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# Your Life



Jennifer White of the Dare to Dream Institute opens her front door to let Joshua Coleman into her home for a meeting and pizza. The Dare to Dream Institute, founded by White, is a non-profit organization dedicated to empowering children. MARINA SAMOVSKY / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

## Daring to Dream

*Institute teaches troubled adolescents self-worth through hard work and caring relationships*

**By Judy Masterson**  
STAFF WRITER

WAUKEGAN — Neighbors on the street peek out their windows, wishing the loud, loitering teen-age boys would find another hangout. But one man, who's been sitting on his front stoop eating popcorn with his small children, takes the bowl over to the boys.

He soon knows their names and ages. He knows that one 16-year-old has not been in school for three years. He knows the look in their eyes and what it means. And they know that at least one adult cares to know them. Cares to know who they are and where they are going.

They are the unnoticed, who sit back uninterested, who get pregnant, do violence, drop out.

Engagement in the learning process begins, the Whites believe, with a relationship between teacher

and student because it is through relationship that people find motivation to change.

### Al Fresca

For the last four years the Whites have worked with troubled adolescents through their Al Fresca Project, an esteem-building program which pays kids to learn the catering business.

Through Al Fresca, teens who are drunks, premature parents or gang bangers, learn to bake breads and desserts. They learn social and job skills. They discover their own self-worth.

"Work, if you do it right, should teach you about yourself," said Mark White, a former instructor at the College of Lake County.

Al Fresca provides the framework and the Whites provide the caring relationship for children after institutions have all but given

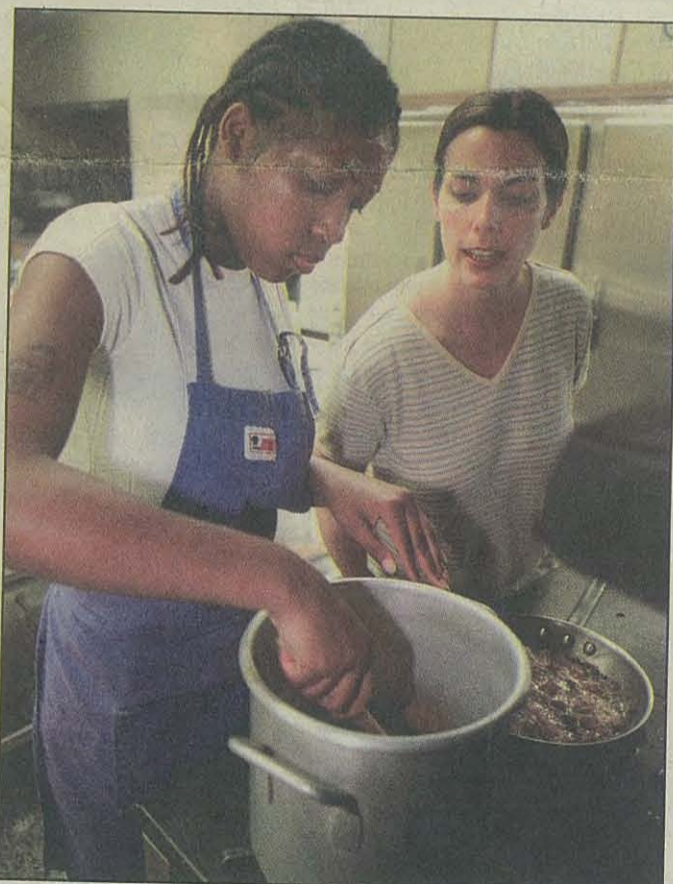
up on them. Such youth are referred to them by schools, social agencies and parents desperate for help.

"The job and the money is the hook," said Jennifer White. "They want a summer job or the terms of their probation dictates one. But the goal is to go through our empowerment program with two adult figures outside the court system to help mentor them.

"All of them have had failures, usually in school first. They're so afraid to make mistakes."

"We shouldn't punish for failing," Mark White said. "Failure is learning what doesn't work."

Elizabeth Nunez, 18, spent two summers working with the Whites through Al Fresca. She met them through a friend who had "caught a case."



Lareice Means, 14, of Waukegan stirs some apricots for apricot bars they are making as Jennifer White, director of programs and student assistance for the Dare to Dream Institute, looks on at the Al Fresca Project at Jack Benny School in Waukegan.

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# DREAM

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"I've never met anyone like them," Nunez said. "They go out of their way to help others find the right path. Most people wouldn't do that."

A graduate of Waukegan High School, Nunez works as a clerk for the North Chicago school district and plans to attend college. She said one of the most important lessons she learned from the Whites was how to deal with anger. "If someone comes at me angry, I'll try to hear them instead of getting angry myself," she said. "If I give them an attitude, it starts a conflict."

