

VIEWPOINT

'Local Peace Corps' taps youthful openness



STEVEN WOODZELL/FOR THE SUNDAY GAZETTE

Really good kids

By RUTH PETERSON
For *The Sunday Gazette*

There's a natural untapped quality in many young people that tends toward helping others. Call it idealism, or as-yet-uncorrupted generosity.

JFK recognized that potential, and in establishing the Peace Corps in 1961, he aimed not only to help those less fortunate throughout the world, but to have those in other lands get to know Americans and to have Americans get to know people of other cultures.

One of the realities of life for young Americans then and now is that at the very age when they might be participating in public service, they may also need to be earning money in order to further their education. Following a sermonette delivered by Jeffrey Coplon at Temple Gates of Heaven in 1970, that congregation made "a greater commitment to the moral and social agenda that has always defined a Jew." Proposed by David Coplon, the Temple Community Service Corps, a "Local Peace Corps" was born, and is now in its 25th year.

The TCSC is financed by contributions from the congregation and fund-raising projects. High school and college youth who qualify are paid the

hourly minimum wage for six to eight weeks of full- or part-time work at community agencies such as day care centers, girls' and boys' clubs, nursing homes, job placement, food distribution and arts centers. The program has been recognized for its excellence with the prestigious National UAHC Award (Union of American Hebrew Congregations) — designed for "congregations that conduct social action programs of special distinction."

There is an application process, and an attempt is made to match successful applicants to jobs that will challenge them, and to agencies in need of dependable help. Partway through the experience, participants meet with the TCSC committee for a progress report and, at the end of the assignment, they submit a written report to TCSC.

LESSON LEARNED

Speaking of her experience at Girls Inc.'s Camp Brookledge, Jessica writes, "Every morning, [the girls] are so excited to see... the counselors, as if it's been a year since we've seen each other. I was considering having a career that deals with children. Now that I have experienced a job dealing with children, I'm looking into it more seriously."

Olga describes emotions ranging from scared to thrilled in her work at The Hamilton Hill Arts Center. The work site frightened her at first, but she learned that it wasn't "as bad as some people say" because there is a sense of unity, and the Arts Center works as a team.

Young men, as well as women, signed on to work with children. Josh calls it a "privilege" and "an opportunity" to work at Camp Love Joy where, dealing with kids aged 6-13, he learned much about poverty and the effect of broken homes — factors he said make "many responsibilities like discipline very difficult."

Mike describes himself as "that abnormally tall person standing to the side" on the first day of work at the Schenectady Day Nursery. But through conversation with the kids, helping at meals, playing UNO, and his unique way of pulling them up to full height on the swings and letting them start from there, he grew to know these children as individuals, and one can't help but think he endeared himself to them.

At the other end of the age spectrum, Ally worked in the Memory Enhancement Unit at Daughters of Sarah Nursing Home for three years.

See **YOUTHS**, page F3

Youths

Continued from page F1

She helped provide activities for 35 Alzheimer's and dementia patients, and says you "cannot help but grow extremely close to residents." She tried to "peel away the layers touched by old age and Alzheimer's to uncover the personal story each resident still kept hidden in their core."

Scott also worked at Daughters of Sarah and said he didn't feel like he was going to work when he went there. He had lengthy talks with residents about their early lives or politics, and was surprised at how interested they were in his life.

We admire the spontaneity and enthusiasm of these young people. It was adult pragmatism, however, that recognized that without sponsorship, many would have had to pump gas or wait on tables to help meet their educational goals. Instead, they were gaining invaluable knowledge about society and societal needs while providing services. What prevents any church, synagogue, mosque, service club or organization from doing the same for their youthful constituents?

Perhaps we should also be asking the broader question.

Instead of sending our young men and women to kill and be killed in a sadly misguided war in Iraq at unimaginable expense to our country, why not tap their energy and generosity for community service? Imagine the financial savings, the transformation of our image in the world, and the service that could be rendered to our eldest, youngest and most needy citizens.

Ruth Peterson lives in Alplaus. The Gazette encourages readers to submit material on local issues for the Sunday Opinion section.