



suburban myths

by elizabeth c. knight

The first place most people think of when they hear the phrase “youth center” is the inner city. There are numerous programs in cities, as well there should be. However, suburban kids need direction and positive role models, too.

I grew up in a beautiful, safe, wealthy town; from the outside it looked as if nothing bad ever happened there. Most of the kids came from affluent families, giving them access to easy money. Our homes were beautiful, with pools and manicured lawns, and our fathers were always at work. Our mothers were pretty busy, too: They shopped, lunched or did volunteer work. As a result, we really didn't have anyone at home until the evening. That gave us plenty of time to do whatever we wanted. We were a hugely insecure group, and already jaded at age twelve.

My high school bred apathy. It was not cool to be a jock or a good student, and classmates would be embarrassed to be at the top of the class. The top 20% was okay, but higher than that brought little respect. Pep rallies were ridiculous; no student in the gymnasium was proud to be associated with the town. Even the jocks did not look all that ecstatic. I never heard anyone say that they loved, or even liked the

school. It was much cooler to hate the school and most of the teachers than to admit that some of our teachers were actually good people.

Because the town was only one golden square mile, and everyone knew each other, it was assumed that the kids were not misbehaving after school. We were on our own, expected to get home by ourselves after school, grab a snack, do our homework and, basically, be good until our parents got home. We were allowed to go out, but we had to be back in time for dinner. We could have friends over, and with our new partners-in-crime we were prepared for anything.

Most of us had cars by the time we were 17, and nice ones at that (the only clunkers were in the teachers' parking lot). We had plenty of possessions and impeccable manners when they were needed; we were very good at hiding the

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Above: Carmen, grade 6, Manhattan

truth—that we were angry, confused and depressed.

In today's economy a household with two working parents is commonplace, so when our

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parents did take a more active role in our welfare, it usually happened because of trouble in school, or when our grades dropped too low. A call from a teacher to a parent was a sure-fire way to get grounded. Acceptable grades and behavior in school were the barometers of our welfare. Keep up the grades and life was fine and we were okay.

The fact of the matter is that most kids were going to keg parties that started at 3:00 P.M. Our parents were away a great deal of the time on business trips or vacations, so it was extremely easy to find a house without parents. Our party locations usually revolved around our parents' scheduled absences. If there was ever a problem, we could always run next door to our neighbors, so no one was that concerned about leaving us alone. Sometimes the police were asked to keep an eye on the house, but they hardly ever did.

No cheap beer or liquor for us, either: We drank like the adults we knew. Cocaine, LSD and marijuana were the drugs of choice and were always readily available as long as you had cash. We were teenagers on a Friday or Saturday night with an ounce of excellent cocaine, an ocean of booze and an assortment of other brain-melting substances. The scary thing is we were not considered druggies, because we were the norm. It is unbelievable that no one died or even OD'ed. When I look back, I realize that we were extremely lucky to have survived our adolescence.

Alcohol and drugs were the big problems, not sex. We were somehow taught that sex was

bad, but so was sobriety. In fact, according to an anonymous poll, my graduating class of 99 students boasted 82 virgins.

When our parents did come home, conversations rarely went past: "What did you do in school today?" "Nothing." "Did you do your homework?" "Yes." Current events were always good diversionary topics, while anything personal was kept bottled up. They didn't want to hear any bad news and we knew it. Most parents were in such a heavy state of denial that blatant clues that we were not okay went completely ignored. To admit that your kid had a problem meant that you also had a problem, and problems were a disgrace. Maybe that's why we pushed so hard to get noticed. A punishment and lecture at least represented attention, and, good or bad, attention counted.

When things got bad, we would confide in each other, but since we were all minors there was not much we could do but to listen. Alcoholic parents were common, as were all forms of abuse, but we had no idea how to get help. In cases of emotional abuse, most of us had no idea it was even happening. No scars and welts meant that things weren't so bad. Neglect was the norm, so most of us did not see going home to a house that was empty for days on end as a

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bad thing. We had few adult supports; most of our parents knew each other from the country club, making it too awkward to ask another adult for advice or help.

