

Best Practice

The Southeast Asian Villages Project

The Southeast Asian Teen Village (CAF) has helped its members tap their cultural strengths to combat depression, fear, alienation and hopelessness. The self awareness, skill and cultural knowledge demonstrated by co-leaders, Lynn Connors and Nou Yang, are instrumental to the program's success. The fact that they have sustained the program's cultural and clinical efficacy for the last 5 years despite funding, systemic and staffing challenges is a clear example of best practice.

In Southeast Asian culture the village is the vessel in which social, spiritual and work life are carried. Along with communal support, the village offers a sense of place and purpose as well as a connection with the past, present and future. Many of the Southeast Asian adolescents Lynn serves have lost or never known these benefits because of their families' refugee experience. Lynn set about recreating the "village" atmosphere in her group therapy sessions as a way of grounding young people who often felt suspended between two cultures.

In this therapeutic milieu, Lynn encourages artistic (writing, painting, story telling) expression of feelings that are too painful, frightening or confusing to be directly spoken. Village "Elders" are chosen and charged with helping to transmit cultural mores and norms to new members. Parents and family members are enlisted as partners in the village experience. Lynn has spent a good deal of time in the Southeast Asian community joining, listening and learning. As a result, she has gained the trust of both the teens, the parents and their elders.

Lynn is the first to acknowledge that her efforts would have fallen short of their goal without the significant contribution of her co-therapist and cultural liaison, Nou Yang. Nou is Hmong and offers a role model to young women who are trying to find their own cultural identities. She is a bridge between CAF and the girls' parents, some of whom speak little or no English. She has reached out with compassion and sensitivity to troubled youth from many Southeast Asian cultures besides her own. The multicultural example set by Nou and Lynn has helped make the "Village" a place where trust and empathy extend across ethnic and racial boundaries.

The purpose of this column is to showcase services at The Mental Health Center that demonstrate clinical/cultural proficiency, innovative service delivery and high consumer satisfaction. I am starting this column to provide another forum for celebrating our diversity, to share ideas and methodology for professional growth and to benefit the people we serve. I invite other staff to submit for future Newsletters examples of exemplary work being done at The Mental Health Center. Please send your submissions to Linda Kastein-Puls under the title, "Best Practice".