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Showing the Way Out

Youth Support Partners Use their Personal Experiences to Support Other Youth

by Bruce Barron

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On a pleasant spring day in suburban Pittsburgh, a young, relatively new staff member attempting to bond with a troubled teenager took the boy to a nearby ball field. At one point, when the boy smashed a ball over the fence, the two went into the woods to retrieve it.

In the privacy of the woods, the boy disclosed that he had once been sexually assaulted in that very spot. “And if you ever say anything about it,” he added, brandishing his baseball bat, “I’ll club you.”

It would be a tense moment for even the most seasoned worker. But what if the young worker himself had a long history of oppositional behavior and mental health problems? Would he be able to effectively address such a situation?

To that question, the Allegheny County Department of Human Services (DHS) has answered an emphatic yes. For three years it has employed young graduates of the DHS system as Youth Support Partners (YSPs), or peer-to-peer mentors and advocates for youth currently in the system. Other jurisdictions have placed one or two capable young adults in a similar role, but no other county in the United States has set up a whole unit of 15 YSPs.

It was a risky move into largely uncharted territory. But today these YSPs are becoming polished professionals, valued for their ability to connect with struggling young people in a way that conventional workers usually cannot. Along the way they are healing themselves and drawing on the lessons of their own painful pasts to make a unique impact on others’ futures.



No Map to Follow

The idea of using individuals with lived experiences as positive role models, even as professional staff, is not new. Alcoholics Anonymous relies on leaders who are in recovery; former gang members generally do the best anti-gang work. DHS successfully implemented a similar concept on a smaller scale, pairing youth in the behavioral health system with peer partners. The success of this earlier model was one of the key reasons that DHS decided to take the idea to the next level, working with youth in involuntary placement. But sending 20-year-olds in recovery from their own difficult past - with experiences including trauma, abuse, neglect or illness—into one-on-one meetings with difficult teenagers was still a daring proposition, partly because no one had done it before.

Once the agency committed to hiring YSPs as part of its implementation of the service model known as High Fidelity Wraparound, outside consultants were hired to provide staff training. Jacki Hoover of DHS’s executive staff recalls what happened during this training. “They had job descriptions for facilitators and coaches,” Hoover said of the training materials provided. “Then I turned to the YSP page and it was blank.”

When the first four YSPs were hired in November 2008, questions persisted. How would the YSPs be oriented to DHS and its various systems, what roles would they play with the young people, and would they be accepted within the culture of the child-serving system? How could these green employees make a good impression on colleagues who, just a few years ago, might have been their caseworkers?

Hoover and her colleagues started cautiously; the YSPs attended trainings, observed meetings, and completed special projects, but were not assigned cases for four months. “I wasn’t sure if it was going to work,” said Aaron Thomas, one of those first YSPs, “since they were paying us rather nicely and we weren’t doing anything. It seemed like we were putting a lot of time and effort into behavioral rehearsals.”

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While the YSPs wondered if they had been hired just to make DHS look good, others criticized the decision to employ young people with limited professional backgrounds. A low point came when Hoover took a YSP to observe a meeting held to explain the principles of High Fidelity Wraparound to caseworkers. When the meeting shifted to an unpleasant discussion of the approaching contract negotiations, the YSP spoke up—and only provoked the workers further. “I had to ask him to be quiet, and he was very upset as we had been coaching him to use his voice,” Hoover recalled.

A key turning point came when DHS staff decided that the YSPs needed dedicated supervision by someone without other executive responsibilities. In October of 2009, Thomas was promoted to supervise his colleagues and Amanda Hirsh was hired as the full-time manager of the YSP unit. Now Hirsh oversees four supervisors who in turn manage the 15 YSPs.

“Through our administrative meetings, we realized that supporting the YSPs had to be a full-time job,” said Keith Solomon, who had initially supervised the YSPs along with his other duties in DHS’s executive office. “This was a group of young adults who had been through the system, with setbacks and personal life challenges, and were now taking on the responsibility of helping others, often in their first professional job. They needed more support than you would typically give to a group of professionals.”



