

History of the Christopher O'Neil Peer Education Program

In 1992, Pam and Tom O'Neil's 17-year-old son was killed in an automobile accident involving a teenage drunk driver. In his memory, they established the Christopher O'Neil Memorial Fund. They decided that the goal of the fund would be the support of programs that encourage successful teen development. With the consultation of Dr. Charles Deutsch of the Harvard School of Public Health, the family helped to establish peer education programs in Baltimore area independent schools.

In June of 1993, Tom and Pam asked Loyola Blakefield, a Jesuit prep school in north Baltimore, to pioneer a program with their commitment to fund the project, no strings attached. They asked Loyola to develop a program aimed at sound decision-making and good health that would be specific to its student population. Counselors at Loyola had been using seniors to help teach a guidance class aimed at health education for several years.

In January of 1994, three Loyola students—two juniors and a sophomore—walked into a sixth grade classroom with the question, “How many of you know what alcohol really is?” A few hands went up. Peer educators have been at work in Baltimore area independent schools ever since.

Pre-teens and teens today face a host of challenges. The purpose of a peer education program is to help them deal with those challenges. One of the basic assumptions of peer education is that pre-teens and teens are more receptive to information, guidance, and advice from older high school students than from adults delivering the same message. The program seeks to capitalize on this. Students in high school are trained by the peer education faculty teams to discuss subjects that are particularly relevant and important to each school. The program teaches older students lessons that they then present to younger students.

Typically, peer educators present lessons in middle school (6th to 8th grades) or freshmen high school classes on a regular basis during school hours. They follow a lesson plan that includes discussion among the students. The lessons cover a wide area of subjects and include many health related and decision-making topics.

The program has enjoyed considerable success in the Baltimore area with eleven schools currently sponsoring peer education. Each school is given the freedom to develop a program that fits its population and concerns. The program is successful in part due to the support of each school's administration. Although it is difficult to quantify results since the subject matter relates primarily to attitudes and behavior, the continuation of the program in the schools is testimony to its success.