

Woman volunteers to help religious groups protect children

Vallee Albert: Newly certified trainer for the Creating Safer Havens Program which assists religious institutions and youth organizations in protecting children from sexual predators.

Background: Albert, 60, was born and raised in Madison County. A 40-year resident of Saratoga County, she lives in Saratoga Springs. She is retired from State Farm Insurance and works as a freelance reporter for the Saratoga Business Journal and Glens Falls Business Journal. She is a member of Toastmasters International and formerly served on its board.

What does Creating Safer Havens mean?

It is a step-by-step program that helps religious institutions of all denominations and youth organizations develop a child-protection policy that rises to the level of need that we have today.

How did you get involved in this project?

As a parishioner of the First Baptist Church in Ballston Spa, the pastor, the Rev. Alan Rudnick, asked me to co-chair a committee updating the

child-protection policy for the church. Through that I met Donald Shepar- rdson last year who founded the program in 1995. I went to San Diego and trained for a week, and I'm the only certified trainer in the program for New York state. I am a volunteer to various churches and organizations, guiding them in developing policy and procedures.

Why are these programs important?

Child-sexual predation and child molestation are rampant in our society. Our children are most vulnerable when they are in areas of trust, including church and youth organizations. We need to create a safe environment for our children. We need to give them that feeling of safety that they are not going to be harmed. We need to manage our risk because ultimately we are liable if a child is molested in that organization, if there aren't good established policies and procedures in place.

How many churches, synagogues, religious institutions and youth organizations are connected to Safe Havens?

It's a brand new program in New York. We want to get the word out because I feel it's important that we're not only aware, but that we're proactive. Our church chose to be proactive and update our policy that had been devised several years ago. I believe many churches are in the same predicament with outdated policies that need to become relevant to today's times.

How will you help if called upon?

I am available to go in, my services are free. A nominal donation is asked for materials provided by Creating Safer Havens. By working with organizations and religious institutions, I give them the encouragement that, in revising their policies, they're more confident in what they're doing and there will be policies and procedures in place that will protect the children and help them manage their risk.

The website is www.creatingsaferhavens.com. The state Department of Criminal Justice website — <http://criminaljustice.state.ny.us/> — lists convicted sex offenders, as do many local police agencies.

— Carol DeMare