Rising Above the Challenges

The YSPs have exhibited remarkable resilience, making effective transitions into professional roles and helping other young people to carve out a positive pathway for themselves, while continuing to address their own significant personal struggles. Here are a few of their stories.

Hazel calls herself a “chameleon” because she has passed through so many home settings. Placed in foster care at age three due to her mother’s drug addiction, she gave birth to her own daughter at age 14. An abusive relationship left her thinking that “every man was going to molest me.” She managed to graduate from Pittsburgh’s Carrick High School, and a classmate who had become a YSP in 2009 recruited her the following year.

“I know how it feels to have nobody to talk to you or show you another way so that you don’t follow your parents’ footsteps,” Hazel said. “I want to show other females a way out.” Her twin sister has chosen to follow Hazel’s footsteps, becoming one of the first YSPs in another Pennsylvania county.

James—the YSP who was threatened with a baseball bat—landed in residential treatment by age 14 due to extreme hyperactivity and defiance. He vividly remembers the case planning meeting at which, when he tried to object to negative comments about him, a therapist silenced him, saying, “You’re not allowed to talk.” After making it through high school in alternative education, he worked several years at a grocery store and was feeling a desire to do “something where I help people” when his mother, a social worker, told him that the county was looking for YSPs. (Incidentally, James responded calmly to the young man’s disclosure and went on to build a highly productive relationship with him.)

Tasha, raised by her grandparents because of her mother’s inability to provide adequate stability, says she was a YSP “unofficially” to her siblings as they fell into juvenile delinquency. She turned to “drink, drugs and guys” at age 16, but seven years later she had a spiritual awakening and “faced reality.” Now, at age 26, she has custody of her younger sister. “I saw myself living like my mother, and it was not good,” she said.

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Initially told that she could not become a YSP because she had no direct personal experience in a child-serving system, Tasha protested vigorously and successfully. “I have a lot of experience,” she insisted—“CYF (Children, Youth and Families), juvenile probation, placement. I’ve been through it all with my siblings.”

Marvin, a YSP promoted to a supervisory position, didn’t meet his father until he was age 17. His mother moved out when he was three years old, and he was mistreated by a relative at a young age. Eventually, his paternal grandmother gained custody and helped him through college. After graduating, Marvin worked at a group home, becoming disillusioned by his belief that the facility was more interested in filling beds than in helping youth. Since joining DHS, he has completed a master’s degree and is now working toward a doctorate in organizational leadership. Eventually, he hopes to direct his own program for at-risk youth.

Clair, one of the original four YSPs, had a life-altering experience at age 12. Because her mother was dying of multiple sclerosis and was unable to care for her, she had to move from her comfortable rural home to an impoverished urban housing project. Shortly after her mother died, so did her father. She moved in and out of seven foster homes, some of them quite dysfunctional. Even while attending a local college and living in a dorm, she was virtually homeless during school breaks. Clair had just signed up for a court reporter training program when a youth advocacy organization told her about the YSP openings.

These five and the other YSPs share several common characteristics and goals: the resilience needed to enable them to move beyond their challenging upbringings, a burning desire to reach troubled youth and make a difference in their lives, and the desire to make the system better for those who come after them. Some continue to harbor anger toward the system while others feel that they were well served, but all believe that they can contribute toward better outcomes for the youth they encounter.



Respected

Not surprisingly, the YSPs are convinced of the value of their role (see sidebar), but in fact, plenty of independent corroboration supports their belief. Judges in the Allegheny County Courts’ Family Division who have observed YSPs in their courtrooms frequently request the involvement of a YSP in their cases involving adjudicated teens.

“The youth whom we see in court often have limited relationships with healthy adults who can empathize with their current situation, yet offer realistic, practical advice for having a healthy life,” said Administrative Judge Kathryn Hens-Greco of the Family Division. “Youth Support Partners take the time to connect with their youth, provide clear-sighted insights to the judge about the youth’s current needs, and, by their example, display a future path to the youth they mentor. The relationships between the YSPs and the youth they mentor are examples of the community we wish we all lived in, where the vulnerable are cared for in lasting relationships by those who have gone before them and successfully negotiated the treacherous path to healthy adulthood.”

