

Release

UAlbany's Middle Earth Peer Assistance Program Celebrates 35th Anniversary

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ALBANY, N.Y. (November 16, 2005) -- The University at Albany's nationally recognized Middle Earth Peer Assistance Program celebrated its 35th Anniversary today with the presentation of a \$15,000 donation from the Dominion Foundation. The donation ceremony was followed by a reception attended by students, alumni, staff and individuals who founded, participated in and supported the University's award winning alcohol and drug education and prevention programs since 1970.

"As Middle Earth reaches another important milestone we're reminded anew of the sustaining power generated from students coming together for a common cause," said University at Albany president Kermit L. Hall. "It's about students helping students, demonstrating compassion and providing education and assistance to combat the crucial alcohol and drug problems facing college campuses today."

Over the past 35 years, Middle Earth has trained 1,500 student volunteers, provided hotline assistance to more than 77,000 students in crisis, and presented outreach education programs to more than 100,000 individuals in need. The program received nearly \$1 million in federal grants and private support during the past year, contributing to the overall total of \$2.8 million awarded to the University Counseling Center.

Middle Earth is staffed by licensed psychologist Director M. Dolores Cimini, a psychology intern, three graduate assistants and 140 peer counselors and educators who undergo a rigorous selection process and comprehensive training program including alcohol and drug prevention initiatives, sexual assault, and HIV/AIDS education. In addition, they learn listening and communication skills, crisis intervention approaches and even workshop and peer theater techniques. The latter component is essential for participation in the Middle Earth Players, an improvisational theater group which has become the program's strongest and most visible peer educational initiative since its inception in 1997.

"I am honored to be serving as the director of the Middle Earth program at a time when the organization is so active and vibrant," said Cimini. "It's a delight to have the opportunity to work with such dedicated and motivated undergraduate students who are truly exceptional in their efforts to help and support their peers, and to communicate prevention messages both at UAlbany and beyond."

Student leaders from the center just returned from the Boost Alcohol Consciousness Concerning the Health of University Students (BACCHUS) Peer Education Network National Conference in Orlando, where for the second year in a row they claimed three awards-more than any of the other 75 competing colleges and universities. They won \$100 for Outstanding Program, \$300 in the Award for Excellence in Peer Education for a College/University of 12,000 or more students, and December '05 graduate, Sheng Wu won Outstanding Student prize. The student leaders are donating their monetary prizes to the Kimberly E. Esterman Memorial Scholarship Fund. This trip was made possible by the multi-year sponsorship of the Dominion Foundation.

"The Middle Earth Peer Assistance Program is a sterling example of the ideals of good citizenship that has reached the top ranks among peer programs with the inspired supervision of Dr. Cimini," said Estela M. Rivero, the director of the University Counseling Center. "We are most appreciative of the Student Association for its partnership in this endeavor, as well as to the Dominion Foundation for its generous funding in recognition of the excellent contributions of Middle Earth."

Middle Earth began as CRISIS 5300 back in 1970 when a small group of student volunteers were concerned about the impact of drugs and 1960s culture and issues on their peers. Today, their model drug and alcohol prevention and education programs and committed volunteer staff set the standard nationally and are routinely recognized and honored with awards from BACCHUS and Greeks Advocating Mature Management of Alcohol (GAMMA).

"The volunteer students of Middle Earth provide outstanding peer assistance to other students and members of the community," Rivero continued, "while providing leadership for peer assistance organizations nationwide through active participation in a model service learning program."

More than 1,500 UAlbany alumni have been involved with Middle Earth and remain in touch with the program providing volunteer service and guest lectures including program founder, psychologist Louis Ringe '71.

For additional information visit: www.albany.edu/counseling_center/middle_earth/index.html.

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