

Guiding Teens and Their Parents Through Tough Times



Erin Ben-Moche

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Photos by Cyndi Bemel

At a young-at-heart but wise 80, Dennis Poncher said he doesn't plan to stop his work anytime soon. He provides shelter for at-risk teens at his home, focusing on helping them become successful adults. He also creates programs for families facing challenges, and meets with parents who are hesitant about attending support meetings for their children.

"I won't give up. I'll be doing this for as long as I can. I don't want to lose any more kids," he said in a phone interview with the Journal.

Poncher accomplishes this work through Because I Love You (B.I.L.Y.), the nonprofit he founded in 1982. The idea grew out of personal tragedy. Poncher's wife, Joyce, the mother of their two children, died in 1981. On the way to the funeral, his 15-year-old daughter, Lesli, announced that she was pregnant.

Not only did he learn that his daughter had been dating a "boy with a van" in an on-again, off-again relationship, but that his son, Ian, was using and dealing marijuana. Both children were expelled from school and Poncher was drowning in debt from his late wife's medical bills. He soon filed for bankruptcy, and closed the clothing stores he had been running. "I didn't want to live anymore," Poncher recalled. "I wanted out."

One afternoon, when his kids were on the porch, he wrote a goodbye letter and grabbed his wife's medication, intending to take his life. A friend, who came by to check on him and the kids, found Poncher writing his letter and ripped it out of his hands.

Poncher was then introduced to a parent-therapy group and said he was blown away by the number of parents and families talking about issues similar to his.

After attending a handful of meetings, Poncher realized he loved the idea of meetings but not their philosophies. Together with eight other parents, Poncher started a parenting group session, which ultimately became B.I.L.Y.

“It’s called Because I Love You because we’re not here to be your friend. We are your parents and you might not like us and we might not like you at the moment, but we will always love you.”

As the group continued to grow and Poncher’s son started to get better, he suggested to his father that he start a youth group along the same lines. Now, B.I.L.Y. runs support groups for parents and kids.

B.I.L.Y., Poncher said, saved not only his life and his children’s, but to date, has helped more than 700,000 families around the country. All of B.I.L.Y.’s services are free.

Over the years, B.I.L.Y. leaders and Poncher have helped shut down teen clubs dealing drugs, built camps, founded weekend programs for family counseling, and informed parents on how to protect, support and love their children.

“We do it because we love them,” Poncher said. “That’s why it’s called Because I Love You, because we’re not here to be your friend. We are your parents and you might not like us and we might not like you at the moment, but we will always love you.”

Poncher said one of the hardest things for parents to grasp is the transition period after their kids return from programs. He said if parents don’t change with their kids, it’s harder to be a successful family unit.

“It’s not that what [they’re] doing [as parents] is wrong. It’s just not working,” Poncher said. “If you fall apart while you’re raising your kids, you’re no help to them.”

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