

An Open Letter to the Town Council and Participants in the Town Forum on Crime and Safety and the Citizens of Cape Charles, April 23, 2007

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When communities grapple the issues of crime and safety issues, the discussion eventually comes around to what can be done to prevent juvenile crime. As an experienced educator and child and youth development professional, I have worked actively to help families, schools, and communities across the nation in their efforts to help kids succeed and become productive, contributing members of their communities. I am unable to attend the meeting this evening because of youth and community development work in other parts of Virginia this week. However, as a Cape Charles citizen, I think crime and safety issues, along with youth development issues, are critically important to the Cape Charles community. Therefore, I am offering these comments from my perspective and experience as an educator and as a child, youth, family, and community development professional.

Juvenile crime, vandalism, teen pregnancy, and other public health and safety issues related to youth are not new issues. As concerns about youth-related crime have grown over the past thirty-five years, many organizations have conducted research studies and developed community-based pilot programs to determine the best approach to addressing and reducing juvenile crime and related undesirable behaviors.

Overwhelmingly, the research has shown that the best way to reduce juvenile crime is a preventive approach. Furthermore, preventive approaches that focus on *positive youth development* rather than *threats of punitive action* are the most successful, the most practical, and the most cost effective for communities. (See research data provided with this letter.) When communities focus on positive youth development rather than on "fixing what's wrong with youth," study after study shows that youth become more involved as positive contributors to their communities, rather than participants in juvenile crime, vandalism, and other destructive actions.

In light of research findings, *positive youth development* initiatives have now become the major focus of the field of youth development. The Search Institute in Minneapolis, Minnesota, has become a clearinghouse for some of the most important research on positive youth development. Key research findings are published in the Institute's book: *What Kids Need to Succeed* (a guide for families and communities) and in reports from the Center for Early Adolescence at the University of North Carolina. It is my strong belief that it is time for Cape Charles to explore and embrace the development a community-wide positive youth development initiative. With this in mind, I am sharing highlights of the research findings here. Following each set of findings, I have posed *Questions for Consideration* by citizens of Cape Charles. It is my professional opinion that it is time for

Cape Charles to develop thoughtful answers and actions in response to these and other important questions.

### **Key Research Finding #1: The Seven Needs of Adolescence (From the University of North Carolina)**

As children enter adolescence and are subject to the influences in the world beyond their home and family (school, the media, the community, peers, etc.), they need support for *seven developmental needs* during their out-of-school hours:

- 1) *The Need for Physical Activity* (developing physical skills and abilities, getting exercise, developing healthy physical habits, testing physical limits and capacities in safe, supportive settings)
- 2) *The Need for Competence and Achievement* (opportunities to get good at doing things, including a variety of life skills and talent-related skills)
- 3) *The Need for Self-Definition* (opportunities to reflect on who they are as part of their family, race, culture, gender, religion, community, country, etc.)
- 4) *The Need for Creative Expression* (outlets for expressing new thoughts, emotions, and ideas)
- 5) *The Need for Positive Social Interaction* (communicating, cooperating, problem solving, planning and enjoying social events with peers AND adults)
- 6) *The Need for Structure and Clear Limits* (working within boundaries, participating in shaping reasonable rules and guidelines, understanding the structure of systems of knowledge)
- 7) *The Need for Meaningful Participation* (opportunities to participate in activities and experiences where youth can make a difference, where youth can serve others, where youth can deepen their commitment to being the best they can be and help others do the same)

### **QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION**

- What are we doing as a community to support these needs in our youth as they explore the world beyond home and family?
- What could we do as a community to ensure our youth receive support in these areas?
- How would the community as a whole benefit if we made a concerted community effort to support these needs of children and youth? How would this support and contribute to community safety and health?

## **Key Research Finding 2: The 40 Developmental Assets (From The Search Institute)**

The Search Institute identified the following building blocks of healthy development that help young people grow up healthy, caring, and responsible.

