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"A Vital Christian Presence in Social Work"

**UNDERGROUND" YOUTH DEVELOPMENT THROUGH
COFFEEHOUSE/DANCE CLUB OUTREACH:
ANALYSIS OF AN UNDERGROUND YOUTH COFFEEHOUSE**

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Introduction

We are always looking for "natural" community supports that we can refer clients to. When you are from a rural community with a county population of 35,000, these types of support systems tend to be limited. Typically we fail to find appropriate social settings that provide the type of outlet at-risk youth think they want to engage in. The Friday night football game, Saturday night basketball game, followed by the after game dance just isn't enough to engage these teens; thus, they tend to drink, get high and hang out creating their own "cool" environment. In our town this consists of congregating in the parking lots of the local shopping plaza, or breaking into a vacant and boarded-up historic hotel in the downtown area.

The hotel was destroyed by fire this summer, thus removing one of the places that local youth were entertaining themselves. In June, around midnight a party of teens and young adults were drinking and getting high. Things got out of control when a fire started. One teen threw what he thought was water on the flame, but it turned out that the "water" was in fact, a flammable liquid which flashed back onto the youth burning his arms and chest. Two other boys managed to help him, and all of the youth were able to exit the building safely. By the time the fire department was notified the structure was fully engulfed in flames.

"When young people act irresponsibly in a way that can seriously injure themselves or others, they are at risk. Such youth usually don't have one adult with whom they can discuss everything that's going on - including irresponsible behavior and what is motivating them to it" (Network Magazine, 23(3), p.23). So how do we connect with these kids before something bad happens? Should we invite them to church, provide more extra-curricular activities at school, mandate drug-court or mental health treatment, offer Boy Scouts or 4-H? Jesus told us to "Search the

highways and byways and compel them to come in". The Pharisees operated by expecting people to seek them out for assistance; to come to the place where the Pharisees were most comfortable, such as church or other public places. In contrast, Jesus went to where the people that needed help tended to be, such as at weddings, the seaside where fishermen congregated, or their homes. He worked to create an environment that was conducive to making them feel comfortable, in order that they might receive what He had to say. The Sermon on the Mount took place in the middle of nowhere and somehow people came. What it really all comes down to is having a neutral place that feels natural to youth so that we can connect with them.

Creating an environment using those things that our youth are familiar with can be a powerful tool. "If you don't understand and recognize that what they're thinking and what they're feeling, and then be able to take that in and come up with a really precise message that you're trying to reach them with in their terms...you're going to lose...you're absolutely going to lose" (Frontline, *Merchants of Cool*, PBS video). In Acts 17:16-34 the apostle Paul was hanging out where the people of Athens went to hold discussions. He noticed a cultural thing about Athenians - that they were very religious. In fact they were so religious they built numerous statues to various gods, and just in case they missed a god, they built one to the "unknown god". Paul used this cultural icon that everybody in town knew about and proceeded to preach "the way" more clearly. We can learn from this example to use or create such an environment to do the same thing.

Attik 3:16 is such an environment. The facility has an information system involving many televisions hung from the ceiling around the perimeter, interconnected and tied in to a computer. There are foosball tables, ping-pong, air-hockey, and various table games. Tables and chairs, booths, and cast off couches and chairs provide a variety of comfortable seating. The performance stage consists of an upper "drum riser" section that is approximately 30' x 10' combined with a lower section that is approximately 50' x 10' lit by a professional light bar supplemented by home-made can lights. A 32-channel sound board, five power amps, six monitors, and four main cabinets combine for the loud sound system needed when 200+ teens fill the space.

If connecting is really what it's all about, how do we provide the environment that is conducive to accomplishing this? What are the "nuts and bolts" of putting this all together? In retrospect, the biggest single factor to doing a coffee-house type of outreach is desire. The phrase "if you build it, they will come" (*Field of Dreams*, "Shoeless" Joe Jackson) has proven true in our case. Most youth appreciate any effort made by adults to provide a space for them to congregate. At times they complain and make fun of our efforts, but if they come and hang out, then we know we're on the right track. "Evangelism...must always be done in culturally appropriate ways" Tony Jones, *Postmodern Youth Ministry*).

