



INSPIRED TEENS

Over the summer, 15 year old Joshua Corwin and his friends thought it might be fun to volunteer for the Vista Inspire Program's (VIP) summer camp. VIP is a program where kids with Autism Spectrum Disorder and other special needs are integrated with their typically developing siblings and peers into a natural environment where the kids can be themselves. Volunteering involved swimming, singing, doing art projects and just hanging out. VIP is not about therapy, per se, although it is therapeutic with a highly-skilled and experienced staff. What happens most significantly is that the kids with special needs are integrated into a social experience with volunteers, where they are included and accepted.

What Joshua and his friends didn't anticipate was that they wouldn't want the summer to end, perhaps even more so than the children whom they were there to help.

Joshua invited all of the teen volunteers to an end of

the summer pool party at his house. This core group of teenagers began talking about how they would like to continue with VIP during the school year. This conversation resulted in spinning ideas for community outreach programs so that their schoolmates would also catch the spark of the program and volunteer as well. The talk then escalated into ideas about creating a teenage board of directors within VIP, so that they wouldn't be mere volunteers, but a creative and driving force within the program. And from there, it snowballed.

A second get-together at Joshua's house in September attracted over twenty five teenagers and in short order, they created Inspired Teens (IT). IT would not only continue the volunteer participation with the school-year programs of VIP, but they would also create their own structure to stimulate outreach into the community and hold fundraisers to help them realize the projects that IT is going to create. Community outreach will be facilitated through social media, IT members pitching stories to their school

newspapers and old-fashioned word-of-mouth. They even decided on their first fundraiser: a screening of "It's a Wonderful Life" at American Cinematheque in Santa Monica with a Pink Berry reception afterward. The ideas were flying and a movement was born.

At Inspired Teens, they recognize that teenagers these days are scheduled to the max. With that understanding, they encourage everyone to volunteer – even if it's one night or afternoon each week or each month. Even if you just want to come to an event, that's fine with them. There is no minimum number of hours to participate: it's based on each person's availability. The teens have found that volunteering is contagious: the more you volunteer, the more you want to volunteer. One of the volunteers has said that VIP is the ONLY place where she can be herself 100%.

During the school year, there are two types of VIP programs created by founder Elaine Hall: The Miracle Theater Project and Nes Gadol. The Miracle Theater Project is founded on the principles of the Miracle Project which was beautifully articulated in the Emmy Award-Winning documentary, "Autism: The Musical." It is a 22-week program where along with theater professionals and their typically-developing siblings and peers, kids with autism learn singing, dance and theater arts. The program culminates in a live performance that is written by and for the kids themselves. The Nes Gadol program is a pre and post Bar/Bat Mitzvah program as well as a religious education program where Jewish kids with autism and special needs can study Torah. What's unique about these programs is that the volunteers enter the world of the students. "Outside-the-norm behavior" of kids with special needs is treated with empathy, inclusion and the understanding. "We all have feelings as teenagers where we're not accepted or we were made to feel uncomfortable," says Joshua's mom and VIP board member, Susan Corwin. Above all, the goal of both programs is to have fun.

The energy and momentum of IT has come just in time: over the summer, the state of California slashed its budget so severely that it no longer provides any funding to the program. Last year, the state subsidized 90% of hard costs. In response to the budget cuts, VIP has lowered prices and offered more varied classes including stand alone classes that don't fold into Miracle Theater Project. The teenagers are undeterred. Clara Sturak, board member of VIP and whose son, Dashiell is a participant in the program says that "our teenagers at IT have been so amazing and have incredible ideas and different ways of seeing the future of the programs – they are invested."

Susan Corwin feels that the recognition that VIP has received throughout Southern California is due to the unique component of typical peer volunteers side by side with kids at all levels of the spectrum in the program. "This program makes them feel valuable; they didn't realize that what they gave was more than they received." Josh Corwin: "It's the ideal we're looking for in society – accepting each other for who we are – it enriches our environment."

Community Outreach coordinator for VIP, Jennifer Brook who at 23, looks like a teen herself, will be a liaison between the VIP board and the IT board. For more information about the program, Jennifer can be reached at 310.836.1223 ext.369.

For more information about Inspired Teens, please visit their Facebook Page: <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Los-Angeles-CA/Vistas-Inspire-Program/54300296565?ref=mf0>

The Website: <http://www.vistadelmar.org>

Twitter Page: <http://twitter.com/VistaInspire>

VIP Class Schedule and Enrollment Page:

<http://www.vistadelmar.org/enrollment/>