

## Committed Partners for Youth:

As an honors graduate in psychology and substance abuse, and via my roles as a mentor, supervisor in the juvenile justice system, teacher, tutor, coach, university researcher and brother, I have given myself king-sized opportunities to analyze the effectiveness of youth intervention strategies. I have worked with children from toddlerhood through late adolescence, witnessing the full span of normative social, emotional, physical, and intellectual development. Likewise, I have worked with several handicapped populations of individuals where the variance in developmental assets is grand. The worldview I have developed about the needs and probabilistic developmental tendencies of children at various ages is uncannily articulated in comparison to a time when such interactions had not taken place.

In my time spent with youth I have come to several conclusions. Emotional, social, and cognitive developments are intrinsically interwoven by socialization processes that begin from day 1. Far too often the result of (or related to) economic circumstances and drug abuse, increased stress blunts the effectiveness of parental guidance and vice versa. In the mirrored image of neglect and abuse, and from the sometimes unfortunate natural processes of observational learning, there then develops a population of youth that lack the vital social skills necessary to survive in the world that we have created. How then, do we “deal” with these kids? How do we give them these skills that they have learned to live without? How do we convince them that what they have grown to know might be wrong or that there are much better days ahead if they follow our advice? Some believe that incarceration is an answer and some, ignorance. More popular is the advocacy of various programs aimed at specific problems like drug abuse or even a complex combination of current intervention strategies.

However, behind every intervention is the hope that some sliver is set deep enough that it will never work its way out or that when it surfaces it will have some special meaning to the youth. Various lessons are hoped to have been learned from various strategies but what we are really dealing with here is an attempt to give these troubled youth skills that they, for whatever reason, never sufficiently attained in their lives to date. And how do we know, as servers of today’s youth, that what we are doing is effective without waiting to analyze recidivism rates? Holistically, we really don’t. Only when close personal bonds have been created between one of us and the children do we really have an idea of how much we have helped. Through laughs, smiles, small lessons like learning how to get a passport, when to dial 1 before calling, or how nice some people respond when you hold the door for them, and through the absolutely unmistakable bond of friendship, we begin to understand what a child really lacks and where we can help. These children are missing things that every one of can give them but the trick is knowing when and where to intervene; how to create a closeness. Because to know a child as a friend is to know more about that child than most adults in their lives ever will.

What I believe to be the perfect context for development of this type of bond is mentoring. Considering all other intervention strategies, mentoring is really the end all method that will always work to some degree. Pooling prosocial adults in an effort to create close relationships with youth who struggle to survive socially is perfect. Although unbeknownst to a mentor in the midst of a relationship or development of a

close bond, there is some effect. If a mentor is truly filling their role and, at minimum, wanting to help a youth, most of their job is already done. The child already knows that someone cares and the tip of the sliver is in. How does a child know that a judge, or a probation officer, or a teacher really cares about their well-being? They probably don't. Their relationships are an effect of institutional stipulation and they are not personal. Anyone who cares about today's youth is not necessarily a mentor but they have the chance to become one. The essential ingredient, despite formality, is that a long-term close bond be developed in conjunction with will. Sometimes all that it may take to effect a youth is the *attempt* at creating a bond like this. All that it takes is a little care in right circumstance. A smile in the right context at the right time from the right person, when it's needed most, can be as helpful to a youth as seven thousand interactions with authority. Never underestimate the power of a happy face ☺

Committed Partners for Youth gave me the opportunity to fill this superlatively important role in the life of a single youth. I would have loved to help more but what I realized and what CPY emphasized, is that our efforts are most effectively doled to one youth at a time. It takes extraordinary effort from any member of the social service aiding today's youth, especially when funneled into the life of one youth from the time and energy of one prosocial adult. I have no idea how much I aided him in the three-year bond that we created but I know I did *some*. Furthermore, I surely know that the effect on me was grand and that there is no other experience that could have prepared me better to further interact with youth of this troubled nature. I know that I succeeded as a mentor because I cared, because I smiled, and because I gained a friend. All other effects are extraneous and hopefully in the direction of positiveness. Thank you CPY for helping me find my perspective on how to help today's youth survive successfully. The trajectory of my upcoming graduate studies and ultimate professional career will surely envelope the lessons you opened me to learn and perhaps even the development of a similarly structured organization.

Keep smiling,

Jake Mahon