

Model Peer-Led Sexual Assault Prevention Programs: Lessons for Engaging and Empowering Youth

Reports of Focus Groups

Michelle Harris & Mark Bergeron-Naper
MA Department of Public Health
September, 1999

Deborah Klein Walker, Ed. D., Assistant Commissioner for Family and Community Health
Bonnie J. Tavares, Director, Division of Health Promotion
Carlene A. Pavlos, Director, Violence Prevention and Intervention Services
Marci Diamond, Program Director, Sexual Assault Prevention and Survivor Services

Table of Contents

	Page
I. INTRODUCTION	3
II. DESCRIPTION OF DEMONSTRATION PROJECTS	4
III. METHODOLOGY	6
IV. FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS	7
V. OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	12
VI. APPENDIX: Youth Focus Group Questions	15

This publication was made possible by the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, the Violence Against Women Act and the Public Health and Health Services Block Grant from the Center for Disease Control.

The contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the CDC or the MDPH.

I. Introduction

In 1995, the Massachusetts Department of Public Health (MDPH) was notified that it would receive new Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) funding for sexual assault prevention initiatives through the Public Health and Health Services Block Grant from the Centers for Disease Control. To create a plan for these new funds, five public meetings were convened by the MDPH. The goal was to determine the need for community-based sexual assault prevention activities in the Commonwealth. Several priorities were identified based on the subsequent meetings. One of the priorities identified was to establish local sexual assault prevention and education demonstration projects, focusing on program development with both adolescent males 12-19 years of age and with cultural-linguistic minorities.

Five Sexual Assault Prevention Demonstration Projects were funded in 1997 to 1) provide community organization, primary prevention education and skill-building to target populations; and 2) change individual and community norms, attitudes, and behaviors about the serious legal, social, and public health problems of sexual assault. All programs used some form of a 'peers teaching peers' model and took into account the cultural beliefs and values of the community. Youth mentoring, leadership development and peer education were employed in each program.

The Massachusetts Department of Public Health began an evaluation project in 1998 to assess the process and effectiveness of the five demonstration projects. A focus group format was chosen as the method that would most fully elicit participants' perceptions of the impact and meaning of their program experiences. Focus groups were held at each site. Adolescent peer leaders identified four critical characteristics of adolescent sexual assault prevention programs that had a positive impact on them and their community. The four characteristics are:

- * Promotion of a sense of belonging and connection to one's peers and community
- * Incorporation of sexual assault prevention into every layer of the curriculum
- * Provision of opportunities for participatory education and development of useful skills
- * Modeling of the values of commitment and leadership

The focus group participants affirmed that their programs achieved these benchmark characteristics. Programs with the aforementioned characteristics successfully supported youth in understanding sexual assault prevention work as relevant and important to their lives and to their community. Programs were able to elicit and nurture participants' motivation and engagement around a potentially threatening set of issues, making it possible for these teens to incorporate program concepts into their lives.

II. Descriptions of the Demonstration Projects:

Energia Positiva

Energia Positiva, part of the Holyoke Youth Alliance, educated 14 to 18 year old youth about sexual assault prevention and healthy relationships. This project, designed to offer Holyoke youth the opportunity to develop an understanding of their potential, worked with 15-20 youth. After receiving extensive training on sexual assault issues, the participants worked together to develop a theater presentation which they then performed throughout the community. Although the group primarily wrote and performed plays about sexual assault issues, they also worked on related projects including brochures, videos, and public service announcements geared to raise awareness of sexual assault and partner violence prevention. Serving primarily the Latino community of Holyoke, this project was intended to provide youth with the opportunity to learn about sexual assault prevention. This was accomplished through sharing and validating each others feelings and offering specific prevention information connected with group discussions of gender violence issues.

Mentor/Advocates for Respect and Safety Project

The Mentor/Advocates for Respect and Safety (MARS) project, a collaborative project between the Everywoman's Center and the Men's Resource Center of Western Massachusetts, focused on sexual assault prevention and youth empowerment. Mentor/Advocates were high school and college youth who underwent intensive training on sexual assault issues. Two after-school programs for middle school students, as well as various community outreach projects were established. The after-school programs were called *Life After School* and included single gender and coed discussion groups, interactive and creative activities, recreation and one-on-one mentoring. Community outreach activities included radio public service announcements, a youth mural project and a pilot youth radio program, all focused on sexual assault prevention.

