit he and 12 other East Side students created to demonstrate their work as "peer leaders" under the auspices of the Peer Group Connection.

The students, along with nearly 700 seniors from 40 high schools throughout New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania and Connecticut, arrived at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in New Brunswick for a daylong round of workshops they helped design to hone their peer leadership skills during the 4th Annual Urban-Suburban Peer Group Connection Conference.

Since its inception 10 years ago in Princeton by psychologist Sharon Rose Powell, the program has become a regular part of curriculums in 85 public and private schools in the Northeast, as well as 11 schools in Georgia.

Powell said her "primary motivation" for developing the program grew out of a desire to help freshmen adjust to the social and academic pressures

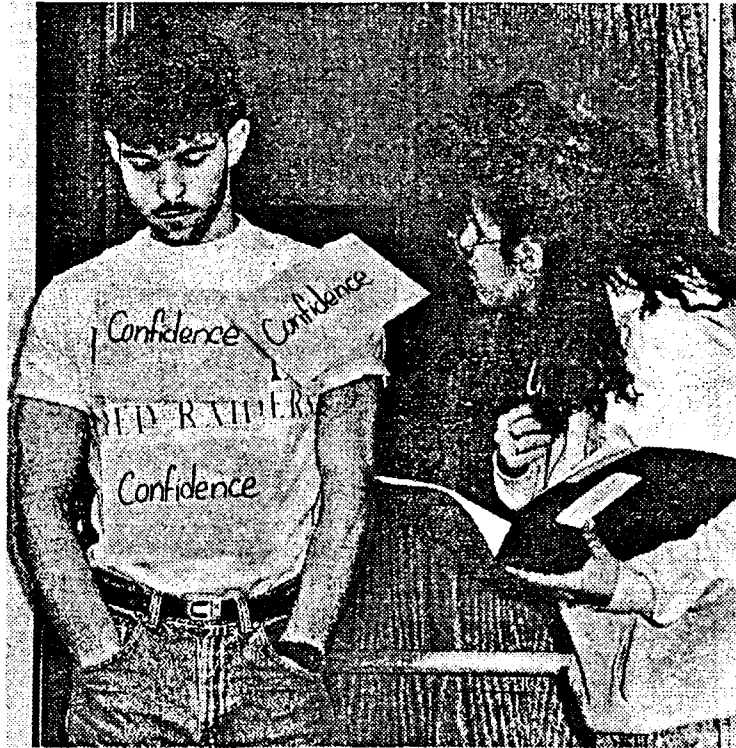


Photo by Richard Raska

Roger Fidalgo and Molly Jay Glover, students at East Side High School in Newark, participate in the program on building self-confidence

that are unique to the world of high school.

During her stint as a high school counselor, where she worked with students involved in drugs and alcohol or who appeared to lack motivation, she said teenagers most often said that upon entering high school, "They felt they had very little support, that they were thrown into a situation where they didn't feel connected" with parents, teachers and their peers.

She said she focused on the idea of using upperclass students as peer leaders trained to help build the self-confidence of freshmen. "because kids, espe-

cially high school-aged kids, are more susceptible to what their peers think than anyone else."

Their peers, said Powell, are "credible in the eyes of kids."

The peer leaders, usually seniors, apply for the program in their junior year, and are exposed to a rigorous selection process in which they write essays and submit to oral interviews before they are eligible for the five-credit course. They then go through an intensive, three-day training program prior to the start of the fall semester, learning leadership and problem-solving skills at a retreat run by

teachers who coordinate the peer group program at their respective schools.

As for the effect of the program on the peer leaders, Powell said, "Obviously, their self-confidence is tremendous. They're much more aware of what's going on around them; they're much more sensitive; they're very good at questioning people, at bringing people out of themselves, and they're much better at listening."

When asked about how the program changed her, East Side peer leader Beatrice Perez beamed.

"Look at me. I'm talking to you. I'm more open now," said the 17-year-old senior, adding that before her participation in the program, "I kept to myself."

"The best thing I ever did was to introduce her to the Peer Group Connection," said her companion, fellow East Side student Edill Mercado.

Noting that he became a peer leader after learning about the program from his elder sister, the 18-year-old Mercado said that before he applied as a peer leader, "I never dared to take chances."

"I'm more open about my feelings, and I'm definitely more assertive," said Sandhya Rana, 17, a peer leader at Passaic High School. "At first, I was reserved, shy and nonassertive."

The program has also had its effect on the teachers who serve as course coordinators.

For Linnell Wright, an 18-year teacher and peer leadership coordinator at Camden High School, "It's allowed me to see students as people and not just as students," adding she is more sensitive to her students' needs because she has learned to see them in the context of "problems they have at home or things in the community that can impact on them."

"It's very satisfying," she said, "to have peer leaders graduate and come back and say how helpful the program has been to them as they go on to college or the workforce or the military."