A Coffeehouse Defined

We visited a coffeehouse in Berlin, Ohio, which is in the heart of Amish Country, and on a Saturday night 150-200 kids packed a small room to see a show. They did this on a monthly basis and were consistently pulling in this size crowd from a community about half the size of ours, made up of Amish and Mennonite youth! We decided that we could do the same thing in

Coshocton, and in October, 1996, we decided to launch an experimental coffeehouse event. We found a college rock band that was willing to play at no charge, but had no space yet. We remembered that there was a second floor space in downtown Coshocton that was standing empty. The first floor was being used by two separate businesses and they essentially paid the rent on the building. We knew that the owner of the building was sympathetic to both Christian and youth events, so he was approached with our idea. He allowed us to use the space to conduct our experiment. So what we had was a huge room with lights and a counter and nothing else. We planned our first event, thinking that if we got 35 kids to show up, we would consider it a success. That night 80 teenagers from all three school districts showed up. Any downtown area has unused space that can be made into a “cool” environment with a little imagination, luck, enthusiastic elbow grease, and God on your side.

How to fund a coffeehouse outreach ministry is an important question, but this is where bartering and God come into play. The owner of our building agreed to let us conduct our experiment as long as we were willing to provide liability insurance, cover utilities, and pay him \$100 a month to use the space. Since that time, he has allowed us to forgive the rent as long as we continue to make improvements to the facility, maintain the insurance, and continue paying our utilities. We have become adept at asking people for money. Our funding base includes local churches, interested individuals (including little old ladies!), service clubs, businesses, student organizations, professionals, and foundations. An interesting point is that funding our outreach ministry has never been an issue for us. Our community has been very supportive as they have observed us doing so much with so little over a long period of time. We have found that being a prudent and reasonable steward of resources is key to continued financial success. We have been able to finance everything we have wanted to try, buy, or fix up as long as we have been patient and creative in how we get it done. One example of this is that we have had ongoing remodeling needs such as building a bigger stage. We had an idea, some money, but no time or man power. We contacted a local scout troop and found a Life Scout who needed an Eagle Scout project. He provided the adult supervision, material and man power necessary to get the job done. We got a bigger stage and the opportunity to connect with a whole new group of kids. We have found that these Eagle Scouts who got to know us through completing their projects often continued involvement with us, coming to seek advice at times of life crises.

Along the way we have tried to track costs versus the number of people who come to our events. This has given us the information and track record we needed to apply for our non-profit 501c-3 status. We operated seven years without it, so this status is not essential to operating a youth center; however, it does allow you to engage in a whole new level of fundraising that you cannot access without this designation. One of the reasons we waited was the cost of getting the filing done, along with wanting to demonstrate a successful track record that would ensure minimal difficulty in receiving this status. When we decided that the time was right, a local lawyer who knew what we were doing stepped forward and completed the paperwork for us pro bono.

Equipping the facility has been an interesting adventure. As stated previously, we initially had no furniture whatsoever. A \$600 donation allowed us to attend an auction that had advertised restaurant booths, tables and chairs. For some reason, the auctioneer decided to sell the booths as one unit, and we bought enough booths to line three walls for \$100. Another \$80 bought us several sets of tables and chairs. We went from seating 0 to seating 150 literally overnight. A

friend in the supermarket business who advertised live on our local radio station put out a call for cast-off furniture such as couches, chairs, tables, and lamps, stating that we would come and pick up any donated furniture. We had to beg him to rescind the request in three days because we had so many calls for furniture! We still get calls to pick up furniture because of that one advertisement. Our sound system has been a work in progress. We initially made use of sound equipment owned by each band that played at an event, but slowly have acquired our own equipment either through donation or purchase. Table games such as foosball, air hockey and ping-pong have all come by way of donation. It is important to remember that you don't have to have everything at once to open your doors, and second-hand is as good as new as long as the pieces are serviceable.

