



The teen years can be tough, even under the best of circumstances. Waves of euphoria and despair following in close succession, pressure to do well in school, to excel at extracurriculars, to be cool, to get into a good college—couple all that with an unstable home life or trouble in school, and you've got a bad storm brewing.

The founders of Academy of Healing Arts (AHA!) recognized the dire need to guide teens through the turbulent waters of adolescence after the Columbine shooting, when two teenage boys in Colorado opened fire on fellow students following a long period of psychological and behavioral trouble.

AHA! co-founder and director Jennifer Freed, a PhD in child psychology, says, "We saw that the schools were doing a fine job educating, but a terrible job at teaching 'social emotional' learning, and we knew that that was an essential part of becoming a loving, complete human being." So Freed and co-founder and director Rendy Freedman—both licensed marriage and family therapists, professors and trained mediators—took on the challenge and began the program in 1999 with a summer camp format and a handful of facilitators.

Although AHA! evolves continually, the basic tenet remains the same: using the social arts as a way to teach skills like emotional intelligence, character development, diversity appreciation, creative self-expression, stress

management and social responsibility.

In addition to the intensive summer program, an after-school program is offered, with a variety of special topics, a singing group, "Sing It Out," and the Youth Ally program, which teaches job and professional training.

Available to young people ages 14–20, every group encourages the intermingling of students. With this in mind, older students are paired with younger ones in a mentorship role. This is important, says Freed, "because it teaches empathy. Everybody learns from everyone else." A low facilitator-to-student ratio reflects the importance placed on active participation and the individual experience. Says Freed, "That kind of learning needs to take place in a more intimate and connected context."

AHA! also runs an in-school program with freshman classes once a week for up to 10 weeks in Carpinteria, Santa Barbara and San Marcos high schools. Although school administrations were skeptical at first, "because people didn't realize the huge academic effect of social emotional development," Freed says reports started showing the direct correlation between this kind of work and academic performance. "In Carpinteria [high school], there's been more than a 70% reduction in disciplinary and suspension issues since we've been there." Now schools seek them out for the positive benefits they have on the student body.

