

Interview with Dina Sears-Graves
Director of UPLIFT
New London (CT) Teen Pregnancy Prevention Program
Interviewed by Tony Norris

Dina Sears-Graves is the Executive Director of the Boys and Girls Club of New London. She has been the Coordinator of UPLIFT, the New London (CT) Teen Pregnancy Prevention Program, since 1995. Until its move to the Boys and Girls Club in 2004, UPLIFT was a program of the City of New London. It is funded primarily by the Connecticut Department of Social Services as part of its Teen Pregnancy Prevention Initiative.

Norris: How did you first get involved with teen pregnancy prevention efforts in New London?

Sears-Graves: It was really almost an accident, or fate if you believe in that. I was looking for work and saw an ad that talked about working with youth, which I had been doing for many years. I interviewed for the job and got it. As I got involved and learned more, I was shocked at the extent of the problem. I was instantaneously hooked...and still am.

Norris: Working with kids who are at high risk for becoming teen parents can be pretty intense. Some people might find it kind of depressing, with all the problems that these kids encounter in their day-to-day lives. What about it made it so intriguing to you?

Sears-Graves: Yes, the issues can sometimes get intense and some might see it as depressing. However, there is so much good and hope in these kids that you don't even think about it. We follow the Carrera model*, which allows for these kids to become your parallel family. If they were your own kids you would not give up on them, you would do everything possible to see that they can become successful. Another aspect of the program that is intriguing is that it is long- term intervention. You don't work with a child for only a short time. You see the same kid for years. We have had kids in the program for over seven years. Therefore, you get to see the results of their development.

*For more information go to <http://www.emcf.org/programs/youth/carrera.htm>



Norris: Was there some experience in your childhood, adolescence or early adulthood that led you to this profession?

Sears-Graves: Not specifically with teen pregnancy prevention, but definitely with young people. In high school, I always enjoyed working with kids at various summer camps where I worked. I just love kids. My first job was working with seniors in senior programs, but the place I worked also had a childcare program for kids five and up.

One day, I had to fill in at the childcare division and it instantly clicked. Shortly after that, I was running all the after school programs.

Norris: Why did New London adopt the Carrera model as the major strategy for preventing teen pregnancies and adolescent births? When did you begin trying to implement this model?

Sears-Graves: Prior to starting my job with teen pregnancy prevention--actually it was about two or three months before--the City of New London invited Dr. Michael Carrera to speak. The City was looking at the problem of teen pregnancy prevention. Dr. Carrera spoke, talked about his results and the City bought into it. They formed UPLIFT, United Programs Life Issues for Teens. It's hard to believe I've been with UPLIFT almost eleven years now.

Norris: What was it about Carrera's approach that made the City of New London wager that this model would be a good match for the community?

Sears-Graves: I was not in New London when the decision was made to adopt the Carrera model. However, I do believe that New London was dealing with a high-births-to-teens rate, and what they were currently doing was not working. The results of the preliminary evaluations of the Carrera model looked very promising and New London was willing to try something new.

Norris: What kind of challenges did you encounter when you tried implementing this approach to teen pregnancy prevention?

Sears-Graves: It was tough at first, trying to replicate the program to make it fit in New London. There was a lot of trial and error, but we learned from it. There were very few replicates of the Carrera model at the time, so we had to tailor the Carrera model to fit New London.

Norris: Can you give us a couple of examples of the trial and error process?

Sears-Graves: One example of how we learned by trial and error was with staffing. When I first started there were at least 12 part time staff members. I was the only full time person. It was like a revolving door. Staff would come and go. They would get full time jobs, or were just using the program as a second job and didn't take it seriously. It was difficult to manage, and more importantly, the kids could never bond appropriately with the staff. These kids are so used to people, especially their family members, coming and going in their lives that this was just an extension of that. I then looked at all of the program components and came up with job descriptions. I redid the budget and included health benefits for the full-time staff, as well vacation and sick leave. This made the staff much more committed to the program and the job itself.



Norris: In what ways is your program specifically different from the formal Carrera model?

Sears-Graves: One way that our program is specifically different from the formal Carrera model is how we offer our components. Our program runs every day after school. Kids don't have an option of which component they want to attend. If there is an activity scheduled, then all kids must participate. We did not have the space or the staff to do it any other way. Plus, our facility didn't allow for us to have kids come and go. We are located in a city municipal building. There are many offices in it, and some of the workers in the building would get upset if the kids were in the hallways. It was easier to manage the kids if they all came at the same time and left at the same time.



Norris: What kind of impact do you think these differences have on the kids in your program?

Sears-Graves: Quality and consistent staffing has had the greatest impact on the kids. We are able to provide a program that is well thought out and run by caring adults. We have staff members who have been working at UPLIFT for over ten years.

Norris: Were there any special qualities in your community that made it harder or easier to implement the Carrera model?