Latino Intergenerational Sexual Assault Prevention Project

The Latino Intergenerational Sexual Assault Prevention Project, or LISAPP, was intended to raise awareness about the problems and consequences of sexual assault in the Latino community of Chelsea. Sponsored by Centro Latino de Chelsea, this project was designed to educate and change the attitudes and behavior of both adults and youth in the community. The "training of trainers (TOT)" model was used in which participants acquired knowledge and skills which they integrated with their own life and cultural experiences. Participants then developed and made sexual assault prevention presentations to the broader community. Approximately 30 adults and youth participated in the project.

Teen Rape and Assault Prevention Project

TRAPP, the Teen Rape and Assault Prevention Project, began as a collaboration between Rape Crisis Services of Greater Lowell and Big Brother/Big Sister of Greater Lowell and, originally, was designed as a peer leadership program for males ages 15-18. It developed into a co-ed program of the Rape Crisis Services of Greater Lowell. TRAPP's primary goal was to initiate a community coalition of youth service providers and youth in a joint effort to change attitudes towards rape and sexual assault among teens. The project primarily served Cambodian and Latino youth in the schools and community through five high-school aged peer leaders who were

trained on sexual assault issues. The youth learned public speaking, computer and media skills. Activities included skit creation and community presentations as well as sexual assault prevention web-site design.

Haitian Sexual Assault Prevention Project

The Haitian Sexual Assault Prevention Project, a program of the Haitian American Public Health Initiatives, worked with Haitian teens, ages 12 to 19, in the schools and the larger community. Originally working with only males, the program ultimately included both males and females. The project had two major goals. Participants promoted greater knowledge and understanding of the consequences of sexual assault in the local Haitian community. They also cultivated positive and non-violent individual and community norms to prevent sexual assault. Because locally-produced Haitian-language radio and cable shows are considered popular in this community, the participants created several public service announcements and an on-air radio and cable TV show that educated the community about rape and sexual assault. The project worked with high school-aged peer leaders who did both school and community-based presentations and assisted with a media campaign.

III. Methodology:

In order to obtain support for this evaluation process, the facilitators first spoke with program staff about holding focus groups for program participants. Facilitators developed a series of questions that would address the youth's experiences during their involvement in sexual assault prevention activities (see Appendix A). Program staff recruited youth who had participated to share their impressions and experiences in the program. Program staff explained to participants that the program could benefit from hearing the youth leaders' ideas but that their participation was voluntary and the conversations would be confidential. A focus group was held at each of the five program sites. A total of 38 youth, twenty-four females and fourteen males, participated.

The stated goals of the focus groups were: 1) to learn about participants' experiences and insights in youth programs; 2) to learn what motivated them to stay involved; and 3) to learn what they would want to change about the program. There were also three ground rules, which were confidentiality, respect, and one person talking at a time. Permission was requested to tape-record the conversations and participants were told that facilitators would be the only ones to hear the tapes, that their names would not be used, and finally that the tapes would be erased. Facilitators were able to ask and clarify questions and take notes as necessary. Each focus group lasted one hour, and one of the five groups used a Spanish translator. Following each focus group, facilitators debriefed and reviewed notes. They later listened to the tapes, coded and analyzed them for emergent themes.

IV. Focus Group Findings:

The four major themes that were emphasized in the focus groups are described below.

The Sense of Belonging and Connection to One's Peers & Community

“When we’re here, we feel at home. We make decisions as a group and, over time, influence the message we’re sending.”

Most of the youth listed a variety of reasons for initially becoming involved in their local sexual assault prevention youth programs. The reasons included:

- wanting something to do after school
- wanting to stay off the streets
- making new friends
- interest in theater or media
- desire to improve quality of college applications
- giving back to the community.

The youth, especially those involved for longer periods of time, spoke about the sense of belonging and the connection that they felt with one another and to their communities. When asked what they liked about the programs, youth spoke of working with each other, relationships with the adult facilitators and having a place to go where they felt understood and comfortable.

