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## Antioch woman still working to help troubled teens after 41 years

By Paul Bugarino  
Contra Costa Times

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ANTIOCH -- Shirley Marchetti chatted with a probation officer in the courtyard of the REACH Project center one afternoon when she received a long-awaited gift.

An 18-year-old Brentwood man handed her a camouflage-patterned T-shirt that read "Be All That You Can Be: Be Drug Free."

"I think this is pretty much the greatest gift ever," Marchetti, 76, told him, holding up the shirt to see whether it would fit.

Marchetti has worked to counsel troubled teens in East Contra Costa County since her oldest son was offered drugs while a student at Antioch Junior High School in 1968.

REACH Project Inc., cofounded by Marchetti and then-Antioch police Sgt. Leon LeRoy in 1970, is one of the oldest youth-counseling programs in Northern California.

"The kids are the same; the costumes have just changed," Marchetti said. "They're just sagging their pants now instead of having long hair."

Though marijuana and methamphetamine have been the drugs of choice in the region, use of "designer drugs" such as Oxycontin and Ecstasy has grown, she said.

"What it comes down to is these children really just need somebody to love them," Marchetti said. "I strongly believe that what we see is not who these children are, but what they became."

Youngsters who come to REACH don't realize who they can be, she said.

Marchetti offers tough love that is also unconditional, said the Brentwood teen who gave Marchetti the T-shirt. He is not identified

to protect his privacy.

During his nine months in the program, Marchetti advocated on his behalf during his drug-related court appearances.

When the teen continually forgot to bring an essay about responsibility for submittal to the court, Marchetti jokingly told him she would jump from a ledge if he kept forgetting the assignment.

"I told him it would be the only way he'll remember," she said.

She also kept his silver chain as ransom.

As a child, Marchetti -- then

Shirley Fitzpatrick -- often found herself craving attention.

Born in 1935 in St. Joseph, Mo., and raised by a single mother, Shirley moved a lot as a child -- attending eight schools in her first nine school years.

"I was always the new girl," she said.

She reluctantly moved from San Francisco to Antioch when she was 14; her mother and aunt opened a waffle restaurant on 10th and G streets.

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"It was tough. My mom worked 20 hours a day; she didn't have a lot of time for me. I didn't do well in school and didn't know a lot of people. ... I think I just wanted someone to like me," Marchetti said.

Marchetti still remembers when her high school English teacher told her that she was a good writer.

"She was the first teacher that even told me I was good at anything; it was the thing that turned my life around," Marchetti said.

After graduating from Antioch High, she waited tables at the family restaurant before marrying husband Angelo "Itsie" Marchetti and becoming a stay-at-home mother of four. In the late 1960s, she worked part time as a dental assistant.

Marchetti, like most parents she knew, said she was ignorant about drugs in school.

That changed once her children moved from parochial elementary school to public school.

After her son Danny's episode at school, Shirley tried to find out what was being done to prevent drug use in the community. She started educating herself and spearheaded the Antioch-based counseling and treatment program.

"She's a dynamo," said Councilwoman Mary Rocha, who was in the PTA at Sutter Elementary while Marchetti was forming REACH. "She's a very strong woman, and when she sees a goal, she goes after it. People listen to her because she has the best interest of the kids at heart."

The early years of REACH used methods similar to ones at Napa State Hospital. Marchetti and LeRoy observed a drug-counseling program called "Our Family" at the hospital, which became the framework for REACH.

The REACH concept of helping children with problems at home was the first of its kind in Northern California, said Mickie Marchetti, the program's executive director and Shirley's son.

"There was nothing to really draw from as far as what other groups were doing and what methods were effective," he said.

REACH offers decision-making and anger-management classes, counseling and workshops

aimed at improving communication between parents and children. It also offers drug-rehabilitation programs in Antioch, Oakley and Brentwood.

"We try to offer a safe place to come for those who want to change their life," said Marchetti, who calls the program her fifth child.

REACH recently started offering a support program for grandparents and a youth-diversion program for first-time misdemeanor offenses.

Antioch school board President Diane Gibson-Gray remembers participating in REACH in junior high.

"It was a good outlet to talk about my parents' divorce," she said. "Back then, it was unusual for parents to split up. It was good to have someone to talk to through the process."

Marchetti has always been a strong role model for women in the community, she said.

"Back then, moms were people who stayed home. Both Shirley and Mary Rocha were these strong women in nontraditional roles that I wanted to be like," Gibson-Gray said.

Marchetti briefly retired in 2004 after her husband's death but said Mickie persuaded her to come back six months later.

"REACH is Shirley, and Shirley is REACH," said Rick Marchoke, a retired Antioch police officer who is the group's board chairman. Most of Marchetti's duties now revolve around the treatment component of the



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program.

About 80 percent of those in REACH come to the program through disciplinary action taken by police, courts or school administrators.

Marchetti is often in juvenile court as an advocate for those with felony drug charges.

"It's certainly very close to her heart," Mickie said. "There's a belief in the work that she's doing that's the same as it was 40 years ago. Her devotion is unwavering."

Marchetti's ultimate goal is to see REACH go out of business.

"We haven't quite got to that point," she said, clutching her new shirt.

**Contact Paul Burgarino at 925-779-7164. Follow him at [Twitter.com/paulburgarino](https://twitter.com/paulburgarino).**

SHIRLEY MARCHETTI

AGE: 76

HOMETOWN: Antioch

CLAIM TO FAME: Founder of REACH Project Inc., a 41-year-old drug prevention and rehabilitation program for troubled teenagers.

QUOTE: "You need to love people enough to hold them accountable."

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