

## Arizona Youth Partnership spreads wings across state

By Joe Pangburn, Inside Tucson Business

In this season of giving and sharing, a local nonprofit organization is thankful to be able to spread its wings a little wider across Arizona to help people in need.

Arizona Youth Partnership (AzYP), formerly Pima Youth Partnership, received a federal grant enabling them to reach more families in 22 rural communities across the state.

AzYP works with rural communities and reservations that lack the same programs, services and activities available to children and families in larger cities.

"We feel that every child in the state of Arizona should have the information and skills he or she needs to make healthy choices and avoid high risk behaviors," said the program's executive director, Luan Wagner. "Parents have a powerful opportunity to teach their children how to make these good choices and we can show them how."

Primarily, they have worked on building on strengths rather than deficits, which include: alcohol, tobacco and drug prevention; strengthening families and premarital preparation programs; teen pregnancy prevention; life skills preparation; after school programs for elementary and middle school youth; and recreational/social events for teens and family networks.

With the request and receipt of the \$550,000 per year grant for a period of five years from the National Department of Health and Human Services AzYP will be beginning a program called Healthy Marriages/Strong Families Project.

AzYP teams up with the Head Start programs around the state. Head Start is a federally funded program offering services to families at or below the federal poverty line helping the family as well as the children to become self sustaining.

The program will offer 200 rural Head Start parents the opportunities to come to marriage conferences and peer groups to help build stronger relationships.

"We will be providing all-expenses-paid weekend retreats for married couples, engaged couples or even those planning on getting engaged," said Wagner.

According to AzYP, the purpose of the project is three-fold. The couples will build healthy marriages through learning PAIRS at weekend retreats. They will nurture healthy marriages through Marriage Mentoring Networks that meet monthly to participate in booster sessions. They will sustain healthy marriages through additional skills workshops.

"We will also be giving couples a \$300 stipend for completing the

program," said Wagner. Jesse Rodriguez, director of northern Arizona's Head Start program, is working with AzYP on this program.

"Many times these parents are having to work two jobs to get by," Rodriguez said. "They don't always have time for themselves. It is great to see something targeted toward them to help them build healthy marriages."

Other Head Start program directors, like Linda Yuguchi of southeast Arizona, are also welcoming the program come into their communities.

"A healthy marriage fits right into what we want to do," said Yuguchi. "When a child grows up in a home with supportive parents in a healthy marriage, it helps the children become self sustaining."

"The whole concept is great," continued Yuguchi. "When you train a group of people like that, they will go out and interact with their peers. So the people who participate with this will become the ones who are encouraging their peers and teaching others what they learned through this program."

Arizona Youth Partnership has seen tremendous growth over their sixteen years of service to the state of Arizona.

In 1990, when the program started, it worked in the communities

of Marana, Sahuarita and Ajo and had a budget of \$220,000. In fiscal year 2005-2006 AzYP worked with 9,955 children, youth and adults in 23 communities across six counties. Today their budget is \$2.5 million annually.

"We have been so successful in bringing community visions to life locally that other communities statewide are asking us to bring our programs, services and activities to their youth and families," said Wagner. "I hope we can meet the demand."

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