

Dedication, Wisdom Don't Go Out of Date

Helena Valentine recently retired as founding director of Teen Life Choices in Southeast Washington. That was bad news. But Valentine doesn't intend to stop working on behalf of District teenagers. She made that clear May 6 when she received a lifetime achievement award from the D.C. Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy.



Helena Valentine helped hundreds of D.C. teens avoid the trap of pregnancy.

Thank goodness.

For 15 years, Valentine and her staff at Teen Life Choices, or TLC, have steered hundreds of at-risk youths past the pitfalls of teen pregnancy and on to a brighter future through character development.

"Did you know that none of the girls who participated in the program got pregnant?" said Valentine, 63. "Did you know that?" This is a fact to be celebrated, and her methods for achieving it certainly need to be understood.

Instead of focusing on the suppression of teenage hormones, Valentine homed in on the emotional needs of those she sought to help.

On boys:

"They are so angry, and they have a right to be angry. They are much smarter than we were at that age, but they don't get credit for being intelligent. They have seen so much, been through so much, but few adults in their lives have the sensitivity or patience to listen without judging."

On girls: "Girls are actually more aggressive than boys. I watch how boys group together and the girls try to penetrate the group. One girl would use her butt to push between boys gathered around a Playstation. When the boys were working on a collage around a table, a girl would come over and lean down so they could see her breasts. The girls are looking for the attention they cannot get at home, and this is how they see other girls getting it."

On parents:

"We took our kids and their parents to a retreat in the Poconos, just to encourage parents to become more involved in their children's lives. You should have seen them canoeing and riding down dirt roads on bikes together. Then we talked—about parents not helping with homework or attending PTA meetings. It wasn't because they didn't care. It was because they couldn't read or do algebra or chemistry. They didn't want to meet the teacher because they feared being humiliated. We did a lot of

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miles but feels much longer after working 12- to 15-hour days. Even night owl drug dealers were impressed. They would keep an eye on her car and wave a respectful goodbye when she headed home.

And Valentine took the work home with her. "Then I wouldn't be able to sleep for worrying about what this one needed or what that one didn't have," she said.

Now, Valentine is taking time off for some well-deserved rest and renewal. But she ought not to fade away. She should continue the struggle for the future of at-risk children—not so much as a surrogate mother this time, but as an honored elder with much wisdom and insight.

It is no secret that the District has a wealth of human resources that can be tapped to improve the health, education and safety of its residents. The problem is that the talents of so many end up being misused or go untapped altogether.

The elderly, with their historical memory and knowledge of what works, get pushed aside by well-meaning newcomers intent on reinventing the wheel, and the most creative thinkers are judged by some personal quirk instead of the quality of their ideas.

Rare are those who, like Valentine, see helping others as a calling that cannot be ignored. "God places you where you need to be," she said.

And God knows she is still needed here.

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