

A View from the Front Lines: When Girls are Strong, Communities are Strong

by Seyny Dressler, LaVeisha Mobley Cummings and Felicia Wells

As Directors for Youth Advocate Programs (YAP) in Tampa and Orlando Florida, and Savannah Georgia, we have witnessed firsthand many of the extraordinary challenges girls in the juvenile justice system face. Our experiences with girls in both the juvenile justice and child welfare systems reveal childhoods that included exposure to trauma, abuse, instability, institutionalization and separation from families.

Some girls bounce around from foster homes to group homes; others are victims of physical, sexual abuse and neglect, prostitution or sexual exploitation, lack education or access to health care; and still others possess only remedial social and life skills or have grown up without one or both parents. For many of our girls, the cycle of life as they know it continues: once the victim, now the aggressor.

Yet, in our experience, with the right supports, girls - even those with complex needs - can overcome their challenges and demonstrate tremendous resiliency. To help them survive otherwise devastating histories, they should be in their communities, not in institutions, so they can receive the intensive, individualized, gender specific, trauma-informed support they need.

MELANIE

Take for example Melanie, a 16-year old girl who enrolled in our Orlando YAP program, pregnant and on probation, for grand theft auto. At the age of 5, Melanie witnessed her mother die from an overdose on drugs.

Without support to help her cope with that trauma, Melanie's next few years were very tough; she suffered from an array of abuses, including sexual abuse, was using drugs, was actively involved in gangs, and lived in and out of multiple systems and institutions until ultimately being placed with her grandmother. She was filled with mixed emotions ranging from anger, sorrow, pain, hopelessness and helplessness.

After matching her with a community-based female YAP Advocate, a paid mentor trained in wraparound and advocacy practices, we built a relationship with Melanie and talked with her about her needs, interests and strengths. Using culturally competent and strength based assessment tools, her Advocate worked with her for an average of 12 hours a week to build a plan that ultimately connected her to educational assistance, prenatal care, mental health services, and the community supports she needed.

Melanie's Advocate also introduced her to local female leaders and enrolled her in a YAP-facilitated girls' group at our Orlando offices, where Melanie and other girls shared their experiences and grew stronger together. Melanie also received the additional professional counseling she needed.

Today, Melanie is living safely in her community. Since graduating from YAP, she has not been involved in the juvenile justice system and lives with her grandmother and her baby daughter. She is in high school and is on track to graduate next school year. Melanie is also seeking employment and has had some interviews already with promising feedback.

NIKKI

We met another young girl, 16-year old Nikki at the Hillsborough County Florida Detention Center in Tampa where we were giving a presentation about how we help bring juvenile justice involved youth safely back to their communities. Nikki pulled one of us aside and said, "I need you." So we sat down with her and learned more about her life and about what she wanted.

We learned that Nikki became involved in the juvenile justice and foster care system at the age of 10. At 14, she became a parent. Nikki went into residential placement after she attempted to burn down a house with people in it because someone inside spit on her. After her release, Nikki bounced from placement to placement, but because she had behavioral challenges and needs that weren't being met, she would frequently get kicked out. Each time she got kicked out of a placement, she would end up in the detention center which ultimately became a shelter for her. The staff there refer to her as having "frequent flyer miles."

She shared with her YAP Advocate that her father is serving life in prison for murder and her mother was incarcerated for abusing her and her brother. She needed counseling that she wasn't getting, especially to deal with the trauma and rage she felt that caused her to act out, thus ending up in a placement and then getting kicked out of a placement.

Her grandmother was taking care of her son, with whom Nikki had no relationship. She wanted to be more involved in his life and needed to learn parenting skills. Nikki was at the point where she was aging out of foster care, and needed help enrolling in school so she could pursue her education and receive an independent living stipend. Most of all, she needed someone to help her recover all the lost time in juvenile justice facilities and get back on track.

Just as we helped Melanie, we matched Nikki with a female YAP Advocate who spent an average of 12 hours a week with her. Through her Advocate, Nikki met other successful women in her community who were role models for her. Nikki's Advocate also helped her access counseling to address her challenges with her childhood and her son.

Today Nikki has her certification in phlebotomy and works part-time. She has not been back in the juvenile justice system and lives safely at home with her grandmother. Together, they are co-parenting Nikki's son.

Nikki and Melanie and other girls we work with made us wonder: Where did we as a community go wrong? How did we fail these children? Is there justice for girls? So we asked the girls themselves what they thought. They responded that limited resources, a lack of early intervention and feelings of

hopelessness - that they have no way out due to their economic environment - were the most dominant factors that led them to the juvenile justice system.

We have to give girls the opportunity to change their own biographies and break the cycles that keep them involved in the system. Importantly, the girls we work with want better futures for themselves. Our experiences in Orlando, Tampa and Savannah tell us that girls in the juvenile justice system are more than their experiences and labels.

When girls are strong, communities are strong. By developing trust relationships with Nikki and Melanie, where they had voice and choice in what happens to them, they began to feel safe. They proved that when we give them the right supports, even girls with extraordinary challenges can build plans that empower them, plans that give them the tools they need to lead different, promising paths for their futures. And when we can help them by tailoring services to their individual needs, we are able to address issues specific to girls and increase the odds that they will succeed.

The authors are YAP Program Directors in the following locations: Seyny Dressler, Orlando, FL, Laveisha Mobley Cummings, Savannah, GA, and; Felicia Wells, Hillsborough County (Tampa), FL.

About YAP

YAP is a nationally-recognized, community-based nonprofit agency committed to providing alternatives to institutionalization through direct service, advocacy and policy change. YAP serves over 12,000 families a year in more than 100 programs across 17 states in rural and urban areas including 25 major metro areas. 100% of our programming takes place in the home communities of the people we serve. Follow us @YAPInc.