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## Reachin' Out Program for Special Needs Teens

By *Bobbie Dodson*

"Volunteering at Reachin' Out was an amazing experience. The kids were so appreciative of the smallest things. Just being listened to put a wide grin on their faces," says Nick Oliver, an Orinda Intermediate School (OIS) student.

Nick and eight others from the OIS group, "Others First" volunteered in the Reachin' Out program. It is held monthly at the Lafayette-Orinda Presbyterian Church, 49 Knox Drive, Lafayette, for teens with special needs. "Girls and boys come from all over the county," says Mary Lou Lucke, founder of the program. "These kids can be very lonely. Some come in wheel chairs; some can't make their speech understood; some are autistic; some can't even write their names. It's an important part of their life as it offers an opportunity for them to socialize."

The recent dance, which had 59 in attendance, was a special evening, with Stanley School DJs Tucker O'Neill and John Cornell supplying the music. Stacy Sherbert, a Campolindo graduate who now works at Longs, says her favorite thing is to dance, with the Mambo being her best dance move. She adds, "Mary Lou is really doing a good thing for us special needs kids."

Dinner is always served at the monthly get-togethers. There have been a variety of programs ranging from police coming to teach how to walk at night, a presentation about the Chabot Space Center and a magic performance to movies, talent shows and playing Pictionary.

Dedicated to the program, Lucke has been its leader since 1980. Recently she was honored with an Award for Excellence by the Developmental Disability Council for Country Costa County. For many years she was the special education teacher at Miramonte High School.

"I love these young people," Lucke says. "Some who started in Reachin' Out when they were 12 or 13 are in their 30s and serve as cashiers, greeters and kitchen helpers now. Not only do our participants learn some basic skills and more socially accepted behaviors, but the volunteers learn about different disabilities and how to relate to teens with these problems."

Crondelet students Samantha and Robyn Malpass, with their mom Linda, have been volunteering for three years. Samantha says, "Rather than go to a movie with friends, it's my favorite thing to do Friday night. I certainly get back more than I give."

At this last meeting Jeffrey, who isn't very social and never dances, began dancing. I was so proud of him. Every new accomplishment of my friends there is meaningful to me."

Julia Duncan, an OIS student, observes, "It was a fun way to help others and do something that really made a difference for some kids. I felt that my time was spent in a good place."

"Our group is open to any teen who might benefit from the experience," Lucke says. "For more information contact me at 925-376-3675"

Reach the reporter at: [info@lamorindaweekly.com](mailto:info@lamorindaweekly.com)

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