For some, to have a place to go was more of a physical need. They needed a place to go where they wouldn't be alone or feel unsafe. For others, it was much more of a psychological need. Some youth were relatively new to this country or were in search of a peer group. A few of the youth from Energia Positiva, for instance, were able to articulate that the program felt like 'family,' a place where they felt accepted and valued, where they could come, put down their bags, and not have to explain themselves. A few youth in each of the programs voiced that they had never experienced this feeling in other settings in their communities, especially at school. One youth said she liked the program because it felt safe to her and she didn't have to deal with discrimination. Several males said that if it were not for the program, they would probably be hanging out on the street, wasting time, and/or selling drugs.

When asked what gave them this sense of connection to one another and their community, the youth were unanimous that it was having a common purpose and developing genuine relationships that made the difference. To the youth, the sexual assault prevention message was a positive, meaningful one which they valued and shared as a group. Each group explained that they got some fulfillment and a sense of satisfaction from knowing that they were addressing real, but often hidden, community problems. Some youth had grown up with or known someone who had experienced sexual assault or partner violence, they understood how prevalent this problem is and the stigma that surrounds it. Being part of these programs meant standing up for themselves and their loved ones. It meant supporting and/or confronting their peers in school and thinking about the ways our society tolerates and supports sexual assault and partner violence.

Many of the youth talked about deciding to get involved as a way to give back to their community. For instance, a youth from TRAPP said, "I wanted to get more involved in the community because I like to help people." A youth from LISAPP described her motivation to share information and explain things that improve other people's lives. In this way, the youth saw themselves as useful members of the community and actively making it a better place to live.

The youth described the programs as increasing their confidence in themselves by being part of a team. A striking number of female adolescents described themselves as being shy and self-conscious at the beginning, and confident and comfortable now. One male youth also spoke to this point: "When we're here, we feel at home, we make decisions as a group and over time, influence the message we're sending." While in school they sometimes feel labeled or invisible, but in the sexual assault prevention programs they feel valued and responsible.

The Importance of Prevention

"No one does much to change the roots of the problem. [The kids] can talk about the things they're going through so they don't need to lash out about it. They can talk about it."

Prevention was a major theme that flowed through all five programs, but was especially emphasized by participants in the MARS Program. In each program, the youth articulated the goal of reducing and preventing sexual assault and partner violence. Each program interpreted this somewhat differently but all programs saw prevention as occurring through peer and, sometimes, adult education. The youth from Energia Positiva spoke about their use of theater as a means to convey the message of violence prevention. They described how watching as well as acting in the play evokes feelings aimed at influencing one's thinking and the choices one makes. Two of the older members said that this occurs because "you get into the role and take on the feelings of the character." Several youth said that by making the characters real and humorous, you can think about the issues more easily.

The youth from TRAPP shared this attitude about the use of drama. They described how they planned the use of skits about dating violence and sexual harassment as a way to spread their message. Youth from HAPHI and LISAPP seemed to rely more on public speaking to carry their message.

Unlike the other programs' efforts to reach a broad community through public speaking and theater, MARS focused primarily on educating groups of younger adolescents. With their more specific target audience in mind, peer leaders articulated that the MARS program brought alive the idea of prevention. They spoke of it frequently and listed it as their primary reason for becoming and staying involved.

When asked what they learned during the program, youth from MARS consistently spoke about the program being a "safe haven" for their younger peers, and the challenges of trying to influence younger adolescents' thinking about healthy norms in intimate relationships. The youth from MARS described this process as exciting and challenging. Many of the peer mentors described feeling frustrated by the negative influences of peer pressure on younger adolescents. One youth said, "we want to be on their level and support them, but sometimes we just want to tell them to

do what worked for us." These youth spoke less about how the issues of sexual assault and partner violence impacted their own lives and relationships.

In contrast, the youth in the other four programs agreed that much of what they learned applied directly to their own lives. When asked what they had learned, several youth replied, "to think before I act," especially in situations where they are confronted by peer pressure or partner coercion. The females agreed that this was especially true in making decisions about who they should date and how to negotiate sexual decisions. For the males, 'thinking before acting' meant being more respectful of female friends, family members, and partners in their lives. One youth offered, for instance, that he had learned to show more respect and be more appreciative of his mother. A few other youth said that learning about the issues of sexual assault and partner violence made them more aware of and more able to recognize that their own teasing and name calling could be offensive or hurtful of others' feelings.

