

Middle Earth

Students Helping Students

By Carol Olechowski
Photography by Mark Schmidt

For a college student away from home for the first time, personal and school-related challenges may seem insurmountable — particularly if the student has no one to turn to for advice. At UAlbany, however, students have a friend in the Middle Earth Peer Assistance Program, where Aliya Makki, Mahaliel (J.R.) Bethea, and more than 120 other volunteers lend support to fellow students.

Middle Earth, which operates through the University's Counseling Center, responds annually to hundreds of requests for help. The issues range from concerns about academic performance, loneliness, and interpersonal relationships to problems with alcohol or other drugs, depression or anxiety, suicidal thoughts, sexual assault, HIV/AIDS, and eating disorders. At its office in UAlbany's Health and Counseling Building, undergraduate volunteers staff a hotline and peer education/peer theater program. Its educational programs focus on such topics as mental health and psychological issues, prevention of alcohol and drug abuse, and sexual assault prevention.

Middle Earth, which celebrates its 35th anniversary this year, was founded as CRISIS 5300 in 1970 by a small group of student volunteers concerned

about the impact of the drug culture and other 1960s-era issues on their peers. It has since evolved into a nationally recognized service. "Schools from all over the country look up to us for ideas on how to improve their

"I got involved with Middle Earth because a few people I knew told me that it was an awesome program."

organizations," says Makki, a 20-year-old public policy major from New Paltz, N.Y., who became a part of Middle Earth in late 2003. Like Makki, Bethea, 20, is one of the Middle Earth Players, who put on skits about such issues as drunk driving and roommate conflict for different student groups. Three years ago, he said, "I got involved with Middle Earth because a few people I knew told me that it was an awesome program." A junior political science major from White Plains, N.Y., Bethea is UAlbany's Student Association president and hopes to attend law school after UAlbany.

Betha, Makki, and Middle Earth's other peer counselors "are well known and highly respected within BACCHUS and

GAMMA (Boost Alcohol Consciousness Concerning the Health of University Students/Greeks Advocating Mature Management of Alcohol)," an international network that combats alcohol abuse and other student health and safety problems, notes Middle Earth Director Dolores Cimini. In fact, at the organization's conference in Chicago last November, students representing institutions across the United States and Canada elected Bethea to one of two student positions on the BACCHUS and GAMMA board of trustees. They chose Makki to represent students in New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Canada. In addition, December 2004 graduate Christine Fan took top honors for Outstanding Student, and Middle Earth itself won an award for Excellence in Peer Education. A gift from the Dominion Foundation funded Middle Earth's participation in the conference. ■

It Takes A Community

It takes a community to promote the health and safety of students, and Middle Earth is just one example of the efforts under way both on and off UAlbany's campus.

University efforts to prevent alcohol and drug abuse include a variety of educational programs, targeted actions through campus-community coalitions, and consistent enforcement of UAlbany's alcohol and drug policies.

The University has developed "social norms" marketing campaigns to encourage responsible behavior and change what may be considered the norm. The campaign's aim is to counter student — and community — misperceptions about the amount and frequency of alcohol use by students. A campus survey indicates that most UAlbany students drink responsibly, a fact used in the social norms effort.

Through the Committee on University and Community Relations, UAlbany works with other colleges, tavern owners, Albany police and city residents to prevent alcohol misuse and underage drinking off campus. One outgrowth of the committee was an agreement by tavern owners to eliminate drink specials, which may have promoted high-risk drinking.

That committee's work, as well as the work of Middle Earth, has earned national attention. The latest recognition came from the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA), which awarded Middle Earth's project "The Effects of Peer-Facilitated Alcohol Interventions" an \$849,058 grant last September. Middle Earth Director Dolores Cimini and Assistant Professor of Educational and Counseling Psychology Matthew P. Martens, principal investigators, are using the three-year grant to assess two nationally recognized NIAAA peer-focused, social norms-based programs designed to reduce drinking and negative alcohol-related consequences among high-risk college students.



Peer training: Students who are Middle Earth peer facilitators learn about peer intervention during training funded by a grant from the National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. From left, Sari Khatib, Dr. Joseph Monserrat, NIAAA project coordinator; Chad Waxman, Middle Earth hotline coordinator (behind Monserrat); Caitlin D'Aquisto, Sheng Wu (in front of D'Aquisto), Mahaliel (J.R.) Bethea (on sofa), Scott Ladd and Susana Zumba.

From left: Mahaliel (J.R.) Bethea, Dolores Cimini and Aliya Makki, with Cimini's guide dog, Pacer.