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Personalities of Pittsburgh: Sam Costanzo

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The founder of Summit Academy, a school for high school juvenile offenders in Butler County that offers supports to help them transition into adult life, Sam Costanzo has spent the past four decades focusing on community-based services for troubled youth. Now, in response to a growing strain on youth suffering from drug abuse, The Summit Academy's New Perspective Drug and Alcohol Treatment Center offers addiction treatment and counseling alongside its other interventions.



JOE WOJCIK

Sam Costanzo is the founder and chief executive director of The Academy Schools in Herman, Butler County.

Where are you from originally?

I was born and raised in Blawnox, which in those days was a small, blue-collar steel town on the Allegheny River about 12 miles from the heart of Pittsburgh. While I left Pittsburgh to work in Philadelphia for several years at the start of my career, Pittsburgh always has been and always will be my home.

What inspired you to work with at-risk youth?

After graduating from Duquesne University and joining the workforce, I decided to take some courses at the University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work. It was in that program that I met a professor named Sam Ferrainola. When Sam accepted the position of executive director for the Glen Mills Schools near Philadelphia, he asked me to join them in June of 1975, which was the start of a very rewarding and fulfilling career in the field of juvenile justice. Juvenile court then asked me to come back and start a community-based program in Pittsburgh, and that's how I got back.

You launched Summit. When did you decide you wanted to establish something like that here?

It became apparent to us in 1995 that there was a need for residential programming, particularly based on access to professionals who had a real understanding of community and community-based programs. We went back into residential programming because I recruited a couple of people to Philadelphia, and then when I came to Pittsburgh, I brought them back with me, and they're my two top people at Summit now.

What, in your mind, are some of the biggest problems that affect kids in the Pittsburgh region today?

I think today's adolescents are coming up in the most challenging times that I can recall. In addition to the high crime rates plaguing low socioeconomic areas, these kids are often lost in an educational system unable to address their needs. Most concerning, however, is the large segment of our population that is not only dealing with substance abuse issues, particularly opioid addiction, but also coping with mental health concerns. While most adolescent programs will address one of these two issues, we are licensed and accredited to treat both simultaneously. More importantly, while they are participating in these programs, they can continue their education and participate in a full menu of pro-social development activities.

What's the best piece of advice you give to kids who come through Summit Academy?

Decisions have consequences, and perseverance pays off. Daily we're reminding our young men of these realities because bad decisions have gotten our young people into trouble. Sometimes it's difficult to help a young man understand that they own their decisions and no one else is to blame for their situation. It can also be a challenge to get them to see into their future and realize what is at stake.

Several times a year, I have the opportunity to speak to all of our students, and one of the pieces of advice that I reiterate is that they can never quit. Perseverance is not an innate attribute; it's something that each of us can control — never giving up is a choice. During their Summit experience, each student is faced with many opportunities to quit or persevere, and it is our responsibility to illustrate to our young people the importance of seeing a task or commitment through to completion, even when quitting is easier.

You've worked with at-risk kids for decades. What is the most important thing you've learned in the course of your career?

Kids are kids — what they need is someone to believe in them and their ability to succeed. Unfortunately, as I mentioned before, they are facing far more obstacles than they did 40 years ago. Kids today are bombarded with mature and frequently negative and violent content via the media, and of course, social media.

The explosion of the drug epidemic has also reached a critical level for these youth, and yet, while the world around them has changed dramatically, kids have not; they will always look to see how far they can push their boundaries. But at Summit Academy, we train our staff to recognize the difference between typical adolescent behavior and more destructive antisocial conduct. Every day, we seek to address the inappropriate behavior and encourage the positive. Ultimately, these kids are still looking for a chance to belong, a way to be accepted and a means to achieve.

Our teachers, counselor, therapists and coaches do a phenomenal job placing each young man in an environment which provides him with that opportunity to succeed. Having been a counselor once myself, I am in awe of the patience, care and dedication that our faculty and staff consistently demonstrate for our students.

Title: CEO and founder, The Academy Schools

Age: 67

Education: B.A., political science, Duquesne University; graduate studies, University of Pittsburgh and West Chester University

Experience: Costanzo started in the private sector as president and founder of the private consulting firm National Systems Development Corp., before becoming assistant to the superintendent for Glen Mills Schools, a residential school for public offenders near Philadelphia. Prior to founding Summit Academy, Costanzo founded The Academy, a community-based program for court-adjudicated delinquents. A year after Summit was established, a similar school, New Outlook Academy, was created for female offenders. In 2005, in partnership with Pittsburgh Public Schools, he helped form The Academy Charter School, the first of its kind in the country to admit only court-ordered juvenile offenders.

Lydia Nuzum

Reporter

Pittsburgh Business Times