Another common response when asked what they learned was how to give and get respect and set standards in relationships. These concepts were voiced strongly by several female members of each group. The young women spoke about being "deserving of respect" and "not putting up with nobody who tries to abuse" them. When asked what they meant by abuse, they clearly articulated a continuum of abusive behaviors, including verbal manipulation, isolation, and degrading comments. They also described how the program taught them to identify and confront abusive behaviors and to ask for help from their peers or adults. While only some girls spoke with confidence about what they had learned, others girls nodded and listened intently.

Desire for Participatory Education and Useful Skills

"This is the most interesting and active thing I do all week."

The youth entered the programs with a range of knowledge and skill levels but over time they were generally able to enhance their skills and grow in their self-awareness. When asked what they learned about sexual assault and partner violence, they listed many topics and activities, including boundary-setting in relationships, effective communication, differentiating respect and power, sexual harassment, peer pressure, and gender roles. As a group, they identified trust-building games, role plays, and public speaking or theater experiences as being the most interesting and educational for them. According to the youth, this was because they were learning from their peers, through group interactions and through activities that made the issues real for them. Many of the youth described these activities as fun, a little scary, and hard at times.

When asked what they would think of learning about the issues without the activities, they said they would have been interested but not nearly as much. Some youth stated that the learning would not be as abundant and it would become much more intellectual and much less personal. For youth from MARS, several agreed with one youth's opinion that "this is the most interesting and active thing I do all week." Youth from each program indicated that learning had to involve real interactions among one another and had to involve input and thoughts about how the issues of sexual assault and partner violence apply to their own lives.

The participants' assessment of the value of individual activities varied. Many youth stated that the "trust games" were helpful at the beginning when they needed to feel safe and comfortable

before being expected to work closely with their peers. One youth from Energia Positiva said, "the acting is hard, but it's fun cause the staff help us and because we get to make up a lot of the words until it [the play] makes sense to us." Youth from LISAPP and HAPHI were equally excited about their experience of learning through role plays. They spoke about how much fun it is to put yourself in a role and pretend to be someone different. They also described how useful it is to get feedback about how they look, act, and communicate their emotions on stage. One youth said, "I liked the presentations when we did the dramas because it was fun and yet it felt so real." Youth from TRAPP also voiced their excitement at learning to present publicly. For instance, "we did an activity called 'The Spot Lights On You' where we had to go up and tell a story in front of the group, and then the group told us how we did and how we could improve."

Whether it was acting or public speaking, or in the case of the MARS program, mentoring their younger peers, the youth agreed that they were learning new skills. Many of the youth were glad to learn these skills because they could influence the lives of other young people and because they saw these skills as useful in other contexts, such as future careers. A few of the youth spoke about their desire to be actors, business-women, and to continue with community work. Some of the college age youth found that working with adolescents in the junior high schools in this program motivated them to plan on pursuing future careers as social workers and public health professionals.

The Value of Commitment and Leadership

"I like being recognized as the girl that helps us and passes on a good message."

When asked whether they would recommend this program to other young people their age, the youth gave an overwhelming "YES!" While not all of the youth completed the program, and some were more active than others, there was an overwhelming energy and sense of commitment that carried the groups forward. Most were quite pleased with the skills that they had learned and the work they had accomplished. Being in a play and/or speaking at a conference was something they enjoyed and helped motivate them to continue.

When asked why they stayed involved, several youth responded that they felt responsible to their communities, to their peers and to themselves. If they were late for play practice or unprepared for a community presentation, they felt they would hold back the team and let their peers down. But this sense of discipline and duty went beyond their peers. One youth said, "it's important that I finish what I started" and another youth chimed in saying, "yeah, I wanted to prove to my family and my community that I could complete something positive."

What was most striking about the youth's experience of working together and educating the community was how often they articulated pride in themselves as young community leaders. While some youth entered the programs with past leadership experience, for most youth, the program was their first opportunity to learn and apply new skills in a leadership role. As the participants spoke about this, they were clear to articulate how the experience of presenting and sharing information felt to them:

"It was like I was standing up there, all dressed up, watching them and they were probably thinking, 'Wow! Look at that guy, he knows something I don't know.'"

"You meet new people, learn stuff, show other people, teach them, they learn something, and you feel good that you made a change."

