

Collaboration prompts award for LF groups

By **STEPHANIE KOHL**
skohl@pioneerlocal.com

A social recreation collaboration between the Lake Forest High School Applied Learning Program, the Committee Representing Our Young Adults (CROYA) and the North Suburban Special Recreation Association (NSSRA) has earned a best practice initiative award.

The award, presented by the Association of Parents and Staff of the North Suburban Special Education District, recognizes the program as one that promotes understanding and inclusion of students with special needs.

The organizations worked together to provide youth and teens with special needs a fun atmosphere to build and educate themselves on recreation skills with both students who do and do not have special needs.

CROYA, 400 Hastings Road, had been running a weekly teen drop-in for teens. CROYA, Lake Forest High School and NSSRA then worked together to include students with special needs into the program and allow them an opportunity for socializing and a sense of belonging to a group.

'Support system'

"They (CROYA) are such a support system for so many students," said Carolyn Beckett, a Lake Bluff resident, parent of a student in the Applied Learning Program and member of the APS NSSRA board.

Beckett nominated the collaborative effort because of the positive experience it has provided students in the Applied Learning Program at the high school, 1285 N. McKinley Road.

"I cannot emphasize enough the impact that this collaborative effort has had

on some students in this program at the high school," Beckett said.

Todd Nahigian, assistant director of CROYA, said that since advertising the program to students with special needs in March 2009, about eight students with special needs attend on an almost weekly basis. The program usually includes some sort of business, like planning upcoming events, and ends with a fun activity like gladiator jousting or "What's Behind That Door?" The activities are usually created or planned by students who sit on the CROYA board.

staff who regularly attend the program so they would already have some familiar faces among the 70-100 students who attend on a regular basis.

"The biggest key with this was we were able to get them comfortable," said Katie Secker, a special education teacher at the high school, adding there are not many outlets where students with special needs can have typical social interactions.

Secker said she has noticed that her students who attend the CROYA teen nights have a connection with some of the other stu-

"I cannot emphasize enough the impact that this collaborative effort has had on some students in this program at the high school."

Carolyn Beckett

The idea behind the program was to give students with special needs a sense of belonging, a place to socialize and a space where they can feel comfortable hanging out with their peers, both with and without special needs.

"Once they've connected and felt comfortable, they're welcome to come to any of the programs," Nahigian said.

NSSRA, 3105 MacArthur Blvd., Northbrook, provided ability awareness training to CROYA staff to better work with students with special needs and are available to attend the programs weekly if needed, said NSSRA Executive Director Craig Culp.

'Biggest key'

In order to get the students with special needs comfortable with heading to the CROYA activities, they spent time before having lunch with students and

dents in the building, rather than just being friendly with those in the Applied Learning Program. She said the opportunity for the students to attend the teen drop-in nights also lets the community see that the students can be a part of things rather than apart from them.

"I have seen them actually coming out of their shell and engage with other students a bit," Secker said.

All of the organizations are thrilled to be part of the program and pleased with receiving an award for it.

"It's really a success story and we're happy to be a part of it," Culp said.

The social recreation collaboration will be recognized at a presentation April 20 at New Trier Northfield campus, 7 Happ Road, in Northfield.

Comment: pioneerlocal.com