

Project MAGIC

First-offender teens make a commitment to change

"I was caught drinking with my friends," said 18-year-old Alvin Crisp, "and I was really upset when the judge made me go to the Project MAGIC classes. I had a very bad attitude."

But after two months of small-group, skill-building sessions facilitated by Tonopah teacher Judy Anderson, Crisp's attitude took a 180-degree turn.

"It was like a little family," said Crisp. "I realize that Judy is a good friend and kind person. I can tell her anything. The whole thing about MAGIC is their Code of Conduct—what we say in the classroom stays in the classroom. I know that Judy kept my secrets."

Crisp also changed his mind about drinking. "I realized that I was putting myself and my friends at risk by drinking. I've chosen

some new friends now, and I'm a non-drinker," he said.

Crisp is one of the 2007 Outstanding Graduates of Project MAGIC, a nationally recognized innovative and collaborative prevention program

that helps first-time juvenile offenders, ages 12 to 18, leave the criminal justice system and become productive members of society.

Since 1995, the University of Nevada Cooperative Extension program has graduated more than 3,800 youth who have not reentered the justice system, saving taxpayers an estimated \$5.4 million in incarceration costs. Probation staff estimate only 10 percent of graduates are further involved in the system, compared to 30 percent recidivism for other Nevada youth. To date, Project MAGIC has received more than \$4.5 million in outside funding.

For these accomplishments, program originator and professor Marilyn Smith will receive the prestigious 2008 National Excellence in



Photo by Amy Meier



Photo by Deborah Cobb

Project MAGIC 2007 Outstanding Graduate Alvin Crisp, of Tonopah, during his first week in the field with the Bootstraps crew. RIGHT: Crisp runs in a track meet where he qualified for Nevada state competition in the 100-meter dash.

Extension Award from the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges at their annual meeting in Chicago.

"Marilyn has demonstrated leadership in a dizzying array of programming, scholarship and community outreach," said one of her collaborators, Bill Evans, professor in the University's Department of Human Development and Family Studies. "She is always trying to improve her programs and bring the latest research knowledge to a broader audience. This is the essence of Extension."

Assessing the need

It was with grit and determination that Smith achieved a national reputation for working with high-risk youth and their families in rural Nevada.

During the early 1990s, the largest gold deposits in North America were discovered in these communities. The influx of young families moving to Nevada's frontier to get good-paying jobs resulted in extended families left behind and overburdened agencies inadequate to meet the needs of a growing population. Shift work in the 24/7 mining industry left youth unsupervised, leading to juvenile crime, school failure, drug and alcohol abuse and the highest youth suicide rate in the nation.

Nevada had one of the highest juvenile detention rates in the country, with 407 youth per 100,000 incarcerated, nearly a 50 percent increase over the previous decade. In 1994, Cooperative Extension staff completed a statewide needs assessment of youth in state-run juvenile detention facilities. The results indicated few alternatives to detention existed, with high rates of risky behaviors among youth in the system.

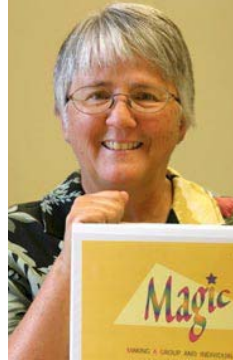
The Elko County Board of Commissioners asked Smith and other University collaborators to explore options other than jail for juveniles, and so a pilot program was developed. Today, Project MAGIC is available in all Nevada's rural counties, several urban communities, the Duck Valley Indian Reservation and Nevada Youth Training Center.

In addition, 20 other states have purchased the Project MAGIC curriculum for use in their communities.

Teaching the students and parents

Smith and other program leaders rely on developmental assets—social support, appropriate boundaries and social competency—to reduce negative youth behavior and increase positive behavior. They identify and build on

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The Tonopah Skateboard Club includes Justin Hathaway, a Project MAGIC and Bootstraps graduate, who is now a mine employee and 4-H leader, Ryan Roper, Chris Brown, Robert Ashbey and Salvador Falcon. RIGHT: University of Nevada Cooperative Extension professor Marilyn Smith holds her Project MAGIC curriculum.

strengths. The students' objectives during their 20 sessions are to change behavior involving alcohol, tobacco or drug use, learn skills to manage conflict, enhance communication, learn about responsibility and decision-making, practice cooperation, set short- and long-term goals and achieve positive relationships with adults.

After their life-skills portfolios are completed, the students participate in a community leadership project, which may be visiting the elderly in hospitals, buying Christmas presents for the needy, taking care of abandoned dogs or beautifying a stream bank.

The parent component of Project MAGIC consists of educational meetings and/or self-paced lesson plans completed at home to accommodate the 24/7 work schedules in the casino and mining industries. Their activities are designed to increase communication and family management between parent and child. Materials are available in both English and Spanish.

Taking the next step

A follow-up study of 100 Project MAGIC graduates indicates increased skills among the youth in decision-making, conflict resolution, goal setting and communication. Further research reveals that most graduates are using program strategies to stay out of trouble with the law.

"Project MAGIC is a good program," said 20-year-old Justin Hathaway, who grew up in Tonopah. He was not court-ordered to at-

tend the classes, but his parents suggested he might benefit from the program.

"I never got into too much trouble," Hathaway said, "but I didn't do much work in high school either—it was boring." He was a skateboarder, and didn't fit in with the other Tonopah teens. After graduation from Project MAGIC, he entered Bootstraps, a new Cooperative Extension program that targets young adults who are not in school or employed. The program, funded by \$1 million in grants, teaches youth responsibility and hard work on public-land projects.

"That program was great," said Hathaway, "and it was good work experience and helped me develop my resumé. It gave me that extra step above to get a mine job."

Today, Hathaway hauls tons of ore in a huge truck for the Round Mountain Gold Mine, putting in 15-hour days and making good money with full benefits and stock options. He's well on his way to his dream of opening a shop for high-performance engines. But in the meantime, he signed up as a 4-H leader because he wanted to help younger kids develop a skateboard club and set up a skate facility in Tonopah. He wants to be a good role model and mentor.

"He's a cool guy," said Smith. "I like his energy. He's a kid who just didn't fit in with the community and now he's helping others." **N**

For more information about Project MAGIC, contact Marilyn Smith, (775) 738-1990, or smithm@unce.unr.edu.

Impacts of Project MAGIC:

Youth: A recent analysis of 550 participants was a rich mix of ethnicity, gender, rural-urban and Indian Reservation youth. The pre/post evaluation of program participants reveals that after completing the program, they were:

- Significantly more likely to report their grades were now better than most students in their class;
- Significantly more likely to indicate that it is wrong for someone their age to smoke cigarettes; and
- Significantly more likely to report an increase in participating in service to their community.

Youth Portfolios: Upon entry, participants' mean scores were 34 percent, "emerging level," indicating they blamed others for their situation, to the post 51 percent, "developing level," where participants assumed responsibility for delinquent behavior and proposed workable solutions to their problems.

Parents: Parents also complete pre/post surveys; results reveal that after completing the program:

- Their child missed significantly less school;
- They believed that the things youth were learning in school were significantly more important for later life;
- They were significantly more likely to agree their child's interests don't fit with using alcohol and drugs.