

at the UW-La Crosse campus

Counselor REACHes out to students

Mary Torstveit doesn't mind if her students talk about sex and drugs. In fact, it's part of their job.

Torstveit, Alcohol and Drug Abuse Coordinator at UW-La Crosse, heads a student education group that talks to fellow students about sex, alcohol and other drugs. Called REACH and SHARE, the peer program began in 1987. Torstveit, a former high school biology teacher and counselor hired to establish a federally-funded alcohol program, realized she couldn't run all the presentations herself. So she organized a group of six students to help give lectures. But she discovered that when she led



programs, about a dozen students would attend. The students, however, would draw about 50 each program.

“It didn't take me long to figure out which method was the most effective,” says Torstveit. The peer assistance approach was born. Now about 40 students are active peer educators each year and can receive academic credit for their on-the-job training. They come from different majors and campus organizations. In 1993, student athletes became more involved after the university received one of eight NCAA \$13,500 grants for education of alcohol-related problems.

While the first programs focused on alcohol, discussions now include sexual assault and harassment, as well as AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Torstveit says drinking and these sexuality issues go hand-in-hand.

As the program grew, Torstveit discovered that plays have more impact than lectures. Now her students give short theatrical productions of typical day-to-day situations, covering alcohol, other drugs, STDs, AIDS and sexual assault and harassment. The students help her write the scripts. “The skits portray everyday situations in their language,” says Torstveit. The students also use media — startling posters, statistics, charts, flyers, music, slides and ads — to emphasize their points.

Success of the educational programs is hard to pinpoint, but Torstveit believes the peer approach works best. Students attending REACH/SHARE programs point to the peer approach as the way to talk about drugs and sex.

Mary Torstveit says being part of this educational process is special. “It's the neatest, exciting process I've ever seen,” she says. “It's really a privilege to work with these students. It's the most meaningful vocational opportunity I've ever had in my life.”

Increasing numbers of students wanting to become peer educators indicates success, too.

Along with helping others, REACH and SHARE helps prepare the peer assistants for life after college. Torstveit — “Mary T” to her students — sees this as one of the most rewarding aspects, and a sign of success. She says the peer educators get a new understanding of current societal issues, along with personal skills. “They come in the program with a general knowledge of these societal topics, but leave with a deeper commitment to these issues,” she explains.

The students also find out about giving back to the community. Along with presenting more than 100 programs on campus, they speak at civic meetings and area high schools. They have also helped curb trouble in downtown La Crosse. Torstveit and her students joined other campus groups and La Crosse Police to discuss ways to stop annual revelry after a canoe race that had turned into riots. Their plan of promoting responsible behavior and holding non-alcoholic alternative parties worked — arrests were low and no riot. “Their involvement shatters some stereotypes that students only go to college to have a good time and party, while being insensitive to community issues,” notes Torstveit.

Notoriety extends beyond La Crosse. Last November, REACH and SHARE was the only university group asked to the International Conference on AIDS Education in Chicago to address the impact of the disease on college campuses.

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