

Alice Cheney explains the High School Association for the Research of Principles

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High school members held rally on the steps of the New York Public Library last summer

While many of their peers are concerned primarily with good grades, their social life, or the search for pleasure via drugs, alcohol, fast cars, whatever, there is a group of high school students in New York City who have different concerns how can they lead lives of commitment to God while continuing to attend school and prepare for the future.

It's not easy, the members of HARP (High School Association for the Research of Principles) admit. But, as one pointed out, when God sees the age for drug use dropping lower and lower, He can't help but be happy to see a group of young people working to bring God into the hearts of their fellow students.



Alice Cheney, HARP advisor

Chatting in the basement dining room of the 71st Street Center of the Unification Church in New York City, Amy told me, "So many kids are mixed up. They know a lot about the world but don't know how to reach God. Put them all together in one school and you have a whole bunch of people who have lost hope and don't know where to look or whom to trust."

But those who have found HARP -- about 25 active members -- have found hope. Amy, for example, described herself as "almost an atheist" at the time about a year ago when her mother joined the Unification Church and encouraged her daughter to attend a workshop. "I felt something missing in my life, but even after I had heard the Divine Principle and knew it was true, where could I go in New Hampshire? The only thing that kept me going was thinking about the summer, when I could be active for God. Now there's HARP in New York, so we moved here."

The youthful evangelists in HARP come from widely mixed backgrounds, as diversified as New York itself: blacks; Latins; Orientals; Jewish; Protestant or Catholic from Irish, Lebanese, Italian, or English ancestry. Most are between the ages of 15 and 18, with an occasional 14-year-old. About half of them have relatives, sometimes even their entire families, who are members of the Unification Church. Roxanne's aunt, for example, heard the Divine Principle first after someone gave her a pamphlet. Then Roxanne and her sister joined followed by their mother, grandfather, and cousins.

Others, like Frank's mother, can see the changes in their children due to their affiliation with the group. "She sees I'm changing my attitudes, that I'm more serious about life," Frank says. "Before I had a beard, long hair, and a mustache." Now he sat before me with short-cropped hair and a suit and tie. After having dropped out of school, he was encouraged by the Church to finish and is now enrolled in a high school equivalency program.

Actually, their advisor Alice Cheney points out, "Quite a few high school-age members who met the Family had dropped out of high school before meeting us, had been roamers, drug users, discontented. Our policy is to re-motivate them via the Divine Principle to understand the value of learning and to get them back in school as soon as they are emotionally ready and determined to do well. Just this fall, I put five drop-outs back in school or equivalency programs and registered three others in different schools than the previous year. I do a lot of school and family counseling and try to show them the principled understanding of their particular growth period and spiritual problems."



At their own workshop in the Bronx, HARP members study Divine Principle and its application in their lives

Alice describes the high school members as "still pure, and full of energy. They unite easily. When they are given an ideal like the Divine Principle, they are ready to go all the way wholeheartedly with it. God and prayer are natural to them.

"But," she goes on, "it's a struggle for them to get deeply involved with the Principle and the Family, and then have to pull out every morning and put their heart into school, which is so far away from the ideal. They have many questions about what they should do, how they should act. I have to explain to them many times that their responsibility right now is to study well and help bring their families closer to God, not to separate from them.

"They want to grow up fast and get on to big-time adult work, but I try to encourage them, telling them how important it is that they prepare themselves for leadership in the future. All those who graduated from high school last year are now in college, and the present seniors also plan to go to college."

Even while they are still in school, they are being trained in leadership. The group is organized into five teams, each headed by a student leader. After their Wednesday evening programs, each team meets together, setting conditions to bring people to lectures or workshops, discussing problems, working on homework, etc. The program itself will often be a time for a guest speaker, for studying the Divine Principle or Korean (one member is half-Korean), planning weekend activities or formation of HARP chapters.

Alice commented, "They tend to have rather a lonely course in school so their relationships to each other are especially close and wonderful. They really are learning to realize how precious their brothers and sisters are, compared to most of the kids in their schools."

One of the highlights of their activities last summer was a Rally for New Life, Love, Learning at Union Square and the New York Public Library. The rally reached high school students and young people from all over New York through public speeches, singing, and a demonstration classroom in which passersby could sit down and participate. Petitions drew thousands of supporters.

Their summer continued with three weeks of training at Barrytown, New York, a week of fundraising experience, a three-day sightseeing trip to Washington, D. C., and five days at an Explorer Camp before school reopened.

Recently, the members also held their own workshop. Before they can talk about Principle, they recognize the need to study it themselves more deeply. The workshop dealt, too, with some of the problems they encounter in school life and, most of all, they feel, it helped them to realize clearly the application of Principle to their personal relationships.

Frank's evaluation of the weekend was, "Most of us weren't so aware of our own fallen nature, so we realized we have to help each other. Also, when you've been on the street, it's hard to learn discipline and to listen. But we're being given more and more responsibility, so we're learning fast."

This kind of experience pays off. Other students recognize and respect them for being different. Roxanne, for example, has been asked to serve on the Student Council and on the student curriculum committee at her school.

"They know I have a high standard so they put their cigarettes behind their backs when they see me," she says.

"There are not too many kids with high ideals," Roxanne adds, "so I felt entirely alone last year. There was no direction and no activities for the high school members.

This year it's all different, now that we have HARP. We have a focus, plans, a clear goal. I don't feel that I'm alone but part of a team. If I want to bring guests over, there are other high school students for them to talk to."

"The teachers just accept the way the students are," comments Amy. "They're just glad to be able to get them to school at all. The purpose of school has become just to keep the kids out of trouble and teach them the basics. Teachers are the most important ones in the school. Students really enjoy some classes and really look up to their teachers, but the teachers don't set good standards. They tend to downgrade our leaders. They even wear jeans and long hair. I'm taking a course in the Bible as literature and my teacher tries to justify using drugs to reach God. Her attitude is 'I used to be on this religious trip!' She just makes a joke out of it."

But Amy and the others know there exists a core of good people in their schools who are really seeking God, not just self-satisfaction and pleasure. By asking students such questions as "How are you going to become happy?" or "What do you think about the future?", they can get an idea of what's going on in a student's mind. Does he or she have hope? These things are reflected in appearance and how they act as well. The conscientious ones, who are concerned about the world and doing something about it, these are the ones the young HARP members seek to draw out and eventually introduce to the ideas that have brought purpose and meaning into their lives.

"I know where my life's headed now," says Amy. "I see a bright future. I want to do everything I can for high school students."