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community stories

Youth Realizing Their Unlimited Potential – Destination: UP

Children and youth in care

If you had the difficult choice between growing up in a neglectful or abusive family or living in the care of the state – a foster or group home – which would you choose? The reality for Canada's estimated 76,000 children in care is that they have no such choice. Child welfare agencies and police departments are doing their best to replace crisis responses with prevention and early intervention. But the complexities of family violence, poverty and addiction make it difficult to leave children in risky situations. Sometimes removal seems like the best option.

Children and youth who grow up in care often have to struggle with physical and psychological scars. Their ability to form healthy relationships is diminished by not having had close attachments to their parents. They are often stigmatized by being the 'bad kids' from care. Their living arrangements typically do not include budgets for the sports and community activities that nourish bodies and spirits. Many turn to drugs, alcohol and self-harm to manage their pain. At an age determined by their province or territory of residence – usually 18 or 19 – they are expected to leave their home and assume complete responsibility for their lives.[1] Most provinces and territories make available funding for postsecondary education, but this practice assumes that the individual has done well in school and is able to manage financial and program details sufficiently well to be successful.[2]

Though there is widespread recognition that children and youth fare better when they have both voice and choice in the design of their care plans, there are few precedents for surrendering control of funds to children themselves or to outside agencies which offer focused programming. Glimmers of hope, however, light the way for the future.

Youth helping youth

HeartWood Centre for Community Youth Development, a nonprofit organization now based in Halifax, was founded in 1989 by husband and wife team Maureen Langbo and Marc Langlois. They wanted to provide learning opportunities for adults, young people and families in an outdoor setting. Maureen and Marc

used their therapeutic recreation backgrounds to plan and operate canoe trips, environmental education experiences and family camps. Over time, they added leadership camps and school programs which they ran from various camp settings in rural Nova Scotia. Those associated with the initiative refer to the 'HeartWood way' when describing programming that is inclusive, empowering and sustaining.

In 2001, Lorena Pilgrim, a former young person in care, met with Marc to discuss the need to create opportunities for youth in care to develop their leadership potential. At the time, Lorena was employed by the Nova Scotia Council for the Family (NSCF) as their Youth Program Assistant. HeartWood and the NSCF formed a partnership and began planning a leadership development program for various child welfare agencies in Nova Scotia. Marc was able to apportion part of a grant from the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation to help support the development of this initiative. A key component of the joint plan was to include former youth in care as part of the staff team for each session: Lorena and HeartWood employee Adrianna MacKenzie assumed this role.

Later that year, three agencies were invited to participate in the newly-developed program. They were required to supply one staff member and a group of youth who were able to commit to a four-session outdoor leadership experience. Unfortunately, one agency had to withdraw, but the remaining two completed the sessions and provided useful feedback on the program's design. Lorena and Adrianna were asked to compile this feedback and conduct an evaluation of this first effort. In the end, they designed a nine-month, four-part leadership program for youth in care, which was then called Destination: UP (Unlimited Potential).

Staff members at the Nova Scotia Council for the Family were pleased to see the new initiatives begin to take shape. Says Council Executive Director Yvonne Blanchard: "We know how important it is to give youth the skills and strength they need to take responsibility for their own well-being. In 2001, our organization established Youth Achievement Awards, which we use to focus attention on the work youth are doing in our community. We have also developed an educational bursary program called 'Amanda's Gift' for youth who were terminated from care – either because they were in voluntary care or were non-compliant in their placement, or they had reached the age of 19 or 21 [depending on whether they were in voluntary care]. Those two programs have helped to build an understanding that the provincial government has a responsibility for supporting the educational aspirations of youth in care. We hope that HeartWood's work will demonstrate the need for core life skills and leadership programming for these children – something we believe should be embedded into provincially-funded supports for this population."

Adrianna and Lorena used every possible opportunity to educate and advocate among social agencies for more awareness of the needs of youth in care. Says Lorena: "Individuals need to be developed from the inside out. Once they have the skills they need, they can begin to help others. Part of our mandate is to build the capacity of the child welfare system to respond to the voices of youth in care."

Destination: UP was later expanded and now applies to HeartWood's youth in care initiatives as a whole. The nine-month program was re-named "Reach… Connecting Youth In Care With Their Potential." It includes a week-long wilderness trip, two weekend residential camps and a celebration event for youth aged 13 to 16.

