OPI Participants Provide "Christmas in April"

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Once OPI participants Amanda J., Scott S. and Matt D. decided on a unique Community Activity for April, their enthusiasm quickly spread until three local families with special needs were treated to a unique "Christmas in April" grocery shopping spree at a local grocery store.

Sixteen OPI participants spent weeks collecting nearly $700 from their fellow participants, as well as from OPI staff. In the end each family got $215 which they spent on everything from milk to diapers.

The participants met the families outside the store, divided into three groups and then assumed tasks: the first group was in charge of making sure each family stayed within their budget; the second group kept track of items on a calculator or pushed the carts and the last group was assigned to keep the small children occupied.

"They all were looking for sale items and trying to find the best deals," explained Christa Lopez, Acting Director of Career and Volunteer Services, who helped organize the event. "They were absolutely wonderful. I was so impressed."

The Participants contacted the North Los Angeles County Regional Center where Ms. Lopez used to work. Their staff selected the three families who could benefit the most.

At Optimum Performance Institute, one Community Service activity is mandated per month.

The Optimum Performance Institute is a highly individualized therapeutic and educational residential program for young adults ages 17-25. For further information contact Anne LaRiviere, Director of Admissions, (888) 558-0617.

What West Ridge Has Learned from Teenage Adoptees

By Jacob Gibson, LMFT, PhD

The anticipation was much worse than actually doing it. Ten minutes before the start, one young man almost backed out, but his courage was bolstered by his fellow students and my co-facilitator. All seven teenagers had some degree of anxiety, and many were visibly shaken with the thought of going through with it. Their task? To tell their adoption story to a large group of professionals, adoptive parents and prospective adoptive parents at the Utah Adoption Council's annual Spring Conference.

The beginning of an idea came a year earlier after we attended a birth mother panel at the same conference. The goal of the conference is to service the educational needs of adoption professionals and the members of the adoption triad, namely adoptive parents, birth parents and adoptees. In talking to one of the conference organizers, I learned that adoptees are an under-represented population in the workshop presentations. I proposed the idea of a workshop where members of a group of adoptees at West Ridge Academy would present their adoption stories, talk about their work through adoption issues, and answer questions the audience has about their experience. The idea was well received and over the next year the idea incubated.

When I received the notice of the dates for the next adoption conference, my colleague Janey and I began to conceptualize the complete format of the workshop and submitted our idea to the conference organizers. We also presented the idea to our adoption support groups. They all seemed to like the idea and every member seemed excited for the opportunity to attend the conference. Many of them wanted to be on the panel to tell their story. We encouraged them to consider what it would be like to tell their story in front of a large audience, to write their story down and submit it to us. Our workshop was accepted, our panel members were selected, and preparations were made to attend the conference.

On the morning of the conference, both adoption groups gathered in the presentation room at the conference location. There was an excitement with those that were going to listen and an anxiety with those that were going to present. Final revisions to talks were made and workshop participants started gathering as the time for the workshop approached. At final count, the students shared their experience with around 100 people, including their own peers.

After a brief presentation by Janey and me about the core issues of adoption, how our groups attempt to address these issues and how therapists help the students transfer the attachments made on campus to their families at home, the students told their stories. Each story was different, some including abuse, transracial families, feeling left out, bad relationships and making similar mistakes as their birth parents. Some were adopted at birth, others when they were older and one within the last year. A few had biological siblings adopted with them, while others were the only ones adopted in their families. Throughout the stories, observers could see nodding heads from others on the panel as their counterparts shared their stories. Despite all these differences, their stories held common themes. What follows are six lessons we can learn from the stories shared at the conference.