Laurie Fowler Beckel has overseen the training and coaching of YSPs in several Pennsylvania counties as a credentialing coach for the state’s Youth and Family Training Institute. She said the value of YSPs is most quickly noticed “when youth in the system who have been silent are, thanks to the skillful support of their YSP, suddenly not so silent, so that the youth’s needs can be understood and the response to those needs can be much more effective.”

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Some colleagues who had initially been skeptical of the YSPs' capabilities now express appreciation for their effectiveness in communicating with and motivating their consumers. "The YSPs are tireless in their efforts to meet with youth," observed CYF caseworker Zachary Stewart. "And the families immediately recognize that having these young people talking to their children is something different. For me, getting a monthly home visit in can be like pulling teeth, but when the YSP comes they don't mysteriously fail to answer the door."

Sometimes the admiration has gone awry; for example, other staff have asked YSPs to use the trust they have developed with youth to encourage them to reveal personal information. One colleague who suspected that a girl was engaging in prostitution asked Hazel to find out; she graciously declined, saying, "I like to get to know the person first."

Steve Freas, facilitator/coach for a behavioral health provider that collaborates with DHS, said that the initial uncertainty about the YSPs' role has given way to admiration. "It's a problem when families don't want to interact," Freas stated. "[With the YSP] you have this person on your team who can share his or her story and sympathize with the youth's lack of trust in providers and lack of support, but then say 'give this team a try.'"



"I Want To Be Just Like Her"

Monique was one of those intractable youth. Fights with her mother led to CYF involvement with the family; when Monique refused to participate in meetings, she was labeled rebellious and spent most of the next four years in shelters and residential placements. "I used to hate CYF," she said. "I couldn't believe I was in the system."

After Monique moved back home at age 15, her caseworker suggested getting her a YSP. Jen came into her life—at all hours. No 9-to-5 employee, Jen is known for sending late-night text messages to encourage her consumers.

"I never liked counselors telling me what to do when they haven't been in my shoes," Monique said. "But Jen knew what it was like to have problems at home or people turning against you."

Monique credits Jen's inspiration with helping her complete the Job Corps GED program, obtain her driver's license, and get through a teenage pregnancy. Jen, a teen mother herself, helped Monique explore her options and accompanied her to medical appointments during the pregnancy. Jen and her supervisor even came to visit on delivery day, snapping photos that would soon grace the YSP office's display board. Monique is now studying social work at a community college and wants to be a YSP someday. "I look at Jen," she said, "and think I want to be just like her: young, motivated, and inspirational."

Morgan, a 17-year-old whose home life was marred by addiction and sexual abuse, is now on Tasha's caseload. "I never had stable relationships," Morgan stressed. "Having someone I can trust can help me more than I can explain. There's nothing that we don't discuss." Like Monique, she envisions perhaps becoming a YSP herself: "I've had a pretty messed-up life and I'm trying to turn it into something better to help people."

The stories of YSPs' dramatic impact on consumers share several common themes. Most notably, YSPs' similar personal experiences enable them to empathize more effectively and build bridges of trust with the youth. In addition, YSPs sound authoritative when talking about the likely consequences of their behavior. Statements like "you can choose to act that way, but you will probably end up in placement or at Shuman" (Allegheny County's juvenile detention center) come off as credible, not condescending, from someone who has been there himself.

Showing they're professionals

There are some limits on a YSP's relationship with the young people. YSPs explain during the initial visit that they are mandated reporters, meaning that they have to report certain types of information (e.g., sexual abuse) if they become aware of it. They also explain that their role is to help connect the youth to their own natural supports and to community resources, because the YSPs themselves cannot become a long-term fixture in each individual's life. The YSPs' goal is to help youth and their families actively participate in planning their futures and to increase their self-sufficiency so that they can handle future challenges more effectively and know where to turn for help.

