

Ozone House provides support, safe haven for high-risk youth

*A weekly interview on a topic in The News, this week with Mary Jo Callan, executive director of **Ozone House**, which has served area youth with crisis counseling, housing needs and as a drop-in center since 1969.*

Q. Can you briefly describe the **Ozone House** program?

A. **Ozone House** has a lot of different programs all aimed at working with runaway and homeless youth and other high-risk youth - to really help them transition into a healthy adulthood. We have crisis intervention and counseling programs, in which we work with youth and families. We have a lot of different housing programs, from emergency shelter to transitional housing to really permanent supportive housing. We have a youth drop-in center, which is located in downtown Ypsilanti. That's more of a youth development and recreationally focused type of center where young people can come and hang out, work with supportive adults but not necessarily be engaged in counseling services. ... Most of the counseling happens in the community. It's mostly home-based work. We'll go to where the clients are.

Q. When you say high-risk youth, what do you mean?

A. I think that adolescence is really, by its nature, even in the best of circumstances, a really tumultuous time. We work with a broad range of young people, those who are homeless - actually on the streets. Those who are running from profound abuse and neglect to those who are struggling with really sort of (normal) issues of adolescence. Maybe it's a blended family, or they're having difficulties in school. The intervention is similar. You give kids a trusting person, you give kids a safe place, a voice. It just depends on what kind of external resources they need. Our importance in the community is that we are a safety net for so many kids that don't have families who are supportive. ... (Parents) are not available, they're incarcerated, they're substance abusers. They have partners who are abusive.

Q. Some kids won't accept help from their parents. Why do they accept help from you?

A. **Ozone House** has always been identified by youth. More than half of our referrals come from other youth. This is the place where youth say, 'They're going to listen to you,' and I think that is part of our strength. We already have import and credibility that their parents don't have. ... People associate **Ozone House** with this loosey-goosey place. (They say) We're so lenient. It's true. ... Kids and parents are often shocked by how laid back we are, how informal we are. But they are also shocked by how much we know about young people and about families. One of the things we know that we really try to stress is the importance of setting limits for young people. We all want structure. We all want limits, even if we don't want them.

Q. Recently, several youth organizations held a program called Noise Permit for youth at Frog Island in Depot Town in Ypsilanti. These included **Ozone House** and some new organizations. What is the role of these new organizations and what was the goal of the program?

A. The groups besides **Ozone House** were Ypsilanti Youth Empowered to Act, Washtenaw Area Teens for Tomorrow and Teen Center Without Walls. They are relatively new groups. They are looking at a broader spectrum (than **Ozone House**). It's less about shelter, more about being empowered to do creative things in your school, or have input into your county commission meeting. ... What we have in common is we are really focused on the Ypsilanti area. Everyone knows Ypsilanti is strapped. It really is an under-serviced area (for youth.) We're just trying to bring expertise and resources to the eastern end of the county that has existed in the Ann Arbor area.

Q. What needs of youth are not being met?

A. The needs that aren't being met for youth are the same needs that aren't being met in terms of families and adults. You know, poverty is on the rise, unemployment, underemployment is on the rise. Lack of health care is on the rise. All these things trickle down to impact youth and children. ... Sure there aren't a lot of safe places in the community to go and hang out and get supportive adults ... But I really just think it's hard for me to separate what's missing for youth in the community from (what's happening with the economy). ... If you have a neighborhood where young people have parents who are around, who are not working two or three jobs, who are making healthy choices, who are positive role models - (the kids) have less of a need. They're not going to be out on the streets getting in trouble.

Q. What can the community do to help area teens?

A. Parents, teachers, adults, grandparents can take an interest in their children and their children's friends and should not be afraid to raise concerns with other parents. Call **Ozone House**. Call child protective services. People can take more ownership in the community's youth, not just their own youth. We can listen to young people. We can try to empathize, try to remember what it was like to be in the midst of the confusing years of life, try to gain some additional compassion for those who have to deal with adolescence on top of poverty, violence, abuse. Give your time, your money (to **Ozone House** or other youth organizations.) We have a wish list on our Web site at www.ozonehouse.org.

Q. What can parents and other concerned adults do when they see a young person struggling emotionally?

A. They can try talking with the young person. Pointing out they're noticing there's a difficulty. Talk with teachers. Point out that they're seeing a mood change or a troublesome behavior. We get tons of calls from parents who are just worried, who need a sounding board. We are always available to take those sorts of calls. Teachers and counselors, we're all trying to do the right thing for kids. Talk to your son or daughter, talk with your friends. There are experts throughout the community in schools, and certainly at **Ozone House** ... who are all interested in making sure kids are healthy, safe and doing OK.

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