### **External Assets**

#### **Support**

- 1. Family support** – Family life provides high levels of love and support.
- 2. Positive family communication** – Young person and her or his parent(s) communicate positively, and young person is willing to seek advice and counsel from parents.
- 3. Other adult relationships** – Young person receives support from three or more non-parent adults.
- 4. Caring neighborhood** – Young person experiences caring neighbors.
- 5. Caring school climate** – School provides a caring, encouraging environment.
- 6. Parent involvement in schooling** – Parent(s) are actively involved in helping young person succeed in school.

#### **Empowerment**

- 7. Community values youth** – Young person perceives that adults in the community value youth.
- 8. Youth as resources** – Young people are given useful roles in the community.
- 9. Service to others** – Young person serves in the community one hour or more per week.
- 10. Safety** – Young person feels safe at home, at school, and in the neighborhood.

#### **Boundaries and Expectations**

- 11. Family boundaries** – Family has clear rules and consequences and monitors the young person's whereabouts.
- 12. School boundaries** – School provides clear rules and consequences.
- 13. Neighborhood boundaries** – Neighbors take responsibility for monitoring young people's behavior.
- 14. Adult role models** – Parent(s) and other adults model positive, responsible behavior.
- 15. Positive peer influence** – Young person's best friends model responsible behavior.
- 16. High expectations** – Both parent(s) and teachers encourage the young person to do well.

## **Constructive Use of Time**

- 17. Creative activities** – Young person spends three or more hours per week in lessons or practice in music, theater, or other arts.
- 18. Youth programs** – Young person spends three or more hours per week in sports, clubs, or organizations at school and/or in the community.
- 19. Religious community** – Young person spends one or more hours per week in activities in a religious institution.
- 20. Time at home** – Young person is out with friends “with nothing special to do” two or fewer nights per week.

## **Internal Assets**

### **Commitment to Learning**

- 21. Achievement motivation** – Young person is motivated to do well in school.
- 22. School engagement** – Young person is actively engaged in learning.
- 23. Homework** – Young person reports doing at least one hour of homework every school day.
- 24. Bonding to school** – Young person cares about her or his school.
- 25. Reading for pleasure** – Young person reads for pleasure three or more hours per week.

### **Positive Values**

- 26. Caring** – Young person places high value on helping other people.
- 27. Equality and social justice** – Young person places high value on promoting equality and reducing hunger and poverty.
- 28. Integrity** – Young person acts on convictions and stands up for her or his beliefs.
- 29. Honesty** – Young person “tells the truth even when it is not easy”.
- 30. Responsibility** – Young person accepts and takes personal responsibility.
- 31. Restraint** – Young person believes it is important not to be sexually active or to use alcohol or other drugs.

### **Social Competencies**

- 32. Planning and decision making** – Young person knows how to plan ahead and make choices.
- 33. Interpersonal competence** – Young person has empathy, sensitivity, and friendship skills.
- 34. Cultural competence** – Young person has knowledge of and comfort with people of different cultural/racial/ethnic backgrounds.
- 35. Resistance skills** – Young person can resist negative peer pressure and dangerous situations.
- 36. Peaceful conflict resolution** – Young person seeks to resolve conflict nonviolently.

**Positive Identity**

**37. Personal power** – Young person feels he or she has control over “things that happen to me”.

**38. Self-esteem** – Young person reports having a high self-esteem.

**39. Sense of purpose** – Young person reports that “my life has a purpose”.

**40. Positive view of personal future** – Young person is optimistic about her or his personal future.

**QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION:**

- Why do you think it could be important for communities AS WELL AS families to promote Assets in youth?
- Which of the 40 Assets are currently being supported by the community of Cape Chares?
- Which could be supported and developed by the community?
- How would the community as a whole benefit if we made a concerted community effort to support these needs of children and youth? How would this support contribute to community safety and health?

NOTE: See reports on the relationship of these Assets to High-Risk AND Thriving Indicators provided with this letter.

