

Created During Troubled Times, CROYA and Its Manager Foster Healthy Teen Relationships

By David A. F. Sweet

Committee Representing Our Young Adults – better known as CROYA – was founded by Lake Forest College President Eugene Hotchkiss, Lake Forest Mayor Frank Farwell and local youth advocate and eventual CROYA Director Margot Martino. The non-profit was created in response to burgeoning drug use and suicides among teenagers in town in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Today, CROYA is flourishing — from music jams to helping kids with disabilities to a multitude of activities, including retreats and educational programs. The organization creates a safe space for teens, whether they are troubled or not; and it is recognized as one of the country's longest-running youth organizations.

Manager Todd Nahigian is closing in on 30 years at CROYA. Lake Forest Love caught up with the busy Nahigian to talk about how his role at CROYA has evolved, how the non-profit promotes healthy relationships and more.

How has your job at CROYA changed over the years?

My job at CROYA has evolved over 28 years, but a few things have stayed the same. Youth are still trying to create their identity and push against the boundaries our society creates. Many of the issues from the 1970s and 1980s which were critical in CROYA's beginning, are still present today. What has changed is our understanding of these issues, and the community's willingness to provide the necessary resources to support the youth.

I come from a clinical psychology background, and I quickly realized that CROYA was the greatest combination of leadership, service, education, and social programming, while providing early assessment of mental health issues and other teenage struggles. Simply stated, CROYA is one of a kind. Directly in line with the CROYA mission, we identify the needs of the youth, create programs to meet those needs, and work with local resources to provide support for youth in need. One thing that keeps the youth coming back is that CROYA is truly for and by the youth. The youth are elected into Executive Committee positions which work with the CROYA staff to make it all happen.

One thing that has proven successful is meeting the youth where they are. From 7th grade to 12th grade, there is a huge amount of growing up that takes place with youth. The variety of needs and behavior that we see is extraordinary, and having trusted adults in their lives is paramount to developing into a positive citizen. I love the opportunity to work with the youth and to see the effects CROYA has on them. The CROYA process is engaging and builds life skills and confidence for youth as they grow into adults.

How does CROYA help build healthy relationships?

One of the main goals of adolescence is building healthy peer relationships. The youth speak to this all the time, sharing that they create many new friends at CROYA. They learn quickly how CROYA's Values of Acceptance, Respect, Empathy, and Accountability make a huge impact in creating friendships and developing healthy relationships with peers.

Another CROYA program that makes an incredible impact on the youth are the High School Retreats. Held once in the fall and once in the spring, these weekends away from Lake Forest and Lake Bluff, without their cell phones, provide an awesome opportunity for the youth to be introspective about teenage issues, and to learn they are not alone in their adolescent struggles. CROYA works closely with the local schools and understands the value of contributing to the local communities. Whether it be teaching the Peer Training and Peer Assisted Leadership classes, supporting school programs, or participating in community service projects, the CROYA organization is a true advocate for the youth both inside and outside of school.

How does CROYA make all teenagers feel welcome?

It is often said that CROYA is a home away from home for youth. We know that the teenage years can feel like a roller coaster of emotions, and youth are introduced to so many new experiences and stressors. We strive to make CROYA a place where everyone is welcome and feel a sense of belonging and comfort, while being able to truly be themselves.

Despite CROYA's many successes, what challenges does it still face?

One of the challenges CROYA faces year after year is continuing to educate the students and families about what CROYA is and what programs CROYA provides. CROYA begins working with 7th grade students, so at the end of the school year, we hold a 6th Grade Welcome Party to introduce the 6th graders to CROYA. There are typically over 100 youth in attendance, and this marks the transition for these students to be eligible to attend CROYA.

Once the summer begins, they are rising 7th graders, and can participate in summer meetings, community service projects, youth trips, float building and programs like Summer Jam and Lake Forest Day Jam. While CROYA provides a lot of fun programming, the staff is also available to provide support to students who are struggling with issues.

Another challenge that CROYA deals with is the stigma of mental illness. At any given time, 20 percent of the teenage population can be struggling with mental health challenges, yet there are many people who are not comfortable acknowledging or dealing with these issues. Over the years I have been at CROYA, there has definitely been

improvement made in this area. I hope that issues around mental health will become even more accepted and that people will grow more willing to address these problems, just like physical injuries or disorders.

What's new at CROYA this school year?

Each year there is a new High School Executive Committee elected by their peers which helps direct CROYA youth programming. This year's group of 24 youth is off to a great start, including a liaison to Woodlands Academy and a liaison to Lake Forest Academy. The Executive Committee meets on a monthly basis to plan activities and to determine the best ways of communicating these events to the local youth. We are always looking for new, creative ideas to implement at CROYA, whether it be a new community service project, a social program, or even a hot topic up for discussion.

Most recently, CROYA held the 2nd Annual Pink Party to raise money for Breast Cancer awareness and research. CROYA also teamed up with local Yoga Instructor Areta Verschoor and Guitarist Dave Hildebrand to offer Yoguitar to the students. The youth really enjoyed it, and we are bringing Yoguitar back around final exams time to help the students de-stress. A couple other new CROYA events include the games "Taskmaster" and "Silent Library", both of which were adapted from the TV shows.

This is the first of a two-part series on CROYA. Read about the beloved Donut Bowl soon.



CROYA Manager Todd Nahigian gets together with founders Margot Martino and Gene Hotchkiss.



There's plenty of fun to be had at CROYA.