It focuses on learning how to take healthy risks, set boundaries and recognize personal strengths.

"UP Café… A Gathering for Youth in Care" is a weekend for youth 13 to 21 years of age and has proved a popular entry point for youth into further Destination: UP programs. The goal of the weekend is for youth in care to get to know other youth in care. The first step is to agree on a community standard – which includes a ban on drugs, alcohol and sex – thereby creating a safe space for interaction. Over the course of the weekend, they come to see that all participants have skills they can share – they teach others how to draw, dance, tell a joke or take a nap. After three days, they have gained leadership skills, self-confidence and connections within the group. "One of things youth have often expressed is their thankfulness to have participated in something where they are not judged," says Adrianna. "They leave us having glimpsed what it's like to live in a healthy environment that allows them to be themselves. As adults, they will know that they have a choice in the world they create."

A third Destination: UP program option is called Horizons Summer Camp. Geared to youth aged 13 to 18, it offers a week-long camping experience with adventures in hiking and canoeing. Skills, strengths and talents are discovered and shared throughout the week.

All three of these Destination: UP programs try to build a community of support around each participant. For many, it is the first experience of feeling completely understood and accepted. Says Adrianna: "It's important to provide happy, positive life experiences to balance out the bad ones. When children and youth come to us, we start by focusing their attention on the talents and gifts they already possess and sharing these with others. By seeing that they do indeed have something to offer, they move from being a service recipient to a service provider."

A fourth planned project is called Step-UP. Designed for youth whose time in care is coming to an end, Step-UP will offer two weekends and nine evening workshops to help youth learn the life skills and build the peer support networks they need to ensure a solid transition from care to independence.

The longer-term benefits of Destination: UP are significant. In the same way that healthy families prepare their offspring to move into the world, youth who continue to participate in the Reach program are moved through three distinct phases. First, they learn to identify their own needs and skills. They are then taught how their community can answer their needs and use their skills. Finally, they learn about service – a step which enables the young people to use what they have learned about themselves and their community to contribute to society.

Financial support for Destination: UP has come from several government grants and through fees paid by child welfare agencies when children and youth are signed up for programming. The Western Region of Nova Scotia Health Promotion provided HeartWood with a Physical Activity Grant in 2005, and the Deepwater Experiential Education Project (DEEP) – a non-profit organization – also contributed funds and resources to allow youth from diverse cultural and economic backgrounds to participate in wilderness education programs. Destination: UP staff are hoping that the support lent to its work by the Nova Scotia Department of Community Services in 2005-06 will be extended into a more permanent funding partnership.

Says HeartWood founder Marc Langlois: "It is extremely difficult for outsiders to have an

Reach participants wait patiently to head out on their first canoe trip.

impact on child welfare programming decisions, or for youth voices to be heard – despite the fact that the system is meant to serve them. Adrianna, Lorena and staff at HeartWood and the Nova Scotia Council for the Family spent a great deal of time getting Destination: UP recognized and used by the system. Without their tenacity and perseverance, these programs might never have seen the light of day."

Rethinking our perceptions of foster care

The foster parenting experience is often inaccurately and negatively portrayed in the media. These volunteers open their homes and lives to children and youth who, in addition to dealing with normal angst and growing pains, are also experiencing the loss of their families. All youngsters clash with their parents at times, but children in care may face more than the usual

amount of trouble working out issues. Their experience of home is limited to the one in which they grew up, and adjusting to new sets of rules takes time and patience.

A common misperception is that foster parents are well reimbursed for their efforts. Though amounts differ across the country, the average expense rate paid per child in Nova Scotia can be as low as $13 per day. When tragedies occur in foster or group homes, media coverage is extensive but, ultimately, provides few answers to the problems faced by children in crisis.

"Unfortunately, foster parents have had to bear all of the negative feelings Canadians harbour about families in crisis," says Yvonne Blanchard at the Nova Scotia Council for the Family. "Few people understand how the system

works and very little investment is made by community or government to ensure a diverse supply of foster parents. The negative stereotyping of foster parents compounds the problem of supply. If we want children to be placed for a successful outcome, we need to find a good match for them. Instead, we overburden the families we have."

