

# CELEBRATION OF LIFE DAY

## Grand Blanc Community Schools Grand Blanc, Michigan

In the Fall of 1997, two middle school students in our district committed suicide within a short period of time. The Superintendent of Schools immediately formed a task force of volunteers from staff, families, and community members. Representatives from each of the Partnership Action Teams also became members of this task force. Plans were made to heighten the awareness of suicide as a social problem and to educate the students, families, and community about signs and prevention of suicide.

The school district sponsored The Light for Life Foundation from Westminster, Colorado to conduct a series of Yellow Ribbon workshops and presentations over a three-day period to students in grades 6-12, families, community members, and all school personnel.

Due to the age of the elementary students, the task force recommended a different approach to addressing the information and developing preventative measures for students in grade five. Thus the Partnership Action Teams planned the Celebration of Life Day, and resource people offering time to assist, funding, or donations collaborated in the effort.

The day began when all fifth graders from each of the elementary schools, approximately 450, arrived at a local park at 9:30am to hear the age-appropriate information presented by The Light for Life Foundation. Time was allowed for students to ask questions, and then they began group rotations through the activities directed and supervised by staff, family, and community members.

The activities included line dancing, CPR instruction, planting flowers and trees around the park, field day games, group trust-building activities, and planting flowers in pots to take home. Volunteers from the local fire department, Girl Scouts, a counseling center, local churches, a local college, local businesses, and senior citizen groups helped with the activities.

Each student received a new T- shirt with a "Celebration of Life" logo on the front that was designed by a custodian from one of the participating elementary schools. These were a big "hit" with the students.

Lunch was donated by businesses in the community, and was prepared by the DARE Police Officers of the community. Volunteers from the State Representative's office and the Superintendents of Schools' office assisted in serving the students.

The students returned to their individual schools at 2:30 in the afternoon to share their impressions of the day with their teacher and classmates in a small group setting. Some of the teachers asked their students to write their impressions of the day, and these demonstrated that the students had gained an understanding of the goal of the day. Here are some of the quotes from the students:

- “Thank you for letting me know it is alright to be scared and upset. From now on I will talk to someone when I am feeling down.”
- “I hope those plants will live for a long time like every person should.”
- “The games really connected to tell us that life is really fun.”
- “The speech really affected me. It made me feel good about me. I WILL remember for my life.”
- “I learned to talk to someone when I need help.”
- “...And I get why we planted flowers, because we were planting life.”

Some of the comments from the families of the students:

- “Thank you for sending such a positive message to our young people in a fun way. We appreciate all the efforts of the field day.”
- “The celebration was a very well-organized event. I believe that the students understood the message and enjoyed the whole day. Only the future will show if it pays off, by saving the life of a child (person) in need.”
- “Thank you for caring about my child and all the others.”
- “I believe this was a positive experience for the 5<sup>th</sup> graders. Hopefully they will retain this information if needed sometime in their life.”

Families and students were asked to complete evaluations regarding the value of the day, and all the results were positive. Feedback from the community was also extremely positive. As one of the parents stated, only the future will reveal if this day was successful in reaching our goal. As of this time, there has not been another suicide of a child in our school district, for which we are extremely grateful. Staff members continue to wear the yellow ribbons; the Yellow Ribbon Cards are still available for the students; and two of the elementary schools are continuing with a Celebration of Life Day this year.

It is worth noting that Grand Blanc School District had just adopted the Partnership program and formed Action Teams only three months prior to these incidents. How fortunate we were to already have an organizational plan in place to address such a tremendous task of educating our schools, families, and community to save our children.

Martha Weiss, District Facilitator  
(810) 629-8275