



Youth Millennium

Youth Millennium is a group of at-risk young people with mental health challenges who have come together to support each other, build their capacities, and make a positive difference through service in their community. The teenage members of *Youth Millennium* have acted on their commitment to service by volunteering in the Jefferson County community, particularly in the City of Birmingham.

Youth Millennium was established in 1999 for adolescents ages 13 to 19 who are receiving services through a federal grant given to Alabama under the Center for Mental Health Services' Comprehensive Community Mental Health Services for Children and their Families program. The Jefferson County Community Partnership (JCCP) provides a comprehensive system of care for at-risk adolescents and their families from sites located at two Birmingham City Schools, two Jefferson County alternative schools, juvenile court, and child welfare.

The members of *Youth Millennium* defined their own mission statement:

To function as a core group of young individuals coming together to: overcome our problems, reach our goals and sustain progress, develop our leadership skills, help others in our community, socialize with each other and meet different people, come up with new ideas, and have fun! We will accomplish this mission by conveying respect and ensuring confidentiality among all our members.

In building the idea of service into the mission statement, the youth recognized their capacity to provide value in the community and to put into practice the social and leadership skills which they were developing through their participation in the group. Adults who worked with the young people saw the group as filling a community need for opportunities for positive youth development. Ongoing formal training in social skills, leadership, and cultural diversity help prepare participating youth to design and undertake successful service projects.

Youth Millennium recruits from adolescents within the JCCP/ COPE (Children Overcoming Problems Everyday)

program who have made significant progress in managing their mental health symptoms, who have leadership capabilities, and who have an interest in giving back to their community. After the first year, the members of *Youth Millennium* went beyond socializing and having fun. By the time group members made their first visit to the Patrician Assisted Living Facility in December 1999, it was apparent that they were ready to take on a greater commitment to service in the upcoming years. During the next year, the group made great strides. The core group recruited new members and received leadership and cultural diversity training to strengthen the group. *Youth Millennium* also committed to several social additional service projects. For Christmas 2000, the group raised money from a doughnut sale and purchased Christmas presents for a family with AIDS. The Youth Millennium vice-president, Alex Grissett, said of his experience with service:

It gives me a sense of self respect knowing that I could make a difference in someone else's life.... We [*Youth Millennium*] are often looked at as troubled kids, so when people in the community see us doing something positive it gives them a better perspective of us.

The group provides community service to several organizations on a monthly and quarterly basis. *Youth Millennium* works with the Patrician Assisted Living Facility, Habitat for Humanity, and Jesse's Place (a shelter for abused women and children). The group has learned that they enjoy the visits as much as the residents from the assisted living facility:

There's one older gentleman who sits and plays checkers with the group and talks to them.... He has a lot of personality, and when they arrive at the facility the group runs to get in line to play him in a game of checkers, even though no one has been able to beat him at the game.

—Cheryl Wiggins, a youth advisor.

“It makes me feel good,” says Danielle Thompson, *Youth Millennium* treasurer. Danielle was hesitant at first about visiting the facility, but says her views have changed and that she is happy to see the residents smile when the group visits. The group agreed that doing things to enrich the lives of others allows them to learn responsibility while also making people feel better.

By the end of 2001, *Youth Millennium* will have donated food, clothing, time, and money to several community organizations in Jefferson County. The group will be able to accomplish these service projects by raising money from car washes, doughnut sales, and charity events such as a 70s party and a Halloween party. The group has been recognized by the community for their efforts toward enriching the lives of others. The group’s most memorable recognition was being invited to see Tiger Woods by the Mayor of Birmingham’s Division of Youth Service.

Youth Millennium continues to experience growing pains, but through hard work and commitment to their mission, members in *Youth Millennium* have discovered that they are capable of overcoming obstacles, taking risks, developing leadership, and enriching the lives of others.

Chalonda Smith, BSW, MS is the Youth Coordinator for the Jefferson County Community Partnership. Ms. Smith has been an advocate for children's mental health. She started employment with Jefferson-Blount-St. Clair Mental Health Authority's Children Services in 1997. Ms. Smith participated in the development of the Surgeon General's agenda on Children's Mental Health in Washington, DC. Ms. Smith, the founder of Project S.H.A.P.E. (Supporting & Helping Adolescent Parents through Education), continues to write grants to fund this home for unwed teenage mothers in Jefferson County.

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