The Reach component of Destination: UP received funding from the National Crime Prevention Strategy of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada , and the money was put toward a video project. In a 24-hour period, a group of 12 youth wrote, filmed, produced and packaged a CD which promotes and pays homage to foster parents and the important role they play in children's lives. Copies of the video may be obtained from HeartWood.

From darkness to light

Destination: UP's work, to date, has touched the lives of 75 children and youth. Because children in care are often uncomfortable and unskilled in asking for the help they need, committing to a supportive program of any length can be intimidating. Adrianna MacKenzie, now the senior administrator of Destination: UP, recognizes the importance of quickly establishing close connections with children and youth.

Says Adrianna: "When they first arrive, young people often resort to swearing and name calling – partly because they see this type of exchange as funny – but they really don't know healthy ways to relate to others because their life situations have never taught them to handle feelings and relationships. They need to learn about healthy boundaries, personal space, asking and granting permission to hug or touch another person. Learning about appropriate behaviour

and taking responsibility for your own actions takes time. Anger and communication issues are common among all teens, but youth in care are more extreme in their deficits. They have lacked the guidance healthy families can provide and many of them see adults as untrustworthy."

Though Destination: UP's core Reach program was meant only to operate for nine months, it has evolved as an ongoing activity. About 17 graduates have continued to meet four times a year since they began in 2004, and more members join each year. For the youth who participate and shape the programming, Reach has become an extended family and the firmly-founded relationships have become a lifeline to a healthier, happier future.

"No matter what the person is going through, we're consistent in our messages," says Adrianna. "We insist that rules are kept and that the individual take responsibility for their actions. Over time, we're tested again and again, and we always respond with concern and compassion. We never walk away on our kids, and that commitment is what gives them the support they need to become better people."

Getting a handle on the national numbers

The precise number of children and youth in care in Canada is difficult to determine. Numbers fluctuate depending on the definition of the age group used by the home province or territory, the length of stay in a foster or group home, and the number of children who are in the care of extended family members.

Directors of child welfare from across the country have formed a secretariat under Human Resources and Social Development Canada, which meets twice a year to address various issues including children and youth in

care, child abuse and youth justice. Child welfare falls under provincial and territorial jurisdiction. The secretariat members work together to find common ground and shared approaches that can build a stronger network of support for children whose family lives are less than ideal.

Says Peter Dudding, Executive Director of the Child Welfare League of Canada: "The fact remains that the number of young people in care has gone from 45,000 in 1996 to 75,000 in 2006 – a rise of 67 percent. We believe that the increase is the result of many factors, including improved reporting and the number of children who witness family violence. Our sense of the situation is that we have passed through a period of focusing on child maltreatment and managing risk, which has not actually helped a great deal in solving the multiple problems and issues facing families. Many provincial and territorial child welfare advocates want to do a better job ensuring that their services are more closely connected with an array of community services. I am a great supporter of HeartWood's approach to youth leadership and engagement work."

Peter is also optimistic that provinces and territories will continue to inspire one another in a cycle of virtuous competition – that is, to set in place child and youth policies that will that strive to improve the life path of children and youth in care. Says Peter: "The age of transition to adulthood and each province's decision about when and how to support postsecondary education offers a hopeful example of how we can improve outcomes for these young people. With its booming economy, Alberta has decided to offer educational support until the age of 24. Though small, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia are also moving in that direction, and that puts positive pressure on other provinces to come up with similar supports."

One girl's story

Francine (not her real name) was abused by her father, and though her mother later divorced him, she later made it clear that she didn't believe her daughter's story. When she joined Reach in 2004 at the age of 14, Francine had no self-esteem and was cutting herself regularly. A year into the program, she wanted to leave. She didn't feel accepted among the largely male Reach participants and had a hard time sharing any of her thoughts and feelings with others. She promised Adrianna she would give it one more weekend, and with a coincidental influx of girls joining the program, she became part of a happy female group where she felt valued and included. Though fearful of water and canoes, she took a risk and went on a canoe trip. Despite tipping, she finished the weekend no longer afraid of the water or boats. She started looking for other challenges, and needed less reassurance in order to try something new. She went rock climbing for the first time and excelled at it. As a counterpoint to her difficult family life, Francine began writing beautiful, poignant poems and songs which found a receptive audience at Reach. Though she has suffered setbacks, she is cutting herself far less frequently.