A common theme among the youth was their pride in being seen as knowledgeable and helpful. Some of the youth were surprised and flattered by the appreciation and recognition of others. As their confidence increased and their identities as leaders developed, they became even more active and committed to the work. The youth spoke about becoming more comfortable acting as advocates and confronting their peers in school around sexual assault issues. They talked about looking at their friends' relationships differently and being available if their friends are in danger. A youth from TRAPP talked about how he wore his TRAPP jacket to school which became a conversation starter with his peers and gave him the chance to talk about what he learned about sexual assault and rape prevention. A youth from Energia Positiva said that because of her experience acting in front of her peers, she now no longer feels embarrassed nor holds back in saying what she needs to say to people around her. Finally, a youth from HAPHI spoke about how important it is to stand up to other people's ignorance about sexual assault issues and to educate them. Even though she had been teased at school for being involved and talking about the issue, she felt like it was one of the most important things she had chosen to do. For the youth, overall, the sense of commitment to the issues, to their communities, and to one another is what really has strengthened the programs.

V. Observations & Recommendations

The final section of this report provides the youth's recommendations for improving the projects and for future development of these or similar projects.

Recommendations:

Recommendations from the youth were varied. The youth from LISAPP and MARS wanted to spend more time doing trust-building games at the beginning and role-plays throughout the program. This suggestion came after explaining that these activities were their favorites but that they felt pressed for time or needed more direction from staff. For the youth from MARS, this suggestion was specific to practicing role-plays about how they interact with their younger peers and techniques they could try that might be more effective. Youth from Energia Positiva requested learning additional theater techniques and skills, including scenery, prop, and costume design and development. They also wanted to incorporate more dance and music into their shows. Youth from LISAPP suggested doing more speaking engagements in the community and tying these events to organized field trips. For instance, a youth suggested going to visit colleges and speaking with students there about college life while sharing violence prevention messages. Part of what came through with these comments was that they wanted more of what they already found positive. They also wanted increased opportunities to learn useful skills with the guidance of their peers and adults and to apply these skills in meaningful ways.

In discussing changes they would make if they were "in charge," youth said they would change and add to the physical space. Several youth talked about how they wished the program had its own space and could function more as a drop-in youth center. Youth from HAPHI, for instance, wanted a teen-focused space where they could easily stay off the streets and involve themselves in activities. For youth from Energia Positiva, having their own space would mean they would have more room to practice and they could expand their hours if staff were available. Finally, youth from MARS reported being happy using the school as their space but reported being unhappy with the restrictions placed on that space. Generally, the youth seemed to want to create a more teen-focused space.

Finally, the youth said they would recommend expanding their programs in overall size and resources. For them this would mean hiring more staff, attracting a greater number of youth and gaining increased community support. The youth asked for increased direction and assistance from staff members. They seemed to want more individual attention and increased mentoring from staff. While they were generally happy with these relationships, they wanted to be sure future staff would be both people they could relate to and people with a deep understanding of the issues of sexual assault and partner violence. A few youth from LISAPP talked about being touched by a staff member who had spoken with them about his own family member who was diagnosed with AIDS. The youth were struck by this staff person's honesty in explaining how his personal situation challenged his own homophobic assumptions about people living with AIDS.

Besides additional staff, the youth wanted to attract more young people their age who have genuine interest in the issues and want to actively participate. For them, this meant giving other young people a chance to do something positive for their community and having newer members in their peer group. For some of the programs, it would also mean offering more young people a

stipend for participating. Youth from HAPHI and LISAPP, however, were concerned that some youth might come only to the program parties or just for the money and would not be reliable when the group needed them to help with the program. One teen suggested having clearer recruitment protocols and expectations, so that youth are accepted based on a variety of criteria and not just their interest in money. Another teen recommended rules about who can come to the parties or participate in the field trips based on their involvement. As discussed earlier, teamwork and commitment were crucial to these teens.

Some youth, from HAPHI and MARS in particular, pointed out the increased need for community support. For example, youth from MARS understood the importance of working with the schools but said they were not given access to schools to the extent they thought most efficacious. The youth discussed how the lack of community support limits their creativity and involvement. They were not sure, however, why the community was not more involved, or what they could do about it. Older members from HAPHI said they used to receive more support from the community and that the program was more fun in the past. To newer members, however, the program was still fun and the sexual assault prevention message was just as important.