Boundary setting is another important issue for YSPs, as they tend to identify so closely with their consumers' struggles and to invest so much time and energy in the youth assigned to them. For help in this sensitive area, YSP unit members meet monthly with Walter Smith, a trained psychologist and Special Projects Manager at DHS, for clinical supervision and emotional support.

"YSPs will often say," Smith explained, "that they are trying to help a consumer attend school more regularly or get up on time and that they are frustrated when the problems persist. I try to help the YSPs understand why the consumer is doing this and to become more accepting of the consumer's struggle. You can't be effective when you are angry and frustrated."

Smith perceives that the YSPs are tempted to become overinvolved in trying to change the youth whom they serve. Ultimately, he noted, "consumers decide for themselves how much change they are going to make. Boundaries for helpers have to do with where our responsibility ends and the consumer's responsibility begins."

Smith also supports the YSPs in their sometimes difficult quest for acceptance by other professionals. "We have unwittingly designed our human service systems following the medical model, where the professional knows and the consumer doesn't," he said. "YSPs have the ability to remind us that there's not a great separation between those who help and those who are helped."

"Psychiatrists, therapists and case managers tend to view themselves as knowing more than youth, and so YSPs' voices are not heard as much as I would like. But they are at the table, speaking up and connecting with the youth's concerns in ways that others cannot do. They are earning respect, and that itself is changing the system."

Clair: I had a North Side girl assigned to me at age 11. She was overweight and her eyes were crossed. She would talk about how people called her names on the bus. I made this "comeback list" of positive, strength-based responses for her to use, things like "Thank you for acknowledging me." After a while she started telling me that she had used the comeback list and it worked. Then it was time to focus on her weight, so we went to Giant Eagle, picked out all the things she liked to eat that were healthy, and created a list of things that her mom could cook. She used to go in the store and buy Twinkies; now it's peanut butter and fruit cups. After two years with me she has lost weight, feels secure and can handle negative situations.

Marvin: I have a 15-year-old boy in whom I see a lot of similarities to myself. When I first met with him, for about three or four months this guy would not open his mouth. I'd say "hi," he'd say "hi." "How was your day?" "All right." That was it. But as time went on, he opened up and now he tells me everything—so much that sometimes I say I wish we could go back to the old way! He's actually expressing himself to his mom, to me, and to the judge. He's about to get out of placement, so the big issue for him is to get reengaged at home without falling back into negative vibes. He went into placement for stealing. I used to steal, but he was pretty bad—stealing cars. I hope he has the right idea now.

James: I had a kid who started on cocaine at age 10. He told his psychiatrist at age 11, and the psychiatrist told him not to lie any more. So he thought service providers didn't care. He made a comment that I picked up on, and when I confronted him he told me about his drug use. He knew that although our conversations are confidential, I had to report his drug use. I told him that he should be dead with the stuff he was using, it was extremely dangerous, and that I did not want to be a tattletale so he needed to come to the team meeting and say what he'd been using. It worked out nicely. He went through withdrawal for three weeks; after he sobered up, being extremely intelligent and a good writer, he was able to win a \$3,000 scholarship to a summer writing camp. He loved it because he was sober and able to think again.

Tasha: I had a girl who was in placement for nine years and came home at age 15. She was very scared of the public, thinking everyone knew her story, not wanting to go to school. When we first got involved she would break out in a sweat whenever she had to go outside. I talked with her about why she felt that way, took her to various places, and saw an amazing transformation. I helped her so much that she became almost overly independent—taking a night class, learning by herself, making friends, getting a job at the Kennywood amusement park. What built the bridge to her was my being confident in myself, honest with her, and on her level. In placement there are a lot of kids and they don't get to open up much about their individual needs. Calling her every week offered that consistency and gave her a voice.



We Are Family

The YSPs may have had rocky experiences with their birth families, but they have found a new family with their colleagues.

Drop in on a YSP team event and it doesn't take long to realize that you're among a community of professionals with tight emotional connections. The energetic, youthful culture ("Tell us your name and your favorite rap song," supervisor Aaron Thomas asked one observer) is intertwined with a deep concern for each other's personal and professional lives.

