

# Career Exploration for **At-Risk** Students

A partnership in Cincinnati, Ohio, is helping young students see the possibility of a successful future through career and technical education.

Improving the odds for severely at-risk children to achieve success in school and in their adult lives constantly challenges educators and social workers alike. In Cincinnati, Ohio, a partnership between the Great Oaks Institute of Technology and Career Development and an intensive mentoring program offers an innovative approach.

Using a series of career camps, Great Oaks and Friends of the Children reinforce and extend the ongoing work of paid, professional mentors who start working with the children in first grade and continue on through high school. The camps combine introductions to career paths with hands-on activities. The children develop basic, everyday skills and create products—a clock, a stepstool, a basket of plants—to take home.

These results support the goals of the Friends program, which aims to have severely at-risk children graduate from high school with a plan for the future, avoid involvement in the criminal justice system, and avoid teenage parenthood. Cincinnati's Friends is a project of Family Service, a private, regional social service agency.

The 13-year-old national Friends of the Children organization originated and is headquartered in Portland, Oregon. Nine

chapters spread across the country serve more than 600 children.

In order for these elementary-school children to achieve the goals set by the Friends, they need to broaden their vision. They need to see and experience possible careers. Consequently, Great Oaks has designed the career camps, using Ohio's Career Development program concepts, to give them a vision of how they can succeed as adults. The concepts include not only what the child wants to do as an adult, but also what kind of person the child will become. This essential element for success involves developing decision-making and team-building skills, encouraging self-esteem, reducing bias, and acquiring the behaviors that enable a young person to become a productive member of society and a good citizen.

## Experiencing Options in CTE

The camps make use of a great strength of career and technical education; that is, hands-on education. First, the children have the opportunity to experience a variety of career options. Second, they acquire practical knowledge in such matters as safety and hygiene. Third, they are exposed to the intangible, but essential, employability skills they will



need to build successful careers.

The camps are held on Great Oaks' Diamond Oaks campus. Career and technical instructors and their students provide instruction. The Diamond Oaks students also present themselves as role models for the children.

The first career camps for the more than 70 children currently participating in the Friends program took place in the spring of 2004, when the children were third graders. This past fall, the same boys and girls, now 10 or 11 years old and in fifth grade, returned a second time. This spring they will take part in a third camp.

The fall 2005 career camps were typical. Half the children were brought in on one Saturday morning for half a day; the other cohort arrived the following Saturday. In three hour-long sessions, the camp covered horsemanship, construction technology and health technology.

The equine science and management instructor and students worked with the children in grooming, leading and riding horses. This session continued the two sessions the children experienced with horsemanship as third graders in the spring of 2004.

In construction technology, the children first made a simple frame for a clock, then assembled the clock, and painted and decorated frame and clock face. Each child received a copy of *The Barn* by Newberry Award-winning children's author Avi. In the 2004 camps, they built and decorated a stepstool.

The health technology instructor and students demonstrated first-aid techniques. These included the Heimlich maneuver for assisting a person who is choking, and the use of a bedsheet as an emergency stretcher. The children also received instruction in personal hygiene, including such skills as dental care and hand washing.

In the camps the children experienced as third-graders, Diamond Oaks instructors and their students also introduced the children to horticulture, chef's training, and cosmetology. The children learned about different plants, selected potted spring plants, and prepared a basket of them for Mother's Day.

From the chef instructor and students,

they received information on basic nutrition and learned how to safely prepare food in a microwave oven. The children made a three-course meal of smoothies, quesadillas and s'mores.

The cosmetology instructor and students showed the children how to take care of their hair and nails. The cosmetology students then gave each child a choice of a manicure, hairstyling or facial.

To help the children acquire essential employability skills, the instructors and students work with them on the importance of attendance, team-building, cooperation with others and respect for property.

### A Critical Time

Funding for the career camps comes from a grant from America's Career Resource Network (ACRN) and from Great Oaks' community service budget.

In the overall Cincinnati Friends program, 95 percent of the children performed well enough academically to advance to the next grade this fall. A total of 87 percent have received satisfactory grades in reading and math. Despite the difficulties created by their families' frequent moves, 90 percent of the children have attended school at least 80 percent of the time.

The children are now at a particularly critical age. They are subject to all the disruption and pressures of challenging family situations, which include frequent moves—with resulting changes of schools. They may be on the cusp of being "bad" or "good." If they go the wrong way, gangs often claim them by seventh grade.

Working with Friends of the Children has given Great Oaks a new way of involving itself in the community and of demonstrating the value of career and technical education.

Most important of all, Great Oaks is providing experiences to severely at-risk children that can broaden their career choices. By expanding their horizons, these children are offered a different way to look at school and the value of education. ■

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**Top:** Diamond Oaks Equine Science instructor Chris Deffinger and Diamond Oaks student Katie help student Donald ride.

**Middle:** FOC mentor Henrietta Thomas and Diamond Oaks Construction Technology instructor Matt Jordan offer advice to students Te'Anna, Janea, and Kayla on putting together clocks.

**Bottom:** Friends of the Children (FOC) mentor Trevor Orr lies on a sheet stretcher as students Renaldo and Markala prepare to transport him. FOC director Barbara Manuel is at left. Diamond Oaks health technology student, Kristin, is at right.