Sears-Graves: We had a great relationship with the City, which was totally on-board with the concept. We got special support from the Health Department. Their support helped us get the job done. There was some resistance, though, to this "new-fangled approach" at first. The kids were really great and they kept us going.

Norris: Without naming names, where did the resistance come from and how did you handle it?

Sears-Graves: Prior to changing over to the Carrera model, the City of New London would get money from the State of Connecticut and agencies in New London would submit an RFP for money to run a short-term teen pregnancy prevention program. When the City chose to run one Carrera program, a number of agencies that had been receiving a portion of the state funds were no longer funded. The name UPLIFT stands for Unified Programs Life Issues for Teens as a result of this.

Norris: What are some of the challenges you have encountered?

Sears-Graves: Whatever challenges my staff and I faced, our attitude was always, "Okay, how are we going to overcome this?" The staff has been great and many of them have been here for a long time. They never flinched at a challenge.

Norris: Can you give a specific example?

Sears-Graves: We have experienced many challenges at UPLIFT. Behavior of the kids is usually the biggest source. Instead of letting it get to them, the staff members all sit together and come up with a solution. It is important to note that with behavior, what works one time doesn't always work the next, or with a different group of kids. As new kids come into the program, or as the kids grow, the staff has to come up with new ways to deal with issues. One particular example is when the staff realized that each of them disciplined the kids differently. As a result, some staff members were labeled as the "good staff" and others were labeled as the "mean staff." To alleviate this, we came up with "the jar". Staff members came up with a list of consequences that they all agreed upon. Any time a kid got in trouble they would first get a warning. After the second time, they had to pick from the jar and complete whatever task was on the paper they chose. Consequences ranged from cleaning projects, to educational assignments that they had to complete immediately. Once a kid chose from the jar and realized the consequences were not favorable, it deterred their negative behavior. This technique was very successful. As a matter of fact, this year we had to revisit the "jar" and come up with new consequences because the ones that were in the jar were not effective for the current group of kids.

Norris: What has been most gratifying about your work with UPLIFT?

Sears-Graves: One of the most gratifying aspects of working with kids over a long period of time is when they graduate from the program and then come back to thank us. Our biggest reward is hearing them say, "I don't know what I would have done without you."

Norris: Was this surprising?

Sears-Graves: It is not surprising that the kids keep up their connections with staff members. As I said before, some kids are in the program for years. This is true for the staff, too. We truly become a parallel family. When it is time to graduate, the relationship doesn't just end.

Norris: What has been your biggest disappointment?

Sears-Graves: Our biggest disappointment was, of course, our first pregnancy caused by a male in our program. We all took it as a personal failure, even though we knew that statistically, we were doing great! We all kind of knew this would happen someday, but none of us was prepared. But we're still in contact with the young man -- he has a great job, married the mother of the child, and they actually have had other kids. So I guess it all worked out.

Norris: Do you think it's possible that, for that young man, even though he became a teen parent, he learned something from UPLIFT about the importance of taking personal responsibility for his own actions?

Sears-Graves: A big part of the Carrera model is learning about choice and consequences and taking responsibility for your own actions. This starts from day one in our program. A kid can choose to participate in the program or make a choice not to. Depending on the choice, a kid may miss out on something by making the wrong choice. In the case where the program participant got a girl pregnant, I do believe that he learned something from us about the importance of taking personal responsibility.

Norris: This raises an interesting question: *You were just pregnant and had a baby. Did that present any problems within the program? Are you using your experience as a teaching tool? Has it been effective?*

Sears-Graves: It was always a joke with the kids that I had been married eleven years and still didn't have a baby. I told them that I still wanted to travel and wasn't ready to settle down with a baby yet. The kids were thrilled when I got pregnant. They threw me a shower and bought gifts -- that's all about the parallel family the Carrera model teaches you to create. But I believe it was a good experience for them and I was a role model. I showed them how life could be; it was a good lesson. I waited until my husband and I were ready. I kept telling them, "You know, having a baby is a lot of work."

Norris: UPLIFT recently shifted from being under the umbrella of the City of New London to now being a separate program within the Boys and Girls Club in your area. What were the advantages to the program in making this kind of administrative change?

Sears-Graves: New London was having financial problems and was looking to spin off programs. Also, because we were under the City's umbrella, we couldn't raise any additional funds for ourselves. I was offered the job as the head of the Boys and Girls Club, but I didn't want to leave UPLIFT. So I went to the City and asked if I could take the program to the Club. The timing was perfect, since the City was just about to merge the Health Department with a regional health bureau. I don't know what would have happened if the events didn't work out so well. I think it was fate and I believe that.

Norris: Any new plans for the future of the program?

Sears-Graves: It's a great program, the model works and we don't foresee any changes in the methodology. It would be great to get more space and have more kids. I'd like to see the program in its own place and expanded. We'll see what the future brings.

Norris: You seem to have a real commitment to the New London community. Are you from there originally?

Sears-Graves: I've always lived in this area, although I grew up in Norwich and now live in Groton. So I guess I didn't wander very far.