



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

and say, 'What's going on?' and they'd say, 'We're not ready. It's too hard for us.' Everybody's in a different position. You have to deal with them where they're at."

The result has been an international success story. BILY is 31

The BILY experience goes something like this: On the first night, parents attend orientation with Poncher before being sent off to small groups, where they sit with other parents and trained group leaders to discuss the week's failures and suc-

cesses. BILY emphasizes making rules, sticking to them and providing consequences for breaking them. At the end of the evening, all of the small groups — including two that are held solely in Spanish — gather together for half an hour. Every session is free and open to the public.

Children are encouraged to attend a youth group meeting, held simultaneously. Cheri Shapiro and Doug Aberle had to convince their daughter to come to her first meeting by saying she wouldn't be allowed to use their car otherwise — a classic example of tough-love BILY parenting — but, Shapiro says, "It took all of twice, and after that we didn't need to ask her to come anymore." Their daughter recently decided to make some changes in her life and moved to Israel to join the army and explore her own independence, a decision Shapiro attributes to the support and confidence given to her by the BILY community.

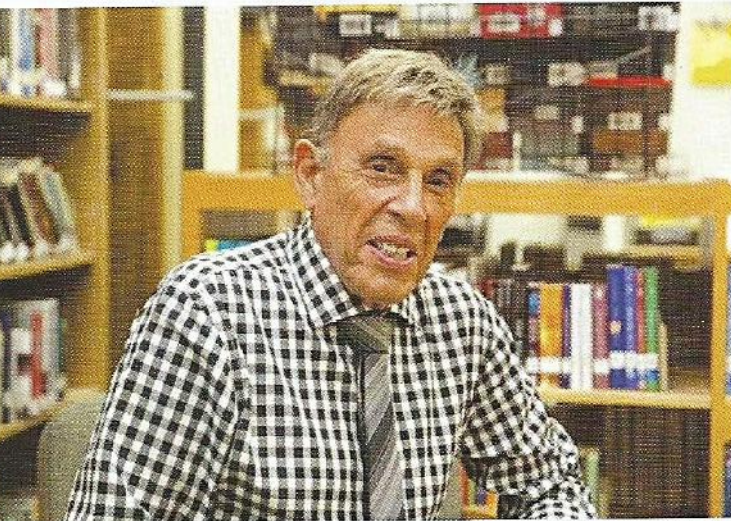
The youth group is a unique opportunity for troubled kids to come together and support one another, and it can create remarkable results, says veteran leader Mark Radin, who is president of BILY's board of directors. "What's so cool to see is that the kid who's the biggest screw-up — the drugs, the running away — he's the first one or she's the first one to say [to other kids], 'How'd that make you feel when you got arrested? How'd it make you feel when you got handcuffed? How'd it make you feel when your parents came and bailed you out? How'd it make you feel when you had to go tell your brother and your sister that you were arrested for whatever?'"

kid was, you know, 4 years old. ... And *nobody* could have been going through what I was going through. ... And I got in my car [after], and I'm like, *I am so good, my kids are great!*"

She and husband Kevin started out as participants and are now group leaders and board members for BILY. They say that friends from the organization comprise a significant portion of their social circle.

"People who deal with ... kids with special issues ... lose all friends," Stacy Wattles says. "Kevin and I, it was just us. We were our own island. ... So, for about eight years, we never went out, we never did anything, because it was just too hard. And being here, we have friends that are just amazing, that I want to spend my weekends with."

The transition from group member to leader is a common one for BILY families, many of whom remain involved in the program long after they've started to see successes. Raising children remains a process, Kevin Wattles says, and the point of BILY is less to solve a



Dennis Poncher founded Because I Love You in 1982 after going through some difficult years with his own kids.

years old, and it has served more than 700,000 parents and youth during that span, Poncher says. Currently, there are 24 sites across the United States and Canada, with the Granada Hills location as the only one in Los Angeles.

"Our success rate is extremely high," Poncher says, though there are no numbers to back that up — in part because the organization is run entirely by volunteers, including Poncher himself.

A testament to its accomplishments, though, are the referrals — from therapists and doctors, from the court system and school counselors, and from parents who've gone through the program and loved it. Walking into a room of BILY parents involves a tide of positive energy coming your way.

Your problems are not insoluble, the refrain goes. Your kids are not monsters. You are not the worst parent in existence. And whatever is going on, you are not alone.

For most parents, the first meeting is cathartic, a chance to air semi-publicly the issues that have been paining them in private. Some even find that their particular piece of hell isn't nearly as bad as they'd thought.

single, finite problem than to give families the tools to work together to keep solving them as they come up.

Although many families have their own private religious practices, many agree that the work they do with BILY feels spiritual in a crucial way. And after so many years of helping people find their way, it seems clear to Poncher that whatever is going on in one's life, God will guide and help you.

"That's my religion, at this point." ■

Of course these kids are terrible at following their own advice, he says — but then that's common among the parents, too.

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"Nobody was going to be able to tell me anything I don't already know," Stacy Wattles says of her first BILY meeting, some years ago. "I've been doing [therapy] since my