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EPISODE NAME: The DREAM Program: a non-profit Vermont mentoring program

Good afternoon and thanks for joining us I’m Judy Simpson. Was our focus is afternoon is on the DREAM program. DREAM began a Dartmouth college in 1999. Two years later it moved to the University of Vermont and won the president’s award for outstanding organization at the end of its first school year. Simply stated DREAM is a mentoring program but as were about to learn it’s much more than that. Joining me are DREAMs executive Director Mike Loner and DREAMs development Sandy Mervin. Welcome to both of you thanks for being here. Mike why don't you start out and tell us what the DREAM Program is.

Mike.: Thank you Judy. DREAM like you said where mentoring organization. We exist in Vermont and Boston. We partner college students with children from affordable Housing Communities.

Judy.: What does DREAM stand for?

Mike.: DREAM stands for directing recreation education adventure and mentoring. It's interesting DREAM actually was called ‘A DREAM’ before we had an acronym for it.

Judy.: No kidding. In the introduction I mentioned that DREAM started at Dartmouth College. Tell us a little bit more about that history.

Mike.: The history is really exciting. There was an AmeriCorps member who worked at a housing community called Templeton in White River Junction. Her name was Katharine Ross and she worked with the Vermont Housing Conservation Board. Basically her charge was to work with the families and children at Templeton. It was a large low income housing community and I think as a 1995 graduate of Dartmouth, she felt bringing Dartmouth College students might work and be a great way to engage the excitement of college students with children providing activities. So she did that and about 10 Dartmouth college students started coming over to White River Junction. From there those students decided they wanted to expand what they were doing with children. They started bringing them back to Dartmouth college campus doing small trips with them and I think by the end of the first year there was about 30 mentors in the program.

Judy.: No kidding.

Mike.: I unfortunately wasn't there but it's an exciting history to talk about and think about.

Judy.: So who do you work with?

Mike.: We work with college programs from the state. We have two programs at Dartmouth College. We have here in Chittenden county programs at saint mike's college Champlain College.
Judy.: We're seeing some video here and this is?

Sandy.: What we're seeing here is a few of our mentors and one of our summer interns from Franklin Square program which is in Burlington. For some of those viewers outside of Burlington we work with kids from Winooski Vermont from Burlington from Milton from an area around Castleton Rutland Poultney Vermont Windsor white river junction Bennington Vermont we're really all over the state as well as Boston. Our programming is very catered to different groups different age groups and what we're seeing now are some kids between the ages of 10 and 12. They're on a scavenger hunt and they've been asked to create a short film so they're just acting out different roles. This is a group of a little younger kids ages 8 to 9. As part of a scavenger hunt they've been giving a more age appropriate task and have been dressed up as animals. Getting some face paint and having some fun and they're going to act out some rolls of animals. We generally try to have a lot of fun and the kids take away a lot at the end of the day.

Judy.: You're working in communities all over the state. Where is DREAM based?

Mike.: Our office are central office is in South Burlington. We're very fortunate to have donated office space from Ben and jerry's so with in their corporate offices. We also have a small office space donated by RE arc which owns Technology Park where Ben and Jerry's is.

Judy.: What is DREAMs mission?

Mike.: Our mission is to connect college students with family's from affordable Housing Communities two help children recognize their options and explore their DREAMs to have successful futures.

Judy.: You mentioned connection with family so it's more than just one on one mentoring program it involves more than the one child.

Mike.: Definitely. We have a very strong group component to DREAM. Our gene programs take place on most campuses on Fridays. We used to call them DREAM Fridays. The college students would go to the community pick the children up typically they'll go back to the college campus where the students will work one on one with the children that then they'll also come together before or at the end of the program and do group activities that way the children have much more of a group identity than just working with one college student.

Judy.: Sandy what you think about it as far as recruiting students to do this? Is it a tough sell? It sounds like it would be a lot of fun.

Sandy.: It's a ton of fun. I was a mentor at the University of Vermont starting in 2006 and I think it was the highlight of my college experience. It's not hard to recruit college students and all I think you find that students are really enthusiastic about joining together with a big group of sip years and doing something that's really positive week after week. I know that some other mentoring programs specifically have struggled with recruiting mail mentors but case in Point I think DREAM has had a lot of success with doing that and finding male mentors to match with male mentees. It's a very fun and vibrant group and I think college students respond to that energy.

Judy.: We talked about what DREAM does for the kids. What does DREAM do for the people who volunteer?

Sandy.: I think for me and one of the greatest things that I've taken away is a sense of leadership and we like to call some of the people they graduate from DREAM and go on to our alumni organization agents for change. People who have seen firsthand the impact that one person can have on another
person through a mentoring relationship and you do take away a lot of lessons in leadership in being part of the group doing positive things.

Judy.: Mike what you think it's important to choose to work with a specific population of kids?

Mike.: In 2009 the Vermont children's poverty count basically stated that low income families specially low-income children do not have access to the same opportunities that children of more affluent communities do. DREAM early on recognize that when you concentrate poverty like you do with the project based housing community your isolating those children even more. Really a lot of what DREAM wants to do is provide the same opportunities resources support to these children as their neighbors have in more affluent communities.