We were taught that there are certain things that you just do not discuss outside of the home, these being the very same topics we were desperately trying to understand. The parents who did notice tended to look away, especially if they lived nearby. They also had no idea what to do, especially since many of the problems required more than a band-aid or a quick fix.

I had some friends in neighboring towns, and I would try to spend lots of time at their homes. Looking back, I realize now that these friends' parents were not as driven by money, which translated into them being home on a more regular basis, which gave them an opportunity to really get to know their kids. Their homes had a mom calling everyone together for meals during which they had fun, or even substantial conversations. Not nearly as many topics were taboo, and everyone was allowed to have their own opinions. They may have been teased for their ideas, but it was usually good-natured ribbing and did not lead to a "go to your room." Being there was like being in a fantasy, or a sitcom from the seventies. It was wonderful.

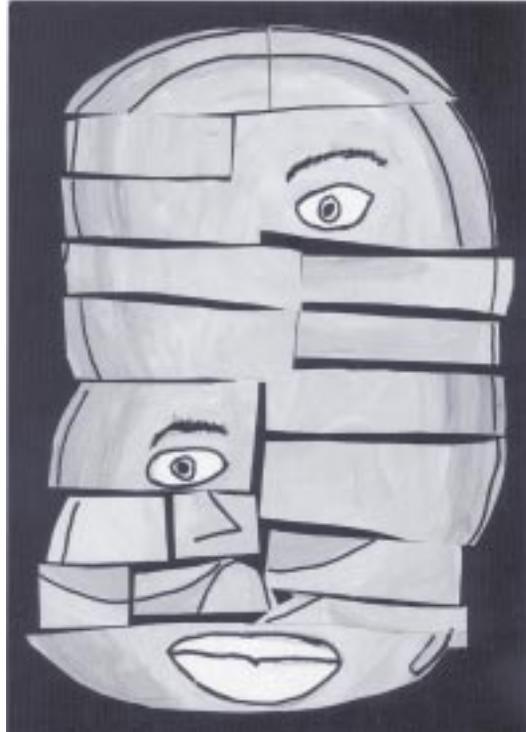
I knew some kids in the city, too, and the funny thing is, they did not get into nearly as much trouble as we did. They always had busy schedules, with no time to waste. Most of them had their act more together than any of us ever did because they had adult role models and they had after school programs. They certainly had tougher reputations, but we just never got caught.

The money-equals-happiness theory may have a ring of truth to it, as money buys us food, a roof over our heads and a million luxuries. However, the concept that much more money brings much more happiness is not always true, my town being a perfect example of this. Too much of anything is bad, and even money tends to come at a price.

Growing up is difficult, no matter what the circumstance. We all work very hard and are tired at night. We could all use a few more hours in a day. Kids are expensive, but all kids need time with mentors and role models much more than they need that new pair of Nikes.

I hear that my town's attitudes are healthier now, and the parents more attentive. Raising the drinking age has helped. Drugs, cigarettes and drinking aren't cool anymore, and I hope it stays that way. Otherwise, my hometown has not changed, and that really is a shame.

I considered trying to start an after school



Adreana, grade 4, Brooklyn

program in my hometown, but I knew they would not want my kind there, especially to work with their kids, kids I understood because I used to be one of them. So, I moved to a large city and fabricated a playroom for children with AIDS. I am on the board of a non-profit organization that helps the families of kids with terminal diseases. Recently, an arts education program has asked me to teach at a planned, inner-city after school program, and I am very much looking forward to it.

It is a terrible shame to me that my hometown does not realize that after school programs are necessary for all children of all ages in order to help them understand more about life and themselves. No matter what their financial background, kids are kids. They need to be heard and understood. They require guidance, positive role models and meaningful activities.

I hear they are thinking about opening a teen center in my hometown. But then, they've been talking about that for the past twenty years.