



# Underground Movement Inspires the Abingtons' Renaissance

The way Rob Williams saw things back in 1995, the Abingtons' approach to youth issues just wasn't right. Parents, school leaders, business people, and church folk all had their own ideas on how to help young people get the resources they need to be successful. "But we each were doing our own thing in our own way, isolated from each other," says Williams, who was then youth ministry coordinator at an area Catholic church.

If anything, the Abingtons—a group of eight municipalities near Scranton, Penn.—were more apt to focus on senior issues than those involving youth. The local coal mining industry's decades-long decline meant young adults moved elsewhere to make a decent living, leaving fewer and fewer families with children in the towns scattered among steep, wooded hills. Teenagers not involved in sports or faith-based activities didn't have much constructive to do.

Things started to change in the Abingtons after Williams learned about *Search Institute Profiles of Student Life: Attitudes and Behaviors (A&B)* survey at a youth ministry convention. "I got excited," says Williams, who returned to sign on other area ministers and faith-community youth workers, who then agreed to approach the school district. "We didn't go to them to say, 'Hey, you're all a mess and we're here to straighten you out,'" Williams recalls. "We said, 'We want to look at the good things here, and provide more positives.'" The school superintendent agreed to

give the assets survey to 6th through 12th grade students. The results came as a wake-up call to the community.

School officials had thought it was clear enough that they cared about students, says Paulette Monchak, the district's director of instructional services. Wrong, students said: Only one out of four perceived a caring climate within the schools. From the kids'-eye view, the community also earned low marks in providing creative activities and helpful mentors, and in demonstrating that it valued youth.

With the survey results in hand, Williams worked with others to sell the idea of an asset-based approach to Abingtons' youth issues. "We talked to police, to the PTO, the Rotary, faith congregations, anyone who would listen to us," says Williams. "We wanted to get as many people as possible to buy into the concept and say that we should do something together." By mid-1998, area congregations had put together enough money to hire a part-time coordinator for a Healthy Communities • Healthy Youth initiative that would focus the enthusiasm into a concrete effort.

## Teen power fuels youth center

Trouble was, no one knew what form that effort should take. So Carla Beach, hired as the youth initiative coordinator in 1998, proposed a community summit meeting to cook up some plans. The most galvanizing idea came from a girl who observed that—short of malls and parking lots—there wasn't anywhere for teens to hang out. What about a youth center for the Abingtons' kids?

When Beach called a follow-up meeting with area adults to discuss the idea, the result, she says, was "just talk." The group never got to step one. So, Beach organized a group of 20 kids instead, who brainstormed a plan to get a youth center up and running. They surveyed their peers, got ideas for what a center should include, and located a building—a deserted elementary school.

In July 2000, with the school board's approval, the teens took possession of the basement classrooms, which they dubbed "The Underground." They had



## Quick-take

### ON THE ABINGTONS

- Location:** A group of eight communities on the edge of Scranton in northeastern Pennsylvania
- Population:** 23,000
- Initiative launch:** 1996
- Annual budget:** \$65,000
- Staff:** Coordinator, Renaissance program coordinator, youth center supervisor, and youth center activities coordinator
- Plans for award:** Hire part-time coordinator for parent/family programs; take area youth to HC • HY conference; hold a workshop on asset building in schools; develop formal plans for fundraising and volunteer recruitment
- Contact:** Coordinator Carla Beach at 570-586-1747 or caala@aol.com



**SWEET MUSIC:** Shaun Campbell (left) and Kiel Sweet (below) perform at the recently renovated Abington Youth Center. Daria Middleton (inset left) supplied some of the sweat equity that transformed the unused school space.

recognize academic performance and positive attitude. Honor roll students, plus students who have raised their overall grade average by at least five percent over the quarter, receive cards that entitle them to special privileges at school, as well as discounts at area businesses. Card carriers can cash in on a one-time chance to be five minutes late to class or to blow off a homework assignment. They can also snag extra points on a test, a free smoothie at the school cafeteria, a free rose at a local florist, or discounts at such local institutions as Manning's Dairy, an ice-cream parlor.



PHOTOS BY CARLA BEACH

Teachers, who knew they wouldn't be returning, had abandoned their classroom displays. Teens spent the summer painting, cleaning, and moving in new furnishings such as a large-screen TV and a pool table donated by area businesses.

Despite their efforts, the center wasn't an instant success. "Kids were skeptical at first because it was in an old school building," says student Stephanie Corrigan. "They thought that because it was in school, it wouldn't be an open place where you could be yourself." The watershed was a Super Bowl party with free food that drew about 100 youth.

It wasn't just the size of the crowd but the mix that surprised Corrigan. There were high-achieving students, but also teens who were on the academic and social fringes. "We created an opportunity for kids to mix in a way they usually don't," says Corrigan. "That sounds like a cliché, but it really did work. We made a place where kids could be the way they wanted to be." On an average month, about 1,000 young people passed through the Underground's doors.

### Businesses pitch in with incentives

At the same time, a flurry of other youth activities got underway. A Battle of the Bands, started in 1999, now draws hundreds of kids and dozens of bands to competitions every other month. Students compiled an oral history of senior citizens and organized a "senior prom" for residents at a local retirement home. The HC • HY initiative offers parenting classes for adults and helps coordinate a middle-school career mentor program.


With the aim of improving school climate, the Abington Heights high school, working with local businesses, enrolled in Renaissance, the student incentive program sponsored by Jostens, the school products company. Twice yearly, Renaissance school rallies

"It's not going to make you love school," observes student Kaitlin Gilbooy. "But kids really work for their cards. You know we'll do almost anything for free food and free homework."

Merchants support the program because they see that it's good for kids and good for local business, says Charles Sandercock, president of the Abington Business and Professional Association and owner of an area frame shop. The traditional Main Street-style stores that make up the association are battling with malls and big box retailers for customers. "The awards are tied to the local business community," says Sandercock. "We get kids in our stores instead of at the mall or the multiplex."

### Momentum carries a winning team

The success of the Abingtons' initiative was demonstrated in a backhanded way when the school board closed the Underground youth center to renovate and reopen the school where it was located. By then, the area's youth were so attached to the place that they chained themselves to the fence to protest the closing. Then, they started scouting a new site and successfully lobbied for unused space in another school building. Once they took possession, they went back to work cleaning, painting, and moving in the furniture.

Seven years after Rob Williams first started preaching asset building in the Abingtons, he's amazed at what he started. "Politicians, school officials, business people, parents—they're all coming together, and it's really something to see. We've got momentum now. Everyone wants to be part of a winning team. I don't think I realized back then how much impact this could have on our community." 

*Anthony Schmitz is a St. Paul writer.*

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**Charles Sandercock**  
President  
Abington Business and Professional Association