

# CROYA keeps teens busy

By J.T. MORAND | STAFF WRITER  
jtmorand@pioneerlocal.com

When there's nothing to do, teens can either be constructive or destructive.

In 1980, the Committee Representing Our Young Adults was formed by Lake Forest city officials to stem the tide of drug and alcohol abuse, vandalism and teen suicides happening in Knollwood, Lake Bluff and Lake Forest.

Today, CROYA is helping teens deal with those issues, and many more, by offering social events, leadership opportunities, community service projects, emotional support and education. Most of the 300 programs offered every year are developed by the youth themselves.

For this reason, the Lake Forest American Legion has chosen to celebrate CROYA at the 98th annual Lake Forest Day Aug. 2.

Five years ago, Amy Elliot was hanging out at the beach freshman year with nothing better to do when a CROYA outreach worker convinced her to stop by the group's weekly meeting.

She's glad she did because it gave her something to do.

She participated in CROYA all four years of high school, developing leadership skills. Last year, she served as chairman on CROYA's executive committee, which governs meetings. Today, the 19-year-old Boston College student will be using her experience to teach impoverished children in Jamaica.

"A lot of times there's not a lot to do for kids around here," she said. "[CROYA] is just a good environment to put yourself into instead of feeling pressured into going to a party where you know there's going to be drinking, or going to that beach and sitting around and just having nothing to do, and getting so bored with yourself that it pushes you into doing stuff that you don't necessarily want to do."

Kamy Daddono, CROYA executive director, said CROYA started as a resource to help troubled youths, but has become a resource for all young adults to safely explore their interests and express themselves without judgment.

Activities such as weekly meetings, pool parties, retreats, community service projects, piz-

za and movie days, beach parties, scavenger hunts, dances, ski trips and Cubs games are intended to develop leadership skills and philanthropy and to provide emotional support and education.

"The most important thing that CROYA offers our young people is a safe environment where they can turn to trusting adults to explore any part of their worlds or their lives that they wish to share with other people," she said.

The opportunities offered by CROYA have helped some teens emerge from a shell to be more outgoing. Not necessarily socially, but about their own interests.

Gretchen Wooldridge, high school youth worker, said the level of involvement is up to the individual. There are no requirements, she said.

"It's all on their terms and there are endless different ways that you can find that outlet to get in," she said. "It may be by coming to one little thing or it may be by signing up for a retreat with 80 other kids."

Chrissy Ziccarelli, 18, said she was painfully shy when she started coming to CROYA in seventh grade.

But, the easy-going and accepting atmosphere caused her to open up. She learned to express herself verbally and artistically. She helped design the cover of a CD being sold to raise funds for CROYA and she earned a \$1,000 scholarship in the annual CROYA essay writing contest for seniors on what the organization means to them.

"In junior high I was incredibly shy. I had one of those meek, little voices and I was so nervous to come in here," she said with confidence. "I got involved in things at my own pace and my friends were always here to comfort me. I especially remember everyone on the staff being so welcoming every time I came back in."

"Slowly, through retreats and peer training, I learned a lot more about how I could communicate with people and I became a lot more outgoing and much better at voicing my own opinions."

She'll be attending Duke University in the fall and plans on studying art and engineering. She'll be using her experience at CROYA to help her establish friendships in college, she said.

"I think that the biggest thing I'm going to take with me is the general feeling you get when you walk in here, of being accepted," she said. "It always became, I always felt, like a level playing ground. Even though

*"The most important thing that CROYA offers our young people is a safe environment where they can turn to trusting adults to explore any part of their worlds or their lives that they wish to share with other people."*

Kamy Daddono, CROYA executive director

there are kids from all different sports teams and all different schools, you come here and you know you're all here to enjoy each other's company."

Students give much of the credit for the comfortable atmosphere to the staff, which is made up of seven adults. They've proven to be a constant

for adolescents, whose lives are in flux.

Matt Engel, 17, a senior at Lake Forest High School, said the relationships forged with staff are stronger than those made with other adults, even teachers, who can often be hard for teens to talk to.

"The teachers are there for a

year, then they're gone," he said. "You build a relationship with the staff members and they're there for six years. It just builds upon each other each year. They're a friend, a guide and a mentor. They're there when you need someone to talk to."

Activities such as the Donut Bowl, a students vs. police football game, and the Donut Cup, a students vs. police floor hockey game, also strengthen relationships with adults in the community.

Elizabeth Foran, 17, helped organize last fall's Donut Bowl. After the game, police officers attended the weekly CROYA meeting to answer questions.

"We get to know them and we kind of get to break the ice between the people that you think kind of scare you," she said.

CROYA is going so strong, offering at least 300 activities to more than 2,000 young adults every year, that it has run out of space at the Lake Forest Rec Center.

A student union, which will include amenities such as a television production studio, music studios, classrooms, a lounge area, and a gift shop where youths can sell their art, is expected to open in 2007.

Budding musician David Blowers, 17, said CROYA covers all aspects of young adults' lives. "It's everything," he said.