Staffing events has actually been our toughest obstacle to overcome. We initially enlisted all our friends and have survived with a committed core group of 12-15 people. We have a group of other volunteers who will work two to three times a year given ample notice. This allows us to do one or two events a month, depending on the type of event and time of year. We have many requests to be open more frequently but simply do not have sufficient volunteers to accommodate the request. What we have found is that time erodes enthusiasm for these types of projects. We make use of the people we come in contact at church, at the office and in the community. When doing public speaking about the Attik, we often say that we have utilized all of our friends, then moved through our acquaintances, and now are seeking strangers to help!

Finding the entertainment to develop programming can initially be difficult, but we quickly found out that once your outreach ministry gets started, people begin to approach you with the desire to perform. The hard part is screening for quality entertainment that will appeal to your targeted audience. You must be willing to attend other events to connect with and judge the quality of bands in order to make such determinations. We have found a great way to help us accomplish this. We hold a Battle of The Bands in the fall which provides us the opportunity to become acquainted with a significant number of bands. We allow the audience to help us determine who the winners are, thus building an automatic rapport between the audience and the band. We make note the bands who seem to impress the audience, and invite them back. In the spring we host a local Talent/Karaoke night which has produced a number of people that we can utilize in another show or as an opening act. Our website (www.attik316.org) has also generated a significant amount of booking information from within and outside the state. This has been a tremendous resource in locating interested people for the Battle of the Bands event, as well as a resource for potential shows. As another way of connecting with local youth, we try to make use of local talent in every show we do. When we have a nationally known act perform, we will use a local talent as an opener for that show. At the spring local talent night we poll the audience with a questionnaire asking them what national bands would they like to see or are familiar with, what kinds of events do they like best, what suggestions for new events do they have, what kind of event would they participate in, and how much are they willing to pay for certain types of events. This survey guides our programming for the next year.

Most of the advertising for Attik events has been done at no charge. The method we have used is to distribute information where your targeted crowd tends to congregate. For example, we planned our first event for the weekend following our local county fair which is attended by nearly every type of Coshocton County youth. We developed ticket-size flyers on bright paper,

and sat on a bench at the fair. We handed every youth that passed by a ticket, whether we knew them or not, and explained what we were trying to do. A week later we had over 80 attend our first event. At each event, we announce the details of our next event. We post our schedule on our website, and each fall and spring create small schedules that are available in schools, at youth groups, at Attik events, and in other places that youth find themselves. We hang posters for events in all three county schools, as well as in other places around town such as restaurants, swimming pools, and parks. We send flyers to churches asking them to post them. We submit an article to the local newspaper, and the local radio station allows us to come in with youth and create a PSA (public service announcement) which they repeatedly air at no charge. For bigger shows, we advertise in *Christian Happenings* who also handles our advance ticket sales, as well as placing flyers on pizza boxes, and utilizing an e-mail list-serve that includes all youth that have attended events and supplied email addresses.

Through our experience, it has been made clear that no matter how well we're prepared for something, when God is involved He has a way of enhancing or changing the direction, scope, and breadth of anything we attempt. An example of this is this past year when we had a Rap/Hip-Hop event planned with two pretty good artists. This event was well advertised in advance, and only 14 people showed up. Half of them were girls who for some reason left just after the show started, leaving 7 adolescent boys to listen to the artists. We felt badly for the artists with the small size of the audience. Shortly into the show, the small audience got drawn in to the show in a way that would never have happened if the girls had stayed, or if the crowd were larger. The boys stuck around after the show was over, hanging out and talking with the artists. All present (artists and audience) formed a circle and began free-style rapping. This evening resulted in a relationship that continues between those boys and the artists and Attik staff who were present that night. These strong bonds may not have formed had a larger crowd been present, as those boys were the type to blend into the background of a crowd.