Observations:

The detail and breadth of the youth's recommendations was impressive and provides important guidance for future program planning. While the demonstration projects were primarily designed to educate youth on gender violence prevention, it may be inevitable that these programs will do much more than that.

As the youth stated, relationships were key for them. A high level of team/relationship building and mentoring skills was necessary for program staff. Expanded staff training and supervision could support advanced skill-building in staff self-awareness, communication techniques and content knowledge. Staff with adolescent social work, education, and youth development skills and experience could be effective in supporting the youth and their families as needed.

Findings indicate that youth gender violence prevention programs should be supported in building linkages within their communities. Working in coalitions can strengthen the sexual assault prevention message and improve the visibility of this issue. Particularly effective groups:

- meet on a regular basis
- are highly connected with the community
- are clear about their goals
- and include a diverse group of members (including youth who have participated in these types of programs).

Helping to plan, market, and publicize public events (e.g., health fairs, photography exhibits, the Clothesline Project, a 'Take Back The Night' march, the 'Yellow Dress' play) can galvanize support from the community while simultaneously educating its members. Finally, opportunities to promote training and share resources among these programs can enhance knowledge of and services to all youth. Such steps can also facilitate organizational linkages, service coordination and cross-referral.

As programs may grow in size, some might expand to include several overlapping areas or projects. This may mean having one group of youth involved in theater, another in dance, and

another in media, or having phases of the program in which youth can decide how much they want to participate. To some extent, this existed at Energia Positiva, where youth worked for short lengths of time, and at LISAPP, where youth completed an initial training then spoke in the community. While several of the youth requested increased opportunities for involvement and leadership, others wanted to know they could have time off when life got too busy or leave on good terms after completing one part of the program. This was especially a concern voiced by youth at LISAPP, where the training ended, but program activities continued. For this reason, use of multiple program components and program time periods or cycles seem to be effective strategies for involving more youth at a range of levels.

Finally, it is important for these types of programs to increase their knowledge and practice of incorporating useful evaluation tools into program activities. An assessment of peer leader attitudes and behaviors could be done at the beginning of the program, as early as the intake process or orientation sessions. Over time, these attitudes and behaviors could be assessed and change evaluated. In addition to filling out standard MDPH activity report forms to measure service outputs (e.g., number of presentations), some programs worked to create their own evaluations to measure service quality. However, further development, especially of impact measures, could yield even richer information. A combination of outcome and process measures could be used in order for program coordinators to know what they are doing, how they are doing it and how effective it is. Programs might expand upon current methods such as “before and after surveys,” focus groups, youth/staff interviews and youth journals to measure changes in attitudes and behaviors. They could also consider increasing or incorporating regular 'rap sessions' or role-plays where youth can process their experiences and practice their skills. Ideally, the youth would help create and pilot these tools and use them in their outreach activities. The youth at Energia Positiva, LISAPP, and TRAPP, all spoke about beginning to integrate various evaluation tools into their peer outreach work.

Overall, each of the sexual assault prevention demonstration projects seemed to be having a real impact on youth knowledge and attitudes toward sexual assault. The youth all wished they had more time with staff and each other, more resources and more community support, but they felt confident they were imparting positive messages to the community and making real strides to change community norms.

VI. Appendix: Youth Focus Group Questions

Introduction: Who we are and what we are hoping to learn- time frame / tape recording.

Ground rules: confidentiality, sharing air time, respect, etc.

Quick go round: participants' names and how they found out about program.

1. Why did you decide (as young men/women) to become involved? What has influenced you to stay involved in the program? Prompt: Have your family and friends supported your involvement in the program?
2. Let's talk about the program. What are some things that you liked about the program? What have you liked the most?
3. What are some things you learned about in the program? Prompt: Have you wanted to and been able to share what you've learned with your family and friends?
4. Has this impacted the way you think about intimate relationships in general? (How so?) Has this impacted the way you think about rape and sexual assault? Prompts: Can you think of a time when you have said something or acted differently because of something you learned in the program? For instance, have you noticed any threatening or abusive behaviors and been able to say something to or been able to confront the person? Why or why not?
5. So, now let's talk about how the program could be different. If you were in charge of this program, what would you do differently? Why?
6. What advice would you give to another teenager thinking about joining this program (in general and specifically a young woman or young man)?

Thank you very much for taking the time and sharing all your ideas with us!