

A man on a mission

Lee Rush is trying to build a just community for young people in Upper Bucks.

By HILARY BENTMAN

Staff Writer

QUAKERTOWN — It may not take a village to raise a child, says Lee Rush, but it does take more than mom and dad.

From the next door neighbor to the Little League coach, five or six adults who know a child's interests and hobbies should be involved in molding their lives.

"It's not just the school's responsibility or the parent's responsibility. It's multiple layers," said Rush.

Providing those layers is the goal for Rush and justCommunity Inc. Founded in 1999, the Quakertown nonprofit organization strives to build healthier communities for youth by including parents, schools and even local government in a child's upbringing.

Over the past 25 years, Rush has been on a crusade to make a difference. He has worked as a school counselor, teacher and director of Project CARE, which trains educators for the statewide Student Assistance Program to identify students at risk for drug, alcohol or mental health problems. Rush even brings youth offenders face to face with their victims.

Rush, who studied criminology in college for a career in law enforcement, decided he wanted to try to prevent a child from falling over the edge rather than picking him up at the bottom of the cliff.

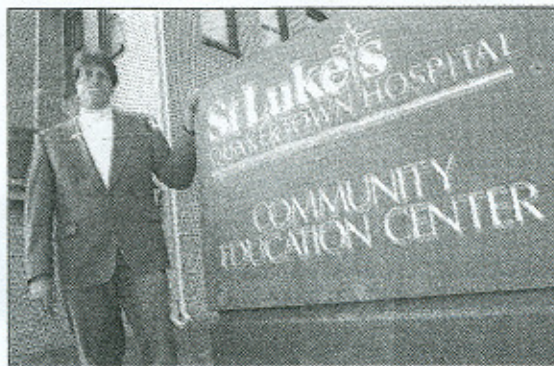
The Upper Bucks native was drawn to his line of work after finding himself in the shoes of many of the students he has tried to help.

As a middle-school student in the Pennridge School District, Rush was caught throwing food in the school cafeteria. He was pulled aside by a coach, but instead of hauling Rush off to the principal's office, the coach took him to his own office. There he asked the young Rush a question that changed his life — "Do you like the man you are becoming?"

The incident showed Rush he had "another set of eyes" watching him, and that's what he and justCommunity are trying to provide for others. "It really makes it clear that I'm here for more than myself. And it's a fun way to make a living. I have a foot in both worlds. I'm around such youthful energy."

justCommunity is the coordinating agency for Upper Bucks' Healthy Communities/Healthy Youth Initiative, a national movement of more than 500 communities that works to build assets that help children and teens.

The Healthy Communities effort identifies 40 such assets, including 20 external ones such as family support and a caring school climate, and 20 internal ones such as honesty and self-esteem. In 2002, students in the Quakertown and Pennridge school districts took anonymous surveys created by the Minnesota based Search Institute to determine what their asset level is. Both districts averaged about 17 out of 40, in line with the national average of 18, according to Search Institute.



Staff photo by Rick Kintzel

Lee Rush is executive director of justCommunity Inc., a nonprofit group that works to promote healthier communities for young people.

"If anyone is not concerned (with this score), then they're not paying attention," Rush said.

Statistics have shown the more assets a child has, the less likely he or she will be involved in risky behaviors, such as alcohol and drug use, shoplifting, vandalism, violence, skipping school, gambling, eating disorders, depression and attempted suicide.

Ray Fox, a counselor at Quakertown Community High School and president of the area's Healthy Communities/Healthy Youth, acknowledges there is no guarantee teens will refrain from using alcohol or drugs simply because of the number of assets they possess.

"You can't be with a child 24 hours a day, seven days a week," said Fox, who has spent three decades with the district. "And no matter how good a child is, the potential (for risky behavior) is always there."

But Fox and other organizers say these assets can make a difference and are teachable. They advocate including student representation on

government boards and providing an outlet such as a skate park for teens to use. Rush says families should strive to eat together more often and place a list of their assets on a refrigerator and choose five to build on.

Healthy Communities/Healthy Youth has also developed a Safe Homes Directory to allow parents to stay in contact with each other. Parents pledge to provide a "safe home" for their child and their friends by prohibiting unsupervised parties, not letting anyone under 21 drink, and monitoring Internet and television use.

"Parents struggle around becoming kids' friends. Children want limits. They're really asking for a line, but parents keep moving it back," said Rush.

Hilary Bentman can be contacted at hbentman@phillyburbs.com.