Judy.: Can you give me another example of some of the programs that DREAM offers these kids?

Mike.: Yes definitely. DREAM is based on a Friday program so there is the mentoring component. Every semester the students and children will work together often with the parents and plan a culminating trip. Culminating trips from Vermont will go to boss in New York City it might be something within the community itself but it's very mentor child lead so they get together and decide what they want to do. They fun race for it and they make the trip happen. During the summer we also bring on a AmeriCorps member to work with each housing community where they provide enrichment programs throughout the summer. It could be games trips to local resources museum's and then we also provide a summer residential camp to the children of DREAM between the ages of eight and 18.

Judy.: You share with us some additional video clips that showed a DREAM in action let's take a look. This looks like fun.

Sandy.: One of the really unique things about DREAM is likely we're saying it's both 1 to 1 mentoring and group a mentoring. You do build quite a sense of community among the various programs. What we have here is spring thing which goes on at the University of Vermont’s campus each year in the spring. We have students from the University of Vermont from Champlain College and from Saint Michael's college that are paired with students from Franklin Street in Winooski elm streets in Winooski the Birchwood community in Milton and Franklin Square. There's this huge community of people that all know each other through DREAM and it's a very positive relationship. Flash forward to the winter of 2010 this is a pit camp DREAM and we've just gone many of the same people students from Franklin Square from white river junction and from Windsor Vermont that know each other through DREAM built relationships together and are just out want to have a great time and explore what this DREAM relationship means to them.

Judy.: Can some of the kids be involved say one year be involved and then be involved next year as well?

Mike.: Yes and I think that is one of the strong use aspects of the program the fact that when a child joins DREAM say as a six year old until they graduate high school or leave that housing community their welcome in the program year after year after year. Quite often they will have a college student who will work with them for two or three years that student will graduate and go get another college mentor. We've had children in the program since 1999 who has had 5-6 mentors until they're ready to graduate high school and had on to college.

Judy.: That's exciting. Sandy where do you find funding for your services?

Sandy.: One of our biggest and one of the funding sources that were the most proud of is contract tool relationships that we have with housing authorities and management groups across the state and also in the greater Boston area. For a long while we've been and AmeriCorps member. Early on
starting in 2002 we were a vista program and then starting in 2007 we had an AmeriCorps State grant which we continue to have to this day. We have a number of grants from community foundations and from larger foundations where United Way member in four different United Way chapters we do get a good deal of funding from individuals and from some businesses and corporations. Ben and jerry's has been a big partner of ours as mike mentioned.

Judy.: Is there a specific reason do you think why DREAM works in Vermont?

Mike.: I think the college campuses are very unique. We work with a number of small liberal arts colleges as well as the state colleges. The students are looking for some way to engage with the community and I think coming to Vermont for them or to Hanover with Dartmouth College. We're looking at a very engaged student body so when they see something like the yellow to ship I'm wearing as a symbol of hours when a student sees 30 children and 30 college students running around the campus in bright yellow T shirts they see that there excited they want to know what it's about so it's an easy way to engage college students.

Judy.: Tell me about your Boston expansion?

Mike.: Sure. In 2009 DREAM as an organization looking to see if it made sense to bring our village mentoring model that we call mentoring outside of Vermont and in 2009 we were fortunate to meet Madison Park development corporation. They're one of the larger nonprofit development corporations in the Boston area. We had a couple meetings they liked what they heard from us and they invited us to come down and start working with orchard gardens and Madison Park Village in Roxbury. So we started programs at Boston University and northeastern university and then just this past year started a program at Harvard and Cambridge.

Judy.: And this is a big anniversary year for DREAM. You have big plans for the 10th anniversary?

Mike.: We do we're pretty excited about it. November 2011 will be 10 years train has been a nonprofit organization in Vermont. We do have a couple of big plans starting April 21 representatives Bissonnette and Atkins from Winooski have coauthored a concurrent resolution that will be read from the house floor celebrating our 10 years. We're hoping to have a party in the park this summer in June or July. The date has not been set yet. And then in November we're hoping to hold big gala celebration.

Sandy.: For those viewers and Chittenden County we would love to have you come and join us. Judy if you would like to come to the big party in the park they love to have you.

Judy.: Sounds a lot of fun. Also if people are interested in the summer camp program what should they do?

Mike.: The summer camp for the children in DREAM summer camp is eight years and older. You're invited to attend a 3 to 5 day session but we also can't DREAM is 50 acres and fletcher Vermont and it's been built by volunteers. We have sleeping cabins that we use tools sheds roads trails have mostly been built by volunteers so we're always looking for people to come up help out. If individuals have construction experience excavators those sort of things we'd love to hear from them.

Judy.: We're just about out of time so how can viewers find out more about the DREAM program or maybe volunteer?

Mike.: You can always give us a call the number is on the screen. We have a great website that shows a lot of what DREAM is. WWW.DREAM program.org. You can e-mail sandy for me. Sadie or mike at DREAM program.org
Judy.: Terrific. Thank you so much for coming in and talking about the program it says it a lot of fun. That's our program for today I'm Judy Simpson we will see you again next time on across the fence.

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