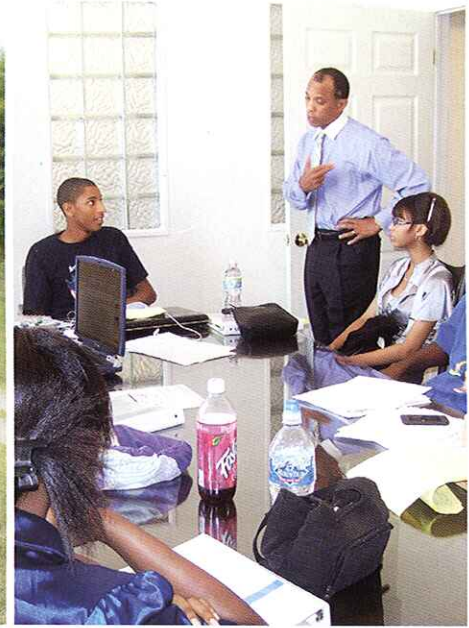




Photo courtesy of Jeffrey & Lois Collins



Former U.S. Attorney Jeff Collins and his wife Lois (lower right), along with a group of teen counselors-in-training, plan an annual summer camp program for inner-city youth from the Detroit area.

CAMPOUT FOR KIDS

TAKING THE INNER CITY TO NATURE'S DOOR

BY TARYN HARTMAN

At a lakefront camp just outside Brighton, youth from inner-city Detroit begin their days with jumping jacks, stretching, and running laps in the early-morning mist.

"It's a pretty rigorous and challenging schedule," says attorney Jeffrey Collins of Project Camp Talahi, the youth program he runs alongside his wife and law partner, Lois. "The day starts at 6 a.m. sharp with the morning workout, and 6 o'clock doesn't mean 6:01."

There are the usual summer camp activities like nature study, arts and crafts, and swimming in the lake, sure, but first comes the pre-dawn exercise that Collins says initially inspires some grumbling among campers, many of whom "wouldn't otherwise have the opportunity to go to camp."

"By the end of the week, they love it," says Collins, a former judge in the

Wayne County Circuit Court as well as the Michigan Court of Appeals. "They're beating me to the workout."

The camp, which took place August 9-13 this year, is offered free of charge to students ages 9 to 12 through Plymouth United Church of Christ, although church membership is not a requirement to attend. Indeed, most of the campers who are connected to the Plymouth UCC family are the children of volunteers.

"What's unique about our camp is a family can come here and show their kids how to do public service," says Lois, who took over the girls' camp for the church in 2001. The Collinses added boys to the program three years later.

Project Camp Talahi is a longtime family affair for the Collins, as their children, Jessica, 16, and Justin, 18, are former campers and two of the 10 teen-age counselors-in-training, who this year are raising funds for the project and "planning

camp down to the menu," Lois says.

Funding for the camp has usually started at \$30,000, but economic woes have forced Plymouth to re-direct the funds elsewhere in the church. The counselors-in-training have taken on the responsibility of soliciting donations and sponsorships, and as of August 3 had raised \$14,000 of their \$15,000 goal, enabling 50 campers to pack their bedrolls and bug spray.

"It's always been a free camp, and we don't ever want to charge the campers," Lois says.

"Just being in that positive environment, for these youngsters, is a good experience," her husband adds, citing testimonials from parents whose kids' academics and behavior have dramatically improved after returning from Camp Talahi.

"It means a lot to give back to the community, and I believe that to whom much is given, much more is expected," Jeffrey says. **M**



Photos by Taryn Hartman