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Innovative program eases problems of new freshman

by Fred Wesson

Everyone remembers that first year of high school. No matter how cocky and important the students are in middle school, the first year of high school can be intimidating. Kids who are too weak, too small, too smart, or too anything--in short, just about all of them--are fair targets for bul-

lies and tougher kids. Teachers can insure that these students are protected in the classroom, but can do little to help them in other areas of their lives.

Realizing that peers can be influential and helpful, Graded School in Sao Paulo, Brazil has become the first overseas American school to implement the Peer Group Connection into its curriculum. The program was developed at the Princeton Center for Leadership Training in 1988 and introduced at Graded earlier this year.

Fourteen seniors at Graded have begun an intensive year of training in group dynamics and leadership techniques to help incoming freshmen to adjust to high school and the general difficulties of be-



Returning from the Senior retreat. (L to R) Troy Russell, Elaine Ades, Wanda Magalhaes, Debra Crane, Sean Corson, Steve Hanson.

New program eases pain of high school's first year

Blazing a new trail, the Graded School in Brazil, in conjunction with Princeton University begins a peer group connection

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ing adolescents. Because Graded is made up of students from many cultures and backgrounds, the senior peer leaders try to help them celebrate their commonalities and their uniqueness at the same time.

Throughout the year, the seniors continue their training in daily classes, and once a week they meet with small groups of freshmen to discuss social and academic pressures; relationships with peers, parents, and faculty; and problems associated with drugs, sex, and alcohol.

More importantly, the senior peer leaders, working in pairs, become mentors and friends to the freshmen. They play games to develop trust and self-confidence and in the process help the ninth graders and themselves to become stronger and more supportive of each other.

The fourteen peer leaders started their senior year with a training retreat away from school and home. The students and their three faculty advisors underwent three grueling days and nights of discussions, group cohesion games, exercises, and problem solving.

A very popular activity at the retreat was the obstacle course, which was held in the pouring



Senior Peer Leaders, sitting (front) Julian Moraes, (behind) Elaine Ades, First row L to R: Debra Crane, Sean Corson, Noelita Hwu, Cristiana Fuzetti, Yuri Keiserman, Pia dal Borgo, Juliana Ronco, l Yuka Amano. (Back row) Jeremy Davit, Giselle Sih, Daniel Veneziani, Jeus Brandt, TroyRussell, Wanda Magalhaes.

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Peer Group Co-Leaders, Elaine Ades, Julian Moraes.

rain. In each section of the course—the Alligator Pit, the Railroad Track, the Hanging Tire, and the Beam—the students had to work as a group. No task was complete until all fourteen of the students had succeeded.

In the case of the Beam, that meant that all the seniors had to get over a beam that was suspended nine feet in the air. No ladders, supports, or stools were permissible. Some of the students were too weak, others too short, and still others were too frightened of heights to make the vault.

Those who were able to mount the beam, lifted, supported, held, and encouraged those who were unable to do so. Surprisingly, there was no grumbling about chickens, weaklings, or complainers. The only discussions were about how to assist those who needed help.

After two hours of hard work, filled with screams of fear and of jubilation, fourteen wet dirty young men and women arrived at the end of the course ready to start the next task. One girl who was shaking so hard she could barely walk agreed that, yes, with this group, she might be persuaded to do it again.

At the end of every game or problem, the group discussed how it had gone. Many of the kids talked about how they could not have made it without the encouragement and help of the others.

By the end of the retreat all

fourteen had become close friends who had shared their fears (both physical and emotional) and their joys. Each and every one of them was ready to "take on" the freshmen.

Jeremy Davit, a PGC peer leader, summed up the retreat by saying, "It was one of the best experiences of my life and it will never be forgotten. The emotions were intense!" Pia dal Borgo, "...started to see people in a different way," and Juliana Ronco, "...realized everybody has problems similar to mine." Noelita Hwu "...found if you have friends and people you trust, things aren't so hard."

"The fact that everybody felt comfortable showing intimate thoughts really made me feel good, because I knew that people were really trusting," is why Troy Russell found the experience moving. Sean Corson summed up the retreat and the program with the following words, "I never really knew any of the people at the PGC, but I left being friends with most of them. There is definitely something special in this group that everyone should be exposed to."

The real work started a week later when the seniors were united with "their" freshmen. Each pair was put together with thirteen or fourteen freshmen. Groups and

pairs were chosen randomly. After one meeting to get to know each other, the groups all went on a one day outing. Meetings and discussions were held, games were played, and the obstacle course was reassembled (the beam was set a little lower).

By the end of the day, all of the freshmen had made it over the beam, feelings had been shared, groups had become a little closer, and everyone was ready for the start of a great PGC year. Even the "tough" kids who were too "cool" for this sort of thing looked forward to their next class.

At the weekly meetings with the freshmen, each pair of peer leaders is free to run the class with no interference from the faculty advisors. The advisors do check in on the meetings, but with six groups and only three advisors, the seniors are pretty much on their own. At the next senior meeting, peers and advisors discuss how successful the freshmen class was. Advice is given and ideas are exchanged. It is important to note that there is no one right way to run a class.

At a recent meeting, the idea of how hurtful it can be to be put down, called names, and insulted was discussed. The class began with a story of a student's self-esteem being destroyed by his

teachers, his parents, and his peers. Then the kids talked about themselves. In two adjacent rooms, one group held a quietly serious discussion; the other group laughed and shared how they had felt in certain situations. Both groups learned something about themselves. The meeting ended with a fun game of, "If you love me, baby, won't you please smile?" The object of the game, of course, is to get your friends to smile.

By now, the seniors have become very protective of their groups, and the freshmen eagerly look forward to their weekly meetings. It is the one place they can go where they be themselves without being judged.

"PGC is a great opportunity to know our classmates better and make new friends!" according to Juliana Salles. Patrick Bergen thinks, "that is a great project," and, finally, Carolina Scheinberg sums up the whole experience, "I LOVE PGC!"