YSP supervisor/coach Marieke Johnson noted the stark contrast between this unit and the mental health setting where she previously worked. There, "I didn't know my staff's personal lives," she said. "If someone was late for work four days in a row, I couldn't ask what was going on—I could only give them the number for the Employee Assistance Program. One staff member had an ill mother, but I had no idea until she quit. Here, I still set boundaries with staff, but they know me and I know them."

Tragedy and celebration have helped to knit the unit together. Colleagues know what's happening in each other's lives. They planned one team member's wedding and comforted others when a parent passed away. They mourned together when a former YSP was gunned down in a drive-by shooting.

Staff changes have a particularly emotional impact on this tight-knit community. When a staff member was leaving the unit, Hirsh used to call an emergency meeting to announce the departure, but she asked for better ideas after seeing how traumatic the experience was for some staff. Now the YSPs are informed individually by their supervisors.

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Happily, there has been minimal staff turnover. One reason is the thorough interviewing process, which includes role playing (usually with Thomas impersonating a troublesome youth) along with an exercise on prioritizing responsibilities. Passion for reaching youth is a valued credential, and candidates also need to show that they can take on emotionally demanding relationships and still take care of themselves when things hit close to home.

The YSPs come from diverse backgrounds and have much to learn from each other. This diversity is a definite part of the group's success, as they share and have come to respect their different life experiences, cultures and vocabulary.

If anyone might have tested the YSP unit's level of acceptance, it would have been James, a white man from the suburbs who admittedly lacked "street knowledge" and who readily shares his sometimes unpopular conservative values. But he has endeared himself to the group with unpretentious comments like "I don't understand what you just said; I'm the white guy in the room."

James won respect not just for his willingness to admit ignorance of inner-city slang but also through his openness to learning from his colleagues; now the inner-city dudes "have his back." On one visit to a youth in a relatively high-crime neighborhood, he arrived early and, while preparing to exit his car, noticed a group of kids approaching. Unnerved, he phoned Thomas, who suspected that James had stumbled into a drug deal. "They're checking you out. Hit the gas and go," Thomas said. James did.



Training, Training and More Training

Training and supervision of YSPs is an extremely tricky process. The YSPs have to learn professional behavior, but they also have to relate to youth as peers. They can't use slang in court, but they need to use it with the young people. (As Hoover commented: "They say things that would sound ridiculous if I said them, and that's part of why they are here.") Often they have to change clothes during the day, because business attire appropriate for office meetings would hinder their relationship-building with young people.

How does the YSP unit pull it off? "We wing it all the time," Hirsh laughed. But joking aside, oversight of YSPs has become extremely structured. Extensive training and videotaped behavior rehearsals occur before YSPs gradually take on their own caseloads, which range from 12 to 18 youths. All YSPs complete DHS's Family Development Credentialing process and learn to apply the principles and philosophies of High Fidelity Wraparound. YSPs receive "super-supervision," in that both Hirsh and the direct supervisors meet with each YSP individually to review strengths and needs. Support from colleagues throughout DHS and partner agencies also plays a key role in supporting, educating and strengthening the YSPs' work with youth and families.

Each incoming YSP has an individualized professional development plan, which can often be quite candid in stipulating agreed-upon areas of personal growth. One YSP's plan included learning not to bite his fingernails. Improving grammar and writing effective case notes are other common goals. Another got her driver's license and quit smoking. (Having a license and a car within six months is now a requirement for all YSPs.) The always gregarious and talkative Tasha got a development plan with the acronym SOUL—silence, observation, understanding and listening.

But these clear expectations are accompanied by plenty of love. Recognizing that the YSPs need stability in their own lives in order to perform effectively, supervisors go beyond traditional boundaries to help staff shop for a car, select an apartment, file for a child support or protection from abuse (PFA) order, or practice for a driving test.

Two of the most important messages YSPs hear are (1) be honest and (2) no surprises, please. If unsure whether a supervisor needs to know something, they are instructed to share the information and let the supervisor help make the decision on the most appropriate way to handle the situation. Such directives reduce the risk that YSPs will make independent judgments that get themselves and their unit in trouble. Unit leadership consistently reinforces that the safety of staff and the youth served is the top priority.

