

Award for Programs for the Disadvantaged in Memory of Carolyn Keane

POPULATIONS OF 50,000 AND UNDER



ELLEN S. POSIVACH

ICMA's Program Excellence Award for Programs for the Disadvantaged, established in memory of Carolyn Keane, recognizes a local government that has enhanced the quality of life for the disadvantaged, including homeless citizens and people with AIDS. Another award for Programs for the Disadvantaged in Memory of Carolyn Keane goes to Tarpon Springs, Florida, and City Manager Ellen S. Posivach for the Gro Group Project.

Over a decade ago, the Pinellas County Schools embarked on a concerted effort to teach basic life skills to its developmentally disabled students. It quickly became apparent, however, that these special students needed more to enrich their lives than the traditional life-skills training found in many communities. In an effort to expand the program and to ensure the skills taught were what was in fact needed, the school board partnered with the city of Tarpon

Springs, giving birth to Gro Group.

Gro Group works in conjunction with the Florida Native Plant Society to provide developmentally disabled adults with a unique opportunity to learn horticultural skills, as well as social and interpersonal skills.

The vocational curriculum provides hands-on training in propagation, landscape design, and nursery operations. The nursery and garden center is open to the public two afternoons a week. Gro Group strives to make the program an outdoor classroom, where children and adults from the community can get to know disabled people while they learn about horticulture. The student participants benefit from the unique opportunity for interaction with a wide range of people, building necessary socialization skills. As participants work as a team to complete landscaping projects and operate the nursery, they learn to take pride in themselves and their abilities.

The program serves approximately 20 students at a time, and the students move at their own pace based on their abilities. One of the program's goals is to increase the services of the nursery so that it can become a real employment setting for some of its students.

Gro Group succeeds, in part, through a combination of paid employees (provided by the school board) and volunteers. The city of Tarpon Springs provides the site for nursery operations and classroom space at its new community center and gymnasium. In addition, the city provides the telephone and utili-

ties, chemicals, pesticides, grounds and building maintenance, assistance from parks and maintenance personnel as needed, and a service and supply budget for horticultural materials. In return, the Gro Group students care for planting beds around public buildings and in public parks.

The Gro Group also works with "Cops & Kids," a city outreach program for disadvantaged youth. The two groups join forces each year to host a joint Christmas celebration for participants in both programs. A toy drive enables Santa to present personalized Christmas gifts to each of the 200 or so participants.

While legislative funding for similar programs has declined since the mid-1990s, the Gro Group has survived in large part due to its long-term partnership with the city government. The shared vision of the city and school district translates to a better life for Tarpon Springs's developmentally disabled residents. It goes beyond teaching basic life skills to enhancing quality of life for the developmentally disabled adults who live in the community. ♣

Participants in the city of Tarpon Springs Gro Group Program