Social services are a provincial/territorial responsibility, which means that they are already highly decentralized and correspond with the current vision of a loosely-knit federalism. The question remains as to what kind of national leadership is deemed most helpful in supporting

the needs of children and youth. "There's a role for the federal government to play in terms of assisting the development of cooperation, collaboration and learning together," says Peter. "At an international level, the Government of Canada already has United Nations treaty obligations which are not being translated into supports on the ground."

The UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1992), and *A Canada Fit for Children* (2005) – two documents which were shaped and championed by (retired) Senator Landon Pearson – make clear Canada's responsibilities [Torjman 2005]. Senator Pearson's assertion that Canada needs a Youth Commissioner, combined with the recommendations of the recently released *Out of the Shadows At Last* [Kirby and Keon 2006] that the federal government establish a Mental Health Commission, affirm the need for more work in the area of coordinating information and services for vulnerable Canadians.

Anger management

When David (name changed) joined Reach in 2004, he could talk easily and at length about nothing in particular, but when challenged about his actions or words, he became defiant, withdrawn and claimed not to care what others thought of him. He lost control on a canoe trip, and some of his Reach peers began to avoid him, fearing more outbursts. Over the next year, he decided to stop taking his Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) medications and more incidents of defiance followed. Adrianna and other staff members met with David to outline their concerns, but shortly after, he was involved in a violent altercation in the community and sent to a youth detention centre. Says Adrianna: "All of his issues reached a peak and he didn't have the tools to deal with his emotions. The wall he put up to keep others out trapped his emotional energy inside, and his response was to relieve the pressure with violence. After an outburst, he'd be calm and smiling."

The jail sentence gave David lots of time to reflect on his actions. When friends and staff from Reach came to visit him and give him a small gift, he was surprised and touched. They asserted that they weren't going anywhere, and when he was released, he rejoined Reach with a clear vision of the helping work he wanted to do. Says Adrianna: "David got a lot of support from a social worker he met while in detention. He's found ways to connect with his emotions and control them a bit more. He's better able to articulate his feelings and take more responsibility for his actions. He's teaching others how important it is to build community, set community standards and be accountable to them. David always showed fantastic leadership skills, and now he's encouraging others to lead. He's also very good at pulling people back in that are threatening to leave – which is the classic cry of a person who needs to know that others truly care for them." David now understands this from personal experience.

What about the kids?

Meanwhile, Destination: UP continues to teach youth in care that they can create a stronger community by becoming emotionally healthy themselves. The program has greatly benefited from HeartWood's standing in the community and its tradition of building youth and adult partnerships. "Youth often have a hard time making their voices heard," says Marc Langlois. "When we find ways to bring adults and youth together to advocate for change, the combined voices can be very persuasive."

Destination: UP is about to enter an evaluation phase which will include a five-year strategic plan. Says Adrianna MacKenzie: "We're not trying to establish ourselves as a one-size-fits-all model of programming, but we are trying to share the lessons and communicate the urgency of what we are doing. We know there are many thousands of children in care who have no access to the type of support and leadership development we offer. We need to step up and help them – they're falling through the cracks."

By her very commitment to others like herself who have lived in care, Adrianna is living proof that the time, love and energy put into our (collective) children are always worth the effort.

Anne Makhoul

Anne Makhoul coordinates the 'community stories' series for the Caledon Institute.

To learn more about HeartWood and Destination: UP, visit: http://www.heartwood. ns.ca/services_ youth_dup.shtml

Endnotes

1. For more information on the specific issues associated with children living in care, visit the National Youth in Care Network website: *www.youthincare.ca*

2. A recent survey by the Child Welfare League of Canada (CLWC) confirms that, with the exception of Quebec and Ontario, all provincial and territorial governments provide some form of financial assistance for post-secondary training or education for youth in care. (In Ontario, local Children's Aid Societies can contribute funds for this purpose.) Each provincial and territorial jurisdiction varies in the conditions it sets for the types of training it will cover and to what age, but most typically, youth must have had their parental rights terminated in order to receive this assistance.

For more details on this survey, contact the CWLC in Ottawa at (613) 235-4412, or visit their website at: *www.cwlc.ca*

References

Kirby, M. and Keon, W. (2006). *Out of the Shadows at Last: Transforming Mental Health, Mental Illness and Addiction.* Ottawa: Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology, May.

Torjman, S. (2005). *A World Fit for Children.* Ottawa: Caledon Institute of Social Policy, September.