



Parents discuss the week's successes and failures during a Because I Love You meeting at Granada Hills Charter High School. Photos by David Miller

# Parent Rap

AT BECAUSE I LOVE YOU, FAMILIES OF CHILDREN WITH BEHAVIORAL PROBLEMS FIND SUPPORT, UNDERSTANDING DURING FREE, WEEKLY MEETINGS

by ZAN ROMANOFF

It's just after sunset and still 90 degrees in the San Fernando Valley, which means the air conditioning is working overtime in the classrooms of Granada Hills Charter High School. It blows frigid out of the vents, but no one much seems to mind: Ties are loosened, jackets slipped off, and more than a few of the 10 adults crammed into teenage desks are sipping Big Gulps while they talk.

School is over for the day; it's parents, now, who've come to learn.

This is the scene at a small group meeting of Because I Love You, a weekly San Fernando Valley-based support group for parents who have children with behavioral problems. There's no litmus test for becoming a BILY parent, as they're known, no minimum bar for entry.

"We have kids as young as 7

months and as old as 58," founder Dennis Poncher tells the two women who have shown up for orientation, both of them visibly anxious about discussing private family matters with a room full of strangers.

Poncher, 75, is reassuringly self-

***"Whatever brought you here, you are not alone."***

***— Dennis Poncher, BILY founder***

possessed, confident and blunt without ever being brusque. His message is simple: "Whatever brought you here, you are not alone."

Poncher founded Because I Love You (bily.org) — which holds meetings in 11 states and Canada — in 1982 after a few difficult years with his own children, who were then 13

and 15. After his wife died of complications related to juvenile diabetes, his daughter confessed she was pregnant on the ride to the funeral. His son was arrested a week later for selling marijuana. Poncher attempted suicide and, after surviving,

started going to support groups, including one called Tough Love.

Later, as a Tough Love group leader, his sessions proved popular, but they were held far from his home. When some group members approached him about starting his own meetings closer to where he lived, he decided to give it a shot. He held the

first session in Canoga Park for 30 parents, "never thinking it would go any further than getting some parenting skills," Poncher says.

He modified the Tough Love curriculum, working in part with ideas he'd first heard of while at a program called Jewish Marriage Encounter with his then-wife. Although BILY is nondenominational, Poncher is insistent on the importance of faith.

"I am drawn in to my religion," he says. "I am extremely spiritual. I pray a lot, and ... I tell people when they have an ailment, I say start out by asking God for help."

What made BILY different from Tough Love was a dialing back in the approach.

"Tough Love worked at a tough-love level," Poncher says. "[But] I was seeing parents that were not coming back, and I would call them