

Building Bridges Between the Generations

BY NINIKO KVARATSXELIA

For many young people, adolescence is a strange and difficult time. They feel they are on the verge of becoming adults, yet their parents and teachers still view them as children. Relationships with family members and authority figures are often filled with conflict and lack of understanding; the physical and emotional changes they are undergoing can lead to stress and confusion; and uncertainty about the future can cause depression and feelings of hopelessness. Navigating this period can be made much easier if teens are given a forum to openly discuss their feelings and problems and are provided with positive, constructive strategies for dealing with the issues that concern them. For most adolescents, the discovery that they are not alone, that their peers are also struggling with feelings of isolation, frustration, and emptiness, can make a world of difference.

The following article, written by 15-year-old Nino Kvaratsxelia, illuminates some of the challenges young people face as they make the transition from child to adult. Nino lives in Kutaisi, Georgia, but the angst she describes is universal. Last year, Nino took part in a series of counseling sessions conducted by Anna Akhvtediani, a psychologist at the AIHA-sponsored Women's Wellness Center (WWC) in Kutaisi, and held at her school. These sessions soon evolved into a peer education program for teenage girls—the very first in



Photo: Suzanne E. Grinnan.

Niniko Kvaratsxelia

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the Imereti Region—that now boasts 11 youth counselors, all of whom took part in the original school-based sessions and received extensive training from Akhvtediani and other staff members. Operating at the WWC since September 2001, the peer counseling program has already had more than 500 participants. Group sessions are held three or four times each month, and individual counseling is also available. Nino also represents her peers on the Community Advisory Board established to help members of the Kutaisi/Atlanta partnership develop programs and services that meet the needs of women of all ages.

At 14, I began to have problems. Things around me had changed remarkably—my father seemed not

to notice that I had become adult, and my mother and grandmother constantly reproached me for even the simplest things which, from my point of view, did not deserve any attention at all. At the same time, I began to have problems with some of my teachers at school. I became very depressed and often told myself that I was a worthless person incapable of establishing any good relationships with adults or peers. I felt that nobody needed such a person and that my life had no purpose.

Only my friends seemed to understand. We talked to each other as often as we could and tried to spend as little time as possible at home or at school. We dreamed about an independent life and always talked about leaving our families. At first I thought that all the adolescents who were aggravated and injured by their parents, teachers, and other adults were similar to one another, but I soon realized that this was not true. I saw that our various interests were often incompatible and my collection of friends divided into two groups—the “good” and the “bad” kids. Looking back on it, I think my greatest disappointment from that period was produced by the breakup of the narrow circle of friends I had formed. Losing some of the friends I had come to depend on made me feel really depressed and alone.

My depression became deeper and deeper. Nothing around me changed and I believed that all this was the way my life had to be. Then one day I saw a brochure—which I later learned was produced by the Kutaisi WWC—for teens at my school. The brochure talked about the emotional problems of adolescents and it asserted that these problems are very

serious. I liked the opinions in the brochure very much because the problems faced by teens—in my experience, at least—were always met with indifference. It also announced that a meeting was going to be held to discuss these issues. I went to the meeting and saw a lot of kids I recognized. When the psychologist who was running the meeting broke

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us up into smaller groups according to what kinds of problems we were having, we started to talk about the things that were bothering us. I was really surprised because this was when I first discovered that the issues my friends and I had with other people were not ours alone; I began to see that many teens had difficulties dealing with the people in their lives. There were about 100 students who took part in the different sessions and none of their parents, teachers, or family members were masters of interpersonal relations! The fact that my friends and I were not alone encouraged me greatly.

I don't remember exactly when the psychologist began to explain why adults have certain attitudes and beliefs, but the fact is that some time passed and I became able to establish a more balanced relationship with most of the adults in my life.

I learned how to interpret different conflict situations and cope with my problems more rationally. I started to look at things from my parents' point of view, while also learning how to calmly explain my own position. The result was a more harmonious relationship within my family.

After a while the group sessions at my school ended and the staff at the Kutaisi WWC decided to create a peer counseling program. They approached some of the teens about participating in the program. When I was asked to be a peer counselor, I agreed with pleasure. Now I meet many teens. When they come to the WWC for the first time, they are very depressed and have no hope for any changes in their lives. I try to help them believe in their own power to make positive changes and to look at their problems from another point of view. I use my own experience of overcoming problems related to the “generation gap,” and the counseling techniques I learned from the psychologist and other staff at the WWC.

The changes I was able to make in my own life by learning how to manage my problems and avoid conflict have made me believe that this type of counseling is absolutely essential for people my age. I now have the confidence to meet problems head-on and have even decided that I want to become a psychologist who helps adolescents overcome their problems. I also became a member of the WWC's Community Advisory Board because I think it is important that teens are able to tell the adult decision-makers about the issues and challenges they face. That is the only way it will be possible to find effective ways to overcome the problems of adolescents—if adults and teens work together. ■