Dare to Dream helped rescue the brother of Vianney Casillas, a nurse for the Lake County Health Department and now a board member for the organization. When the boy was threatened with expulsion from Waukegan High School because of a behavioral disorder, the Whites advocated for him in school and counseled his mother.

The young man participated in Al Fresca and graduated from high school. "He made it because of Mark and Jennifer's help and support," Casillas said. "Kicking a kid out because they don't fit in is the simple solution. But students with behavioral problems have a right to an education. Their families have a right to help and support."

Casillas now refers troubled teens to Dare to Dream.

"It's wonderful to know they are there to help people, not judge them," she said.

## Educating community

When a family or a community has trouble with its children, it first needs to look inward, to discover how it has failed its young, how it has failed itself, the Whites believe.

"The kids they work with don't fit into the system," said Marilyn Krieger, a Dare to Dream board member and director of special recreation for the Zion Park District. "Parents have a hard time with that. The Whites put the value on the individual child. They ask what can we do for this kid and how can we make the system fit the kid.

What can we do as a system to help this child reach their full potential."

"We need to look at ourselves," said Jennifer White. "Kids are not being engaged. It's up to adults to do the engaging. Some parents can't give enough love to the children they have. There's not enough community support. What you put in, is what you get out."

Parents should hold high expectations for their children and teach them how to set goals they may have to struggle to reach. It's through trying and risking, perhaps failing and trying again, that true happiness and self-knowledge come, according to the Whites.

Parents can best serve their children through open and honest relationships, by sharing their own hopes, dreams and failures.

Mark White said parents often confuse discipline and punishment. The root of the word *discipline* is disciple or to follow. Punishment undermines true discipline, the Whites believe, which is the strength to follow inner convictions.

Punishment fails to teach a better way. Force begets force, the Whites say. Hurt a child, he will hurt back. He will fail to trust.

The Whites insist that a lack of trust is the core of many behavior and emotional problems. Lack of trust in themselves, in their environment, makes a child afraid to take chances, afraid to succeed.

"Trusting in themselves allows for healthy choice making," Jennifer White said.

Too many parents push their children to get the best grades, to get into the best schools, so they can ultimately earn six figures, none of which is a guarantee of fulfillment. Some children crumble from the pressure, afraid they'll fail, said the Whites, pointing to growing suicide rates among teens from all income levels.

"We don't help kids learn about themselves," said White. "As a society, we look to making money as the key, instead of who are you and how will you be happy."

The Whites and their institute recently helped land a \$50,000 federal grant for Waukegan High School. The money will help the school create smaller, more personalized learning communities for students.

## Get involved

Those interested in learning more about the program can call: 662-9903 or visit [www.2dream.net](http://www.2dream.net).

The organization's reading list includes:

■ *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Families: Building a Beautiful Family Culture in a Turbulent World*, Stephen R. Covey.

■ *Kids Are Worth It: Giving Your Child the Gift of Inner Discipline*, Barbara Colorosa.

■ *Power Vs. Force: An Anatomy of Consciousness*, Dr. David Hawkins.

"They're very pro-student and very humanistic in their approach to education," said Kim Zupec, principal of Waukegan High. "Working with Jennifer forced us, as we wrote the grant, to make sure we were focusing on what was good for kids."

The Whites will move to southern Illinois at the end of the summer. They hope to take some of their ideas aimed at reshaping education to the state level. They hope to train other adults to take over some of their work here.

They plan to expand Al Fresca to provide more intensive support in the home and to build relationships between the families of participants. They're also working to develop a research project which will track participant's progress for two years.

With so many kids in trouble and so few adults like the Whites, willing to act on their ideals, it's tempting to ask: is there hope?

Zupec said yes. "I appreciate their (the Whites) idealism and the notion that we can make a difference in one kid's life," she said. "We have to believe that we can."

"The hardest part is when students don't make it," said Jennifer White, "when they don't reach some standard or when the family or community doesn't. But that's part of the journey. It's just as much our journey as theirs."

"Dare to Dream may affect only a handful of kids at a time," said Melissa Green, executive director of Success in Schools of Lake County. "But

the impact it has can branch out so that it touches those children's families, those children's peers, where those children work and live."

Green said that grass-roots movements like Dare to Dream are the best way to affect institutional change. "Big systems are hard to change even when you can provide evidence that there's a better way to do things," she said. "The cost of the change and the cost of the fear of change is so high. Dare to Dream is showing it can happen in our own community."

Teens in this year's Al Fresca program will do the cooking for four Louisiana Boil fund-raisers to be held at the Waukegan Harbor from 5 to 8 p.m. June 23, July 21, Aug. 18 and Sept. 1.

## RED, SWOLLEN AND ACHING JOINTS?

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