

WORDS FROM THE TRENCHES

Allan D. Nass

Jacob Center

Durango, Colorado

Most people who work with juveniles will tell you that they learn their most valuable lessons in the trenches from the youth themselves. That was never more true for me than it was in my experience with Jake.

He was labeled a “puke” — a reject from the system, as well as from his own family. Jake taught me the importance of listening to the stories of youth and the efficacy of techniques such as mediation, family support and play therapy. They are methods that sound like buzz words, but in fact allow juvenile workers valuable tools in solving problems not only for the youth, but for the system charged with their care.

I never would have predicted any of this when I first met the 15-year-old boy as an inmate of a juvenile holding facility. Amidst the stark grey walls that reflected little light he appeared to be swimming in his orange jump suit. I was new in the field of child and youth care and was questioning the wisdom of my career choice as I tried in vain to get comfortable on a hard metal chair that was cold to the touch. The large black tennis shoes on Jake’s feet had no laces. I had a disconcerting recollection of a puppy I once knew who had very big paws. That cute little pup grew up to be a huge dog. Jake’s hair was sheared short on the sides with a long pony tail that slid down his back.

Jake appraised me with an impish grin. “Did you know,” he asked, “Wig shops will give you \$10.00 an inch for hair that hasn’t been dyed or permed?” He paused for effect. “I could make over a 100 dollars!” His boyish expression was in flagrant contrast with the tattoo on his forearm. A sneering Satan dressed like a court jester and dancing a jig appeared to be taunting me. I had already been apprised of Jake’s “hot sheet”. He had already racked up a long list of criminal offenses including auto theft, assault, shop lifting, burglary, drug involvement and a bazaar incident where he broke into a church and set a pile of bibles on fire. These offenses were all signposts marking Jake’s journey deeper and deeper into the trenches of the juvenile justice system

I am a community-based child and youth care worker. My primary job is to help keep kids out of jail. I work with public defenders, district attorneys, judges and other community service providers to devise strategies which allow juvenile offenders to stay at home and in the community. I help create alternatives to costly, impersonal and ineffective institutions which act as “criminal training schools” for troubled youth. My job is to reunify youth with their families, schools and communities through practical commonsensical approaches like mediation, youth advocacy and

parental responsibility training. This was clearly not going to be an easy task with Jake. He was entrapped by the prevailing sense of hopelessness facing so many of today's youth. It is startling how easy it is for teenagers to become entangled in bad choices and ushered into the complex maze of the juvenile justice system.

The glib District Attorney flagged me over as I passed by his office. He didn't bother with a preamble. "Why bother?" he asked, "The kid is a "punk"! I shrugged my shoulders and smiled. "We wouldn't have jobs if people didn't have problems," I called back in reply as I backpedaled down the hall. I didn't wait around for a retort. After Jake was booked and released, his Probation Officer unceremoniously arranged for a meeting between Jake, his mother and myself.

When I arrived at the Courthouse there was a large file detailing Jake's maladaptive exploits waiting for me. The beginning of his criminal activity appeared to coincide with the divorce of his parents. He was reported to be a bright and likable kid who left his childhood home while he was still in elementary school. He and his single working mother had been on the move ever since. There was a lengthy evaluation which indicated that Jake was suffering from a plethora of conduct disorders all stemming from "self-loathing" caused by a lack of attachments and sense of rejection. Jake added to his diