

# A Cappella Services for Young Women

By Marisa Celenza, Editor

On a bright January afternoon, I sat in a Toronto coffee shop with Sister Sheila McAuliffe. Sister McAuliffe worked at the Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association provincial office for 19 years and before that was a principal with the Metropolitan Separate School Board, now Toronto CDSB. We spent the afternoon in conversation over Sister McAuliffe's present project and passion that began in the early nineties.

*Look at that face. Is that not the saddest face you have seen today? That is whom we want to help - teenage girls with no voice and nowhere to go.*

It was faces such as this one, which walked by the window that afternoon, that first led Sister Sheila McAuliffe, to form *A Cappella Services for Young Women*.

To sing "a cappella" is to carry a tune without instrumental accompaniment. It is a high-risk musical style. It is far easier to lose pitch when the orchestra is not providing the familiar melody. You can lose your way without a strong rhythm section to keep you on track. Many young women in Canada today are living "a cappella" and often their song is not being heard.

*A Cappella* is aimed at helping at-risk young women remain in school and obtain a high school diploma. It is a prevention and early intervention initiative designed to reduce the possibility that young women will experience poverty and abuse by assisting them to acquire the self-esteem, life skills and education they need, in order to lead a meaningful, independent and interdependent healthy life.

The target group for *A Cappella* is high school aged women in Toronto who feel isolated, discouraged and hopeless about their futures. These girls may be trying to escape conditions of physical, psychological and sexual abuse or family neglect by leaving school before obtaining a high school diploma. They see leaving school early as the only solution to the difficulties of their circumstances. Girls are referred to *A Cappella* through their schools or other service agencies. *A Cappella* is designed to reach out to girls who:

- feel isolated or helpless and need to be drawn out;
- have become unmotivated or unwilling learners;
- would benefit from the mentoring program;
- need to become more involved and experience a broader horizon; or
- would benefit from personal attention and support.

In order to meet their objectives, the *A Cappella* program deals with the underlying factors: the feelings of powerlessness, depression, fear of violence, cynicism and neglect that these girls experience.

Through a volunteer mentoring service and a youth and child care worker, *A Cappella* provides teaching and guidance in the areas of self-motivation, anger management and stress management. The mentoring program matches adult community volunteers with the young girls. Volunteers were recruited through a community newspaper ad entitled, *Wonderful Women Wanted*. Respondents

were put through two intense hour-long interviews before they were accepted and moved on to the training process. This resulted in 14 women eager to be matched as mentors with young at-risk high school students. Mentors spend two to three hours a week with the girls. Sister McAuliffe's goal is to have 50 to 60 mentors trained and matched with needy candidates. The mentoring program provides an opportunity for girls to:

- develop positive self-esteem and reinforcement;
- find their "voice" and speak with confidence;
- have an adult woman who is willing to spend time with them; and
- develop informal opportunities to discuss their current situation and begin to set goals regarding school, social issues, careers and thus attain their full potential.

The mentoring program is stage one of the *A Cappella* project. Sister McAuliffe and the board of directors also have a parent support program. They believe that families know and understand their situation best and are often the creative sources for defining outcomes and finding positive solutions. *A Cappella* offers an eight-session series entitled *Practical Parenting: A Common Sense Guide to Raising Cooperative Self-reliant and Loving Children (Teens)*.

Once the mentoring and parent support programs are firmly established and funded, Sister McAuliffe and the board of directors can turn their attention to stage three of their vision for *A Cappella*, the purchase of a house.

Sister McAuliffe told me the story of "Lisa". There was a "spot" on the sidewalk in front of the local variety store in her neighbourhood that belonged to an ill-kempt homeless man and his mangy dog. One evening when Sister walked by this "spot" on her way into the variety store, she saw a young girl sitting on the "spot". Sister wondered if she would have been sitting there if she were aware of the daytime tenants of this spot. She decided to speak to this young woman on her way out of the store if she was still there. She was still there and Sister McAuliffe stopped to speak with her. After several questions, she finally got a smile from her and the young girl told Sister McAuliffe, "I can't go home tonight." Her mother's boyfriend was visiting and she had been kicked out of the house until the morning. Sister McAuliffe took Lisa home with her that evening and began working on establishing *A Cappella*.

*A Cappella* is a registered Canadian charitable organization. They receive funds from several sources including individual donors, charitable foundations, service clubs, corporate and small businesses and the women's service organization, Soroptimists International of Toronto. Typically, they do not receive enough funds in order to meet the demands of the young girls.

The house that they hope to purchase will offer a safe, caring environment, with breathing space for the adolescent female who "cannot go home tonight."

For further information, call Sister McAuliffe at 416-406-5152.