

DREAM mentors lend helping hand to kids

By KATHRYN FLAGG

MIDDLEBURY — Call them the DREAM team.

That's what the kids of Middlebury's Pine Meadows Apartments call them, at least. Meet Melissa Hirsch and Emma Moros, two Middlebury College students who, along with a small squadron of classmates, make a weekly trek to Pine Meadows with the DREAM (Directing through Recreation, Education, Adventure and Mentoring) program, a Vermont-based mentoring program that set up its outpost in Middlebury last winter.

There, working with kids in their own neighborhoods, DREAM mentors in Middlebury — like their compatriots around the state — are trying to make a difference in the lives of underprivileged children.

"I really want to be working with kids," said Hirsch. "For me, it's all about getting respect for kids and showing them that they have value."

DREAM got its start at Dartmouth College in Hanover, N.H., in 1999, when a few college students began spending time with children at a local housing community. Two of those mentors, after graduating, decided to give the program a shot on a larger scale.

Now DREAM, an AmeriCorps program, has recruited volunteers from nine colleges and operates mentoring programs in 11 housing developments around the state. (Eight of those nine colleges — Dartmouth being the exception — are located in Vermont.)

The program in Middlebury started up last winter, and has been slowly

but surely growing since.

Since its inception, DREAM — unlike most other mentoring programs, which focus on schools — goes directly to the communities where children live. The "distressed neighborhoods," said DREAM Executive Director Mike Loner, were an obvious choice for their attention, because it's these neighborhoods that most often have a high concentration of poverty, high concentrations of families led by a single head of household, and lower education rates.

"For us it just became a real no-brainer," Loner said.

Working with kids in their own communities like this, Hirsch argued, offers opportunities for making a difference in kids' lives that isn't always possible in the confines of the classroom.

"I think that getting to know the families of the kids who DREAM mentors work with — I think that's a hugely big deal," she said. "Working with students in schools is obviously an incredible thing to do ... but it's very different and very powerful to see their families, and get to know their families."

Because parents get to know DREAM mentors — most of whom are in their communities on a weekly basis — they trust the program, Loner said. That lays the foundation for some of the more ambitious programs that DREAM mentors provide, sometimes taking children on trips as far as Boston or New York City.

"Once DREAM becomes really established in the neighborhood, it be-

comes kind of a source of pride for the community," Loner said.

Take, for instance, the reaction of parent John Potter in Winooski's Elm Street neighborhood, where University of Vermont students have been volunteering since 2002.

"If DREAM mentors came here on Super Bowl Sunday and told me they needed my TV, I'd give it to them," Potter told DREAM organizers.

Loner said that the program's goal is simply to help kids lead fulfilling adult lives. The terms of that success is left up to them.

"We just want to see the children transition well into adulthood and be successful," Loner said. Sometimes that means heading off to college — and in Winooski program this year, the five DREAM kids who graduated from high school this year all headed off to college. But Loner said the program also supports other choices, like joining the military or getting vocational training.

But DREAM is ambitious. The organizers and mentors hope children come away with a broadened world view, the experience of interacting with people from different backgrounds, a sense of self-reliance, and

"We're just building this ever-expanding network of individuals who are actually concerned about how this child will turn out," Loner said.

In Middlebury, the DREAM program is still small — but the six or eight students who volunteer do so with devotion. Students show up every week for their Friday afternoon play date with DREAM participants,

and the reaction from kids when the "DREAM team" arrives makes the effort that much more worthwhile, said Moros.

"They're really excited to see us," she said. "That's probably one of the most rewarding things about doing DREAM."

Moros, who came to the college from Barre, Vt., spent the summer working as an intern for DREAM, and now along with Hirsch leads the group as a "co-chair."

At Pine Meadows, she said, she and the other DREAM mentors are working primarily with a group of 7- to 12-year-old kids. At their weekly Friday afternoon get-togethers, students and mentors do everything from apple picking to arts and crafts projects.

"We kind of create a safe space ... but we still also have fun," said Moros. "You can establish such a cool connection with these kids."

Loner predicted that the Middlebury program, though small at the moment, could well grow to include 30 or 40 mentors over the course of the next few years.

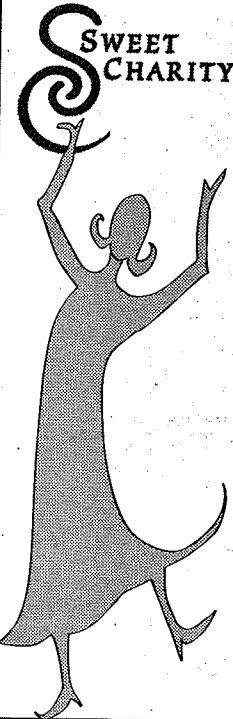
It's hard work, said Hirsch and Moros, and recruiting students from the Pine Meadows neighborhood has been slow going. But for now, Hirsch and Moros and students like them are grateful for the chance to get to enter the lives of local children — and to share bits of their lives as well.

"If you understand their backgrounds and you get to now them as full people, then I think they are more likely to learn about you as well," Hirsch said.

commission earlier this year. Eleven residents expressed a concern on the planning commission, but only two incumbents leave.

Last month Planning Commission Chairman Tom Wells said he would like to rewrite of the town plan to be a big job. It grew from a nine-page plan to more than 100 pages in the new draft.

The S
New Y



SWEET CHARITY

141A Main S
Open Monday
www.sweetcharityv