“I thought there would be more challenges with young people so new to the workforce,” said Jeanine Rasky of the DHS executive office, to whom Hirsh reports. “They require unique supervision and life coaching. Our current success speaks to the quality of the YSPs, the supervisors, and Amanda. Amanda’s style of leadership offers a significant amount of structure, within which the supervisors then provide a level of flexibility. It is a good mix!”

Shannon Fagan, director of Pennsylvania’s Youth and Family Training Institute (YFTI), suggested that DHS’s decision to establish a distinct unit devoted to the development and supervision of YSPs has been integral to the program’s success, giving the young adults a chance to learn together about various aspects of career development.

Of course, a ratio of four or five YSPs to one supervisor/coach may seem expensive. Traditional human services workers may have a caseload of 30 or 40 youth, not the 12 to 18 assigned to YSPs. But YSPs “need much more than one supervisor for every eight or ten of them,” said Steven Freas. “They need reassurance when they are doing a good job.”

Marieke Johnson thinks the YSPs, with their entry-level salaries, are an economic winner: “They are helping to reduce the services a family needs by building up the youth’s natural support system. And they do a lot that’s not on the time sheet, like answering the phone at 9 p.m. when someone calls.”



Shining Stars

The YSP unit has become stable enough to take its show on the road. YSPs have been presenters at professional conferences around the country, and the YFTI has looked to Allegheny County as a model for other counties seeking, perhaps somewhat more cautiously, to hire youth in similar roles.

Tasha, who gave a presentation at a professional conference last year, commented afterwards, “People were amazed that Allegheny County was hiring people who had been in the system themselves. It shocked me because this seems so natural to me. That’s when I realized we need to take this across the nation. Start a YSP unit and give youth opportunities to give back, and you’re going to see change.”

Beckel, the YFTI consultant, has seen admiration for the YSPs conquer fears about the potential for problems caused by their youth and inexperience. “When I first met with the unit’s coaches, concerns about risk were predominant in the conversation,” she said. “But as we have developed a credentialing system that equips these young people to do their jobs well, conversation about risk has gone way down and conversation about what they are achieving with youth has gone way up.”

DHS’s bold move to create a whole unit of YSPs rather than hiring just a few may actually be a key factor in its success, because the unit’s size has made it easier to provide dedicated supervision, intensive training, and uniquely structured performance expectations, as well as to build a community of enthusiastic staff who reinforce each other’s passion.

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From a system perspective, DHS is extremely proud of the YSPs' performance and frequently highlights them during visits from dignitaries, such as foundation executives or Pennsylvania's Secretary of the Department of Public Welfare. Their experiences, candor and eagerness to suggest new approaches and innovations have been instructive to fellow staff and have provided a fuller understanding of Allegheny County's rapidly evolving youth culture.

"The YSPs have positively impacted our responsiveness to youth needs, permitting better results," said DHS director Marc Cherna when describing them to his "Children's Cabinet" advisory board. "Who better to teach us than those who have firsthand experience?"

The YSPs are also increasingly valued for their insights into the system itself. "They can bridge the gap between the youth currently in the system and those who are trying to help, but who never had the experience of being in the system and have no way of knowing what it is like," said Patricia Valentine, DHS Executive Deputy Director for Integrated Program Services. "They have pointed out the impact of procedures and red tape on youth, or ways in which the system can demean youth without meaning to, treating them as though we expect them to be irresponsible."

While others may remain incredulous that Allegheny County took the risk to hire and train so many YSPs, those within the unit frequently express amazement at the wonderful opportunity for which their difficult childhoods prepared them.

"When you take a group of former recipients of the system who have life experiences," Clair declared, "and pair them up with youth from all different areas of life, they like us. They talk to us, because we understand youth culture and we understand them. It is so empowering for both of us. When I'm talking with that youth, it's my therapy too. I am very passionate about this work and I wouldn't trade it for the world."



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