

# **A Personal Reflection on Natural Helpers**

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In my unofficial capacity as the connector for Long Island schools who have hosted the NH program since my first year of doing so in 1986 at Elwood-John H. Glenn High School in East Northport NY, I offer these reflections:

When schools begin the process of implementing the Natural Helpers program, one of the key questions to address is the site to host the retreat training itself. This is certainly a cost consideration for school budgets, but one which is well worth the investment. For many students, the experience of attending a retreat away from school grounds is probably the single most treasured memory of being trained as a Natural Helper. Many of the most successful corporations such as Google and other major corporations have long understood the power of a residential retreat for their top executives. The NH retreat allows for students to have the space they need to drop old stereotypes of the peers who are on the weekend training with them. They train together, eat meals together, have down time and fun together, and yes - sleep together (in separate dorms of course). Students and teachers learn about each other as people and begin to break the structure that defines them within the confines of the school setting.

During the second day of the retreat in the evening, all participants come together for an emotionally, life-changing activity called Sharing. Participants are asked in advance to consider sharing something personal about themselves with the larger group - some aspect of their lives which had deep personal meaning. This is strictly voluntary and not required; some students will choose just to listen and take it all in. We hear about personal loss - parents, siblings, grandparents. We hear about betrayals in personal relationships. We hear about dreams that were shattered. We hear all-too-often about the dark nights of suicidal thoughts. We hear about drugs, fears of war, unwanted pregnancies, immigration to a new country and the instability of the global scene. We hear about college fears.

However, we also hear inspirational stories of someone who changed a student's life for the better. We hear about hope and love, and we hear about the precious meaning of friends and family. Ask anyone who has trained as a Natural Helper what their fondest memory of the weekend was; it will typically come in a one-word answer: "Sharing."

Our current educational system is often cited as providing insufficient opportunities for social-emotional learning. The NH retreat is quite the opposite: an immersive experience under the safety and guidance of professional school-based mental health team staff to really lean in and help us to learn what it means to be human. Part of the NH training is also designed to teach students that they are not expected to function as therapists to their friends: their role is to listen - really listen without judgment - and when necessary, to refer to a member of the school-based crisis team. This forms the content of the third day of the retreat curriculum. Spending time together with that very team creates a sense of trust and shared humanity.

Of course, not every school may be able to afford the cost of renting a retreat facility and feeding a large group of teens for three days. Districts have fund-raised in many ways to support the full retreat experience for their Natural Helpers. In the case of those districts where cost or liability concerns loom large, school buildings may be used for the retreat. In some cases, districts conduct their retreat training during weekend days without the sleepover component - acceptable, just not the original intent of the crafters of the NH program.

The bottom line is this - in my forty year career as a School Psychologist and as a provider in private practice working with teens and emerging adults - there is no more powerful mental health prevention program for high school students than Natural Helpers. In a world where access to traditional outpatient psychotherapy comes with many restrictions and limitations, Natural Helpers is open to all. It seeks to recruit the "natural" leaders within every school culture and to teach some valuable life lessons: We are all human. Each of us comes into the world with our unique social, cultural, ethnic, and socio-economic histories. No one needs to be told how to fix their problems; what we all cherish is a compassionate listener. Natural Helpers training cultivates and refines that already existing listening skill within a supportive setting and as part of a helping team. What more can we give our youth?

Some will believe that the liability concerns of this type of large scale prevention program are just too great in these challenging times. I ask what the risk and the cost will be to young lives when we do not accept the need to create belonging, to open our hearts as a school community, and to embrace the challenging task of making this all come to fruition. Your Natural Helpers will make you proud!