



beach life

Helping teenagers find meaning

by Esther Kang

Dr. Greg Allen, founder of Freedom4U, hosts teen improv, concerts and art workshops in the beach cities and Palos Verdes. Photo by David Fairchild (DavidFairchildStudio.com)

Art expression, volunteerism and parent-child relations are central focuses for youth nonprofit Freedom4U

Dr. Greg Allen says he is fortunate to be alive. His father was NFL Hall of Fame and Los Angeles Rams and Washington Redskins coach George Allen. George Allen also coached at Long Beach State. Its soccer field, as well as an athletic field in Palos Verdes Estates are named after him.

The Allen family moved to Palos Verdes Estates in 1966 when George Allen was named the Rams' head coach. Greg was 12 years old.

Coach Allen was famous for working 16 hour days, leaving Greg, his brothers George and Bruce and sister Jennifer frequently unsupervised.

Jennifer wrote a book called "The Fifth Quarter," which portrayed their father as obsessed with football, to the exclusion of all else, including family.

Allen described himself as a



"high risk teenager" during his years at Palos Verdes High School.

"I had a lot of stuff I had to work through to get healthier in my early 20s because I realized I was full of anger and full of hurt," Allen recalled. "I took a concentrated period of time, a few years, to get healthier and to value myself more and make healthier choices in how I live my life."

But in describing his early problems, Allen emphasized, "I'm not blaming anybody else for that, not my parents or anyone else."

Allen became a marriage and family therapist. In 2002, he founded Freedom4U, whose mission is to help teenagers find their passions and, in turn, divert them from the risky road he once trode.

Teenage suicide rates have been rising significantly over the last decade. Thoughts about suicide (suicide ideation) have become so prevalent among teenagers that a state law went into effect last month requiring all middle and high schools to print the phone number for the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline on every student ID.

"We throw away stuff we think has no value," Allen said. "So why do kids think they have no value? It's because they feel like it's not their life, they're living to please everybody else — college admissions, parents, family, how they look. They have no sense of themselves: what's important to them, what they want to do with their lives."

"The focus is on how do I look to other people, what do they think about me, this is how many followers I have, what image of myself can I project — it's all external," he said. "Why is it that 30 to 40 percent of college freshmen can't get through freshman year? They're melting down, having anxiety and depression. College counselors are overwhelmed. Students have no internal development because their parents manage so much of their lives."

Allen, a marriage and family therapist, founded Freedom4U after noticing the large number of underage, under supervised parties in Palos Verdes with excessive drinking.

"What we recognized from that is kids want to be together," he said. "They want relationships and community and to have fun and relieve stress. So how can we use those motivations in a healthy way?"

He surveyed teens to find out what alternative to parties they would be interested in. Art and music were at the top of the list. So Freedom4U began renting out school auditoriums for band performances and art activities, such as ceramics and painting. Several hundred kids would show up and have a good time without the influence of alcohol, he said. In a partnership with the Palos Verdes Library District, Freedom 4U created the Annex, a teen center at the Palos Verdes Library.

The library provides group study sessions. Freedom4U hosts music, improv and workshops in the arts.

Similar programs are hosted in the beach cities.

"We meet at a community center in Redondo Beach and the Clark Building in Hermosa — all arts night with photography, films, virtual reality, hip hop dance teams, bands and people painting," he said. "My daughter calls it my ADD arts night."

Last year, Allen began offering workshops for parents and children together, named after his father's motto, "The Future is Now." The goal is to help parents understand their kids.

"A lot of parents don't have any idea what their kids are feeling or going through or are actually doing," he said. "The average kid usually uses drugs for two years before the parents find out. Kids have a hidden life and they're experts at hiding it... Most parents are focused on telling their kids what to do and getting their kids to listen to them. As parents grow in their understanding of life and their kids and family, they can try to understand, who is this person who's growing up in their family? They're your kids temporarily, and then they'll be gone. So who is this person I've been given? What do they care about?"

"There's a remarkable statistic about families. Those that eat dinner together two to three times a week have 40 percent fewer problems — anxiety, depression, sexual promiscuity, risky behavior," he said. "They're probably not having a therapy session at dinner. They're just being together. So that's my current emphasis: to connect kids and parents together."

*The next Art Expression night takes place on Sep. 14 at the Annex; \$5 for teens, \$10 for adults. "The Future is Now" workshops for parents and children will be on Oct. 8 at Peninsula Center Library and Oct. 16 at Manhattan Beach Library. These workshops are free, but an RSVP is required. For more information, visit freedomcommunity.com. **B***