

After-School and Summer Youth Programs

Everyone benefits

BY ROSS "ROCKY" ANDERSON

I've been a single father for 14 years, since my son, Luke, was almost six years old. His mother and I worked out an equal joint custody arrangement. During most of the time, Luke stayed with me for two weeks, then with his mother for two weeks. Both of us have always been constantly present in his life and he adjusted remarkably well to our divorce.

Perhaps the most difficult problem we faced during Luke's childhood was locating safe care and interesting, nurturing activities for him after he got out of school and during the summer months. We tried just about everything.

Luke went to the old (since demolished) YMCA, where the supervision was spotty

I was astounded. We live in a state and culture that constantly touts its family values, but essentially ignores much of the vast need for quality after-school and summer programs for our children. Far too many of our children have nothing more offered for them during after-school hours than to watch mind-numbing, violent, vulgar television — or worse.

Nationwide, approximately eight million children, ages 5 to 14, spend time without supervision by an adult on a regular basis. Those who believe we don't have these same issues in our community — who believe that most families in Utah still live an Ozzie-and-Harriet lifestyle — should take note: In



time during which children can be learning, experiencing and interacting. It erodes the brain while our children could be engaging in activities that would build the brain — and their characters.

Eighty-six percent of police chiefs responding to a survey maintain that the expansion of after-school programs would greatly reduce youth crime and violence. According to 91% of police chiefs, America will pay later in crime, welfare, and other costs if we do not make greater investments in after-school programs.

We are at an important crossroads in Salt Lake City. During the past 2-1/2 years, we have created the YouthCity

provide far richer, more accessible after-school and summer programs for more young people from throughout Salt Lake City.

Along with public safety and other essential City services, City government has no more vital role than to provide for the well-being of our children. Such a commitment provides for safety and wholesomeness for our young people, it contributes to the current and future safety of our community, and it helps build better lives for our children and their families.

This program is not a slam-dunk. At least one City Council member opposes the expansion of YouthCity, proposing instead that the funds be funneled to



and the program monotonous. We tried a summer county-sponsored program at a school in the Avenues, where Luke was numbingly bored (rental movies being the main activity). Both lasted less than a month. Luke was miserable attending the programs, and I got to the point that I simply could not bear to drop him off for another dull day.

I pieced together three summer programs offered by the University of Utah, but they were not coordinated in terms of time or place, so I was driving him around, picking him up, and dropping him off almost as much as I was in my office practicing law.

Even with adequate financial resources, some flexibility in my job, and a cooperative relationship with my former wife relative to Luke's upbringing, I was stymied when it came to locating good programs after school and during the summer. I could not imagine what other parents in less fortunate situations were facing.

Utah, 70% of children under age six live with working mothers. And during 1999 in Salt Lake County, where there are only eight slots in quality child care programs for every 100 children ages 6-12, almost 56,600 children lived in households where the parent (in single-parent households) or both parents (in two-parent households) worked.

Children who spend six hours per day for 180 days per year in school are out of school for 80% of their waking hours each year. And what do they do during that time? Mostly, their time is unstructured. That time offers both tremendous risks and remarkable opportunities — too often, wasted opportunities.

For instance, children spend an average of almost three hours each day in front of a television; 17% of children watch more than five hours of television each day. Television watching by children has been associated with lower reading skills, behavior problems, and increased aggression. Television soaks up precious

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Program, which offers a rich curriculum for a diverse group of youths, ages 10-14. (Luke would have gained a great deal from the YouthCity Program had it been available when he was younger. He would have loved it — and so, too, would his dad!)

The city presently offers after-school and summer programs at Sorenson Center and, in collaboration with Salt Lake County, at Central City Community Center. We offer an exciting, enormously popular city-wide arts program, Global Artways, as well as recreation programs, dance, video production, computer training, and an employment mentoring and placement program.

However, we can — and should — do so much more. And right now a significant expansion of YouthCity is possible — through monies from a federal appropriation, a commitment of one-time post-Olympic revenues, relatively minor general fund expenditures, and contributions from individuals, corporations, and foundations. That expansion would include the renovation and use of facilities in all parts of the City, including Ottinger Hall at Memory Grove, the boxing building at Liberty Park, and a building at Fairmont Park. The programs would be expanded into Northwest Multi-Purpose Center and Northwest Intermediate School. Also, we would expand the exceptional programs at Sorenson Center. All of this will

other programs. Under such a plan, however, we would forfeit the recent \$1.2 million federal appropriation for which we have worked long and hard — and we would have little or no control over the quality of the other programs, which we support through Community Development Block Grants and extensive program collaboration.

You can call the City Council Office (535-7600) and your City Council member individually to voice your opinion on this important community issue. ♦

Rocky Anderson is the mayor of Salt Lake City.

Rocky with son Luke

