

New Therapy Helps Troubled Teens

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Nothing he had learned in his clinical training was working for Ron Phillips. His psychological counseling sessions with severely troubled teens in Hughson were going nowhere.

"Then I started telling stories to them, and all of a sudden some of the most disturbed kids on the planet were listening to learn," Phillips recalled.

He knew he had stumbled onto something, a method for getting youngsters to talk -- and think -- about their lives.

Phillips' therapeutic storytelling technique emerged in the 1980s when he was program director for Creative Alternatives, a Hughson-based, nonprofit organization that takes in troubled children.

But it was in New Zealand where Phillips perfected his method.

"It's become really accepted in New Zealand," said Phillips, who runs Therapeutic Storytelling Intervention International in Auckland. "The work we are doing is phenomenal."

His method, in fact, was featured last July on the New Zealand-version of "60 Minutes."

Phillips, who returned last week to visit family in Stanislaus County, moved to New Zealand with his wife, Mary, and three daughters in 1991.

"We initially went for a year, and during that year the police there became interested in my work," said Phillips, 53.

The D.A.R.E. Foundation of New Zealand, a police-sponsored youth guidance organization, now uses Phillips' storytelling technique to help children think about their behavior and make positive personal changes.

The therapy uses a fable, written by Phillips, called "Gem of the First Water." A chapter of the book is read aloud, then counselors and teens discuss the story.

"It's about an unnamed boy who goes through a metaphorical journey," explained Phillips, who earned a master's degree in educational psychology from the University of San Francisco.

The story, he said, basically is the same one he was telling back in his Hughson counseling days.

"I create pictures with words, and as the teens listen, they start to see themselves and identify with what's happening," he said. "The story is the tool."

Phillips said he has documented evidence that the technique improves teens' self-image, reduces depression and helps them function better within their families.

He expects to present that proof next fall at the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry conference in Hawaii.

"Therapeutic storytelling has helped lots and lots of people, and now I'm at the phase where I want to help other people (learn the technique), so they can help even more people," Phillips said.

While visiting Stanislaus County (his parents Don and Winnie Phillips live in Waterford), he pitched his program to various organizations, but got no commitments.

"I'm very happy in New Zealand, but I would really love to bring my process back to Stanislaus County. I'd like to make it work here because I'm rooted here," said Phillips, who once served on the Hughson City Council. "I'd like to set up a training base here."

Until then, he invited the public to find out more about his work through his Web site, .

A sample chapter of his book is available free online.

www.tsi.co.nz

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