



# Heart Beats: No Violence, Know Peace

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer  
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**WOOD RIVER** - As long as the heart of a child is still beating, he or she can overcome whatever issues currently overwhelming them.

At least that is the philosophy behind Leslie Davis's Hearts in Faith program, which she said was created by a "vision given to her by God to empower single mothers." Through that program, she has extended her mission to include at-risk children, both from single-parent households and households with both parents still actively involved. That program, called Heart Beats, is a 10-week course in which children between 12-17 years old can actively participate in group programs to alleviate their urge for violent expressions in a plethora of ways.

Currently, the program is being hosted by Riverbend Family Ministries, located at 131 E. Ferguson Ave. in Wood River. Davis said the program will not only focus on preventing violence, but also helping to prevent many social and emotional conditions in adolescents, which can lead them to such dramatic decisions.

"Besides talking about non-violence, we also discuss building self-esteem, fostering love languages - especially within families - helping them learn how to set and achieve goals, and we allow them to share their story near the end of the program in whatever way they feel most comfortable," Davis said.

That story can be shared through writing, poetry, a song or even a picture, Davis said. She said youth participating in the program are able to share their experiences with their peers who may have had similar experiences.

Davis said many youth are referred to the program through parents and teachers, but said she is in talks with juvenile court systems throughout the area to see if her program can help youth treading precariously through a harsh life. Davis herself has worked in the juvenile justice system as well as in the alternative schooling system for students with behavioral issues in Granite City. She currently holds a master's in professional counselling and worked for Chestnut Health Services and is now the Granite City Head Start Program.

"I have always loved working with children and single mothers," Davis said. "My passion is our youth. Even if I can't see an immediate difference or change from the work I have done, I hope a seed has been planted that will one day grow into something wonderful."

The Heart Beats program is relatively new, Davis said, having only been registered as a non-profit organization in July 2016. In that time, she said two youth graduated from the 10-week program, which has meetings at 5:00 p.m. every Monday, which is not a holiday. It is open to any youth between 12-17, who can be referred through several agencies, organizations, friends and family members. Parental consent is required, due to the ages of the participants. If that consent is challenging, and Davis believes the

program may benefit the youth involved, she said she is more than willing to work with parents to bring their children to her group.

That group setting may be a bit scary to some, but Davis assures such a setting encourages people to share their stories with others who have had experiences that, while ultimately different, create many of the same burdens and issues.

"There's a message of strength when being a part of a group," Davis said. "People can see it is not just them going through problems, someone else is too."

Crime rates in youth across areas such as Alton, Wood River and Granite City inspired Davis to create this program. She said she saw a need, and realized many young people did not have appropriate family structures or trusted adults with whom they could share their burdens, and many of their friends and peers were doing all they could to cope with similar issues.

More information, including additional resources and a blog maintained by Davis can be found [here](#). Davis can also be reached at (314) 529-0214. Hearts in Faith can also be found on [Facebook](#).