**Key Research Finding #3: How Positive Youth Development Initiatives Support Asset-Building (From the Search Institute)**

The Search Institute found that an asset-building perspective transforms the way communities address youth issues and think about youth. Some of the differences are:

**COMMON APPROACHES TO YOUTH ISSUES**

**AN ASSET-BUILDING APPROACH**

Focusing on problems.....Focusing on the positive

Pointing fingers and assigning blame.....Taking personal responsibility for making a difference

Reactive.....Proactive

Heavy reliance on professionals.....Mobilizing the public as well as all youth-serving organizations in a community

Viewing youth as problems.....Viewing youth as resources

A crisis-management mentality.....A vision-building perspective

Competition among sectors and.....Cooperation within the community service providers

Heavy reliance on public funding to.....Unleashing the caring potential of all residents and organizations so that public resources can be focused on areas of greatest need  
provide services

Despair about entrenched problems.....Hope that change is possible

### **QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION**

- What would happen if Cape Charles citizens embraced a positive Asset-building approach to youth development?
- How would Cape Charles youth benefit? How would the community at-large benefit? How would this approach contribute to community safety and health?

### **FINAL THOUGHTS**

During the 14 years I have lived in Cape Charles, there have been occasional community-based efforts to engage youth in positive activities for short periods of times such as special events held on holidays and during community celebrations. In the past few years, several organizations and agencies have offered periodic camping experiences and special classes and workshops. This is certainly a step in the right direction.

However, as a town, we have not made a commitment to developing a systematic approach to supporting our children and youth and helping them become actively engaged as productive, contributing members of a community. We have not come together and affirmed that we treasure our children and youth, that we value them, that we want them to feel a sense of belonging. We have not provided them with a right of passage into the community as a whole. They remain on the periphery – hanging out at the Gazebo in the summer, walking the streets when it's warm enough to do so. As an adult community, we have not paid public attention to them, except to notice when they get into trouble or offend our sensibilities with their impolite language or behavior. Over the years, I have observed numerous children, youth, and their parents come to Town Council Meetings and virtually beg (always articulately and politely) for the town to provide recreational activities and facilities that will allow children to enjoy social activities in a positive, safe community setting. Everyone at the meetings – Council Members and observers – always smile, comment on how cute the kids are, and indicate in various ways that “we really need to respond to this.” I admit it, I've done this myself. But, nothing ever happens. At one point last year, the Council agreed to inventory our resources for kids to see what's currently available before moving ahead with any initiatives. We often

have the best of intentions, but we don't follow through. To my knowledge, no inventory was done.

I think we need to adopt a new slogan for supporting youth in the Cape Charles Community: ***"It's about TIME!"***

- ***It's about TIME to recognize that TIME is kids' currency.*** It's what they have to spend! Right now, we offer kids few positive opportunities to SPEND THEIR TIME in productive ways. With a lack of community-based activities, kids are left to their own devices and lots of their valuable TIME CURRENCY is spent wasting the hours away. They do not have opportunities to INVEST their TIME CURRENCY, BUILD THEIR ASSETS, and CREATE FUTURES FULL OF POTENTIAL.
- ***It's about TIME to organize adults in the community who have lots of talents, skills, and knowledge to share with youth – time to recognize that if every adult invested just a little TIME with kids, it would greatly increase the likelihood that our youth will become positive, productive community members with LESS TIME for unproductive, unsafe behavior.***
- ***It's about TIME to stop punitive knee-jerk reactions when things go wrong.***
- ***It's about TIME to take a systematic approach to helping our youth grow and thrive as viable members of the community. It's about TIME to identify and apply for resources to support youth initiatives in our community.*** While individual and organizational efforts to add something for youth in the community are important (holiday celebrations, short-term camps, a new Merry Go Round, a playground, a skate-board park, arts activities, even a new mini-golf!) – we need a strategic plan for doing right by our youth and helping them become part of the community. We have Commissions to study things we have determined are important to the community – Zoning Commission, Planning Commission, etc. ***It's about TIME to embrace the idea that are youth are important to us and to establish a Commission on Children and Youth – a broad-based Commission that includes youth professionals, community members, law enforcement officials, as well as youth and parent representatives – a Commission charged with the responsibility for developing a comprehensive, thoughtful long range plan for engaging youth in meaningful community experiences and keeping all our citizens safe and healthy.*** Other established Commissions always yield results. There are many resources available to help us make the same commitment to results for our youth! Let's do it now!

Respectfully submitted,

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