



## Learning Leadership: **Students Teach Each Other**

By Rob MacKay

**A**na Pitchin wasn't shy, but she definitely didn't consider herself to be a great communicator last spring, when she started participating in LdOut<sup>3</sup>, a youth-leadership program coordinated by Hope College's Center for Faithful Leadership.

"I assumed I was just a normal group member," she says. (After all, she was only 13.)

Pitchin and 14 others from the seventh grade at

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Harbor Lights Middle School in Holland, Michigan, underwent a five-week course that involved interactive sessions on trust, vulnerability, conflict, listening, and accountability. Soon they were volunteering at a senior home.

Pitchin quickly discovered the importance of working as a team and valuing other people's opinions. She also learned that conflict is natural in relationships, but bad conflict must be resolved. Now in the eighth grade, she finds communication with family and peers much easier and enjoys taking on leadership roles.

"Putting my trust in others, I can be a good



leader," she says. "Collaboration is important. If we can create leaders who can work together, in the end we'll have a much better world."

Short for "Lead Out," LdOut<sup>3</sup> gets Hope undergrads together with high school juniors and seventh graders to create and implement a service project to meet a need within a church or community. (The 3 in the program's name reflects the three groups of students involved.) With a strong emphasis on teamwork, participants engage in workshops and other social interactions to learn the principles of cooperation and leadership.

There's a gradual ascension to responsibility, too. After five weeks of training, the Hope students step out of the picture and let the high schoolers take over. Then, while the eleventh graders observe, the seventh graders finish the planning and put the project into action. The idea is that

participants will learn more about leadership—and see themselves as leaders—if they're actually placed in leadership roles.

"It's a really fulfilling experience," says Hope senior Reed Swift, a former LdOut<sup>3</sup> project director who is currently thinking about going on to law school. "The neatest impact is when we start to talk about the service project, and the kids start to talk about the needs in the community. A lot of these kids just need someone to believe in them."

"The shared mission draws them together into a team," says LdOut<sup>3</sup>'s founder, Virgil Gulker, who teaches social entrepreneurship at Hope. "Role modeling is going along. It's 'I want to be like them and I don't want to disappoint them.' The eleventh graders want to be college students; the seventh graders want to be eleventh graders."

After the success of a pilot program in a school setting in fall 2009 and another pilot in a church setting in spring 2010, LdOut<sup>3</sup> expanded this past fall. It is presently offered at four sites in Western Michigan—Grant High School and Middle School, Fellowship Reformed Church in Holland, Fellowship Reformed Church in Hudsonville, and St. Francis de Sales Roman Catholic Church in Holland.

The group from Grant got an added activity on February 19 when five parents and 26 students took a bus to Hope, where they got a campus tour and participated in a discussion about the importance of higher education. Then they watched a girls' basketball game against Albion College at DeVos Fieldhouse. At halftime, Hope president James Bultman called the youngsters onto the court to present them with certificates of honor.

"Many of these students had never been on a college campus," Gulker says. "We hope that many of them will believe that they can go to college."

"At one of the wrap-up sessions for eleventh



graders, one eleventh grade girl said to the group, "No one in my family has ever gone to college, and I never thought I would go to college. But because of this program, and because of you people, I am determined to go to college," Gulker says.

The city of Grant was chosen for the program because it lies in Newaygo County, which has the lowest college graduation rate of all counties in Michigan, and there are rising tensions in the public schools between Latino children of migrant workers and the rest of the population. Plus, Gulker says, the program got financial support from the Fremont Area Community

Foundation and tremendous coordination help from Newaygo County Regional Educational Service Agency superintendent Lori Tubbergen Clark.

All signs point to the fact that Gulker can expect more financial and in-kind support in the future. He just received a request to start a LdOut<sup>3</sup> program at a church in Knoxville, Tennessee. More churches, more schools, more impact.

"We're hoping to offer LdOut<sup>3</sup> in other schools as well," he said. "We're also thinking of making LdOut<sup>3</sup> available to other Christian colleges around the country."