Positive Results of Coffeehouse Outreach

The benefits of this type of ministry are many. Many teens - those who fulfill Juvenile Court mandated community service hours by volunteering at the Attik; the Eagle Scouts who have fulfilled their requirements by organizing and completing much needed renovations; the art students who have designed and painted murals on many of our walls; and those who have performed on stage - have developed a sense of ownership in the Attik, and have developed a more positive self-concept through their work there. Many of those youth continue to come back and seek us out, updating us on their lives, or seeking advice during stressful times. They reminisce about their adolescent years when they came to the Attik, citing their involvement as a positive factor in their development. Our volunteers continue to give of their time because of the satisfaction that results from positive interactions with youth, and the knowledge that they are impacting young lives, thereby altering the future of our community in a positive way. Working in a community mental health agency as clinical and paraprofessional staff, we have clinical relationships with many adolescents. One of our goals as mental health professionals is to move our clients away from depending upon professional agencies for their support. We have found the Attik to be a good place to encourage our clients to go where they can engage in pro-social activities. There they can form healthy friendships with their peers as well as other caring adults, in a setting where they feel comfortable.

The Attik is a place where at-risk youth interface easily with youth that are school and community leaders. This allows at-risk youth to learn to be socially appropriate with their peers. It gives them a place where a semi-structured activity is taking place, where there are some basic rules, but where they are permitted (and encouraged) to be themselves. It is a place where they have to interact and deal with adults, but the adults are provided training to encourage them to apply love, grace, tolerance, and acceptance in their interactions with youth. We have found that there is truth and power in the statement that “love covers a multitude of sins”.

We have seen a general progression towards cooperation among the faith-based community, schools, and social service agencies regarding youth work. We have collaborated on several events, an example of which would be Red Ribbon Week. This week is sponsored by our local drug and alcohol council, Coshocton Behavioral Health Choices. They contacted us to help them with an event in order to create something that a wide variety of youth would want to attend. We had a concert with a nationally known Christian band that had a specific message regarding substance abuse. This event took place in the local school gymnasium with approximately 100 youth representing a cross section of the local population in attendance.

We have also been involved for the past eight years with a county-wide event called Winterfest Coshocton which is a family-oriented New Year’s Eve Celebration that is patterned after FirstNite Celebrations held in major cities throughout the United States. This event involves multiple venues throughout our community, and involves collaboration between social service organizations, service clubs, and the faith-based community to provide a wide variety of activities for all ages. This event has a broad base of community financial support which allows for a low ticket price (\$2 per person) which includes free food at every venue throughout the evening. Winterfest Coshocton has truly cut across socioeconomic lines with between 1000 and 2000 attending each year.

Last year we organized an evangelistic outreach event drawing support primarily from the faith-based community. We held the event at the local high school auditorium and had over 700 students attend the two hour event. The results we felt were positive, with several decisions being made to accept Christ.

Conclusion

In order to be truly successful in treating or helping troubled youth, the faith-based community and social service agencies are going to have to learn how to support and complement each other in order to achieve the results that each community wishes to see. An underground youth coffeehouse can be a vehicle that provides “natural” community support where successful social interactions take place, while fostering the collaborative relationships between all community organizations that are in place to address the needs of youth.

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Practical information

Nuts & Bolts Resources

- www.areotechnic.com (confetti cannons and supplies)
- www.panavid.com (audio experts)
- www.guitarcenter.com (audio, lighting, dj equipment)
- www.sldlighting.com (lighting and club equipment)
- www.rosebrand.com (theatrical curtains and supplies)
- www.rinovelty.com (glow necklaces, lava lamps, novelties)
- www.churchartworks.com (logos, t-shirts)

Cultural Awareness/Resources

- www.cpyu.org
- www.casacolumbia.org
- www.youthspecialties.com
- www.syatp.com
- www.acquirethefire.com
- www.ChristianHappenings.com
- youthculture@cpyu.org
- www.radiou.com
- www.revolt.com

National Network of Youth Ministries
The Merchants of Cool (PBS Frontline video)

Clubs and Facilities

www.rockettown.com

www.spotlight7.com

www.thepipeline.org/clubworship/

www.newunionclub.com

www.fireescape.com

www.attik316.org

Bands & Musicians

www.goa-inc.com

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