

*“The kid I sent was not the same kid that returned”*

**LEADERSHIP CAMP  
FOR HARD OF HEARING  
AND DEAF STUDENTS**

provides participants  
power  
and pride

*By Diana Poeppelmeyer and David Coco*

*Spring 2005*

From mainstream programs throughout the state, deaf and hard of hearing teens arrived for the first weekend leadership retreat\* sponsored by the Educational Resource Center on Deafness at the Texas School for the Deaf and the Texas Department of Assistive and Rehabilitative Services.

Many came from programs with small numbers of deaf and hard of hearing individuals, and for a few, this was a first encounter. Many were nervous. Some even had to be coaxed out of their parents' cars. But our staff cajoled, assured, and calmed those who arrived with the jitters and began making introductions.

Before long, we were well on our way to accomplishing our main objective: guiding these students through a positive weekend of self-discovery. Almost immediately, we began to get feedback about the power of the experience.

- By the end of the second night, the same teens who had arrived full of awkward self-consciousness were performing on stage with complete self-abandon and poise as they starred in skits of their own design.
- A few days after the retreat, a mainstream director called us and said, “I don't know what you did, but the kid I sent was not the same kid that returned. She went away somewhat shy and withdrawn and returned confident and outgoing.”
- Talking to us, a parent of one student said, “She rekindled so much of her world that she truly enjoyed. She had pulled herself away from that hearing impaired world...because she didn't want to feel different and this weekend she found that being different was exactly what she wanted to be all along.”

\*Because our leadership retreats are unique in specifically targeting students in the mainstream, we have realized we need a name to distinguish our focused retreats from others. As of spring 2007, we began calling our programs Discovery Retreats, with our specific theme this year being “Discovering Tomorrow's Leaders.”

*Photography courtesy of Diana Poeppelmeyer and David Coco*





**Diana Poeppelmeyer**, PhD, is currently the director of the Educational Resource Center on Deafness at the Texas School for the Deaf. She has experience teaching at the parent-infant, preschool, middle school, high school, and university levels and has coordinated numerous conferences, workshops, and retreats related to the education of deaf and hard of hearing children. Her current primary interest is helping families become equal partners in the educational process.

**David Coco**, PhD, works at the Texas School for the Deaf as an outreach specialist developing educational technology and outreach programs. Coco obtained his doctorate in space physics and astronomy from Rice University and worked as a research physicist at the University of Texas at Austin for 22 years. His space physics research focused on investigations of upper atmospheric weather using satellite-based measurements.

## Spring 2006

The success indicated by these comments demanded an encore, so we held our second leadership retreat for mainstream students. This time, we held an essay contest and asked students to write reflections on their experiences.

One essay winner wrote:

*Sometimes I need deaf friends because hearing people don't understand what I'm saying. Finally, I have one!!! I want to go there again next year. It was AWESOME!!!*

Another winner said:

*Working in a team taught me to communicate with others and be more open-minded to suggestions. Life is full of teams. My family is a team. My class is a team. My circle of*

*friends is a team. My neighborhood is a team. Teamwork is all around at all ages of life.*

The first prize winner of the essay contest powerfully and eloquently described his reaction to one of the guest speakers:

*His lecture about leadership furiously raised my heart to my throat, forcing motivation to ensbroud it, urging me to get up and charge forward to meet people. I climbed out of this foxhole I had dug for myself as if in war to isolate myself, but his words gave me strength to take a leap of faith to dare to communicate with my peers.*

These essays affirmed our previous feedback.

We realized that:

- We had made a significant and lasting impact on our students' lives.
- We needed to make this retreat an annual event.



- We needed to document the key elements of this retreat model in the hope that others would establish leadership retreats for mainstream deaf and hard of hearing teens.

## A Youth Leadership Retreat for Mainstream Students

### KEY ELEMENTS OF A MODEL PROGRAM

In simplest form, our Youth Leadership Retreat involves motivational speeches, adventure learning, ropes courses, team building activities, reflective and small group discussions, mentoring, games, skits, dancing, and just plain fun.

We believe the key elements to the retreat model's uniqueness and success are:



#### PACKAGING AND PRESENTATION—

Because there is a tendency to make assumptions about programs sponsored by a residential school for the deaf, we decided to emphasize that this retreat was for teens who did not identify as being part of Deaf culture and had infrequent contact with other deaf individuals. In our advertisements, we purposefully changed the usual order of “deaf and hard of hearing” to “hard of hearing and deaf” in an attempt to recruit students who identified themselves as hard of hearing rather than deaf. We also intentionally left the words “hard of hearing” and “deaf” off of the retreat T-shirts since we knew that some students were not yet ready to identify themselves by these terms. And finally, we purposefully chose an off-site location for our retreat to encourage students who might have been reluctant

to attend a program at a school for the deaf.

It is our opinion that schools for the deaf are becoming more diversified, but we did not want to lose students who had different beliefs and perceptions. Fortunately, we were able to hold both of our retreats at Peaceable Kingdom, a beautiful camp facility near Killen, Texas, with an abundance of resources for indoor and outdoor activities.



**COLLABORATIVE EFFORT—**The Texas School for the Deaf and the Texas Department of Assistive and Rehabilitative Services were the official co-sponsors of the retreat, but we also worked collaboratively with the Texas Education Agency, the Texas Council for Development Disabilities, the Regional Day School Programs for the Deaf across Texas, the Texas Alexander Graham Bell Association, and Gallaudet University. This united effort not only provided more resources, but also highlighted the various state and national support networks for hard of hearing and deaf students.



**COMMUNICATION FOR ALL—**The retreat was designed to meet the needs of students from a variety of communication backgrounds, including those who communicated through speech and lipreading, those who communicated through American Sign Language, and those who communicated through signed English. Signing and oral interpreters, and Communication Access Realtime Translation (CART, also known as realtime captioning) were

provided.

We also wanted to establish a non-threatening environment where students could experiment with new communication modes. In many of the structured activities, students were challenged to find ways to overcome communication barriers without using CART or interpreters. The basic retreat philosophy was that communication—not mode of communication—was of primary importance.



**STAFF—**The staff members were characterized by their outstanding quality and variety of backgrounds. The event planners from both co-sponsoring agencies were well known and trusted as individuals who respected individual differences. In that spirit, the planners sought out deaf, hard of hearing, and hearing role models and mentors who could relate to students. We included staff who had previously worked in the youth programs of both the National Association of the Deaf and the Alexander Graham Bell Association. Also, staff/student ratios were kept low—one staff member for every three students—so that students could have easy access to the retreat staff. Dynamic, nationally known speakers inspired and motivated students with examples from their own lives and instilled in students a can-do attitude. Experienced youth leaders guided students through the many structured activities during the course of the weekend. University students, hard of hearing and deaf, participated as peer mentors for the teens.



**NOMINATIONS AND NUMBERS**—Due to the space limitations of our site, we only accepted about 30 students. Students who participated were identified as having leadership potential and nominated by their teachers. The small size of the gathering allowed students to get to know each other quickly and to develop a sense of belonging.



**TRAVEL STIPENDS**—In a state the size of Texas, the cost of traveling to the retreat could have been prohibitive, and we did not want to limit participation to those who could afford the expense of the trip. By providing travel stipends, we were able to include students from all economic levels and from the farthest reaches of the state.



**ACTIVITIES WITH INTENTION**—Every activity of the retreat was designed with the intention of nurturing self-discovery and developing leadership skills. Speakers designed their talks around these themes, and students demonstrated their engagement with questions, applause, laughter, and the occasional, “Amen!” Our activity leaders led students through challenges that required reflection, discussion, teamwork, and perseverance. For example, in one activity students built bridges from one wooden platform to another. As they struggled building these physical connections, they also developed emotional and communication connections. They discovered the needs of each other and their own needs as well. Small group discussions allowed students to disclose their personal stories and discover common ground. Skits encouraged students to express some of the lessons they learned in creative, dramatic, and/or humorous performances. Comedy skits proved to be the most popular mode of self-disclosure.



**RELATIONSHIP MAINTENANCE**—As sponsors of the event, we created the space for relationships to develop. After the retreat we posted pictures on the

website for students, families, and program staff to share. However, we know that the retreat is, for many of the students, the beginning of an expanded social network that will immensely enrich their lives. With today’s technology, it is much easier for hard of hearing and deaf teens to stay in contact. During the retreat, many students exchanged contact information and left with many new names in their address books. A week after the event, one speech therapist let us know that she had to confiscate a young man’s phone as his session with her was constantly being interrupted by his new “retreat” pals. Though she said she was disapproving in her role as a teacher, she was personally delighted to see that he had made friends. And for many of these students, it seems that the retreat not only helped them make friends with each other, but it also helped them make friends with themselves.

Successful youth leadership retreats for



students in the mainstream are not complicated, but they are vital. Our own years of experience in working with hard of hearing and deaf youth tell us that this kind of experience is life enriching for some students. For other students it is life transforming. For still others, it is life saving.

Both of us have worked with young adults who did not have contact with other hard of hearing or deaf individuals during their formative years and we have heard their regrets. Even now, when we make presentations on the work we are doing, at the end of our discussion there is inevitably at least one adult who is hard of hearing or deaf who comes forward, sometimes with tears in his or her eyes, and says, “I wish I would have had a program like this when I was growing up.” Unfortunately, we can’t turn back the clock, but we can listen and take note, and we can decide to provide these opportunities for students of the next generation.

## Leadership and Friendship For Latino Teens

When we learned that the Texas Latino Council for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing would be holding their conference in Austin in September 2006, we took advantage of the location to concurrently run a special Youth Leadership Retreat for Latino Deaf and Hard of Hearing Teens. An outgrowth of our ongoing work with mainstreamed youth, this retreat was slightly different. One difference was that we held it at the Texas School for the Deaf so that students could also spend part of their time at the conference. We also added workshops to promote cultural pride. Working with the Deaf Hispanic Heritage Project from the Institute for Disabilities Research and Training, we were able to offer students special speakers and performances that highlighted the Latino culture. Thirty-four students came from across Texas to enjoy this special confluence of opportunities. In 2008, when the Texas Latino Council for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing hosts the next conference, we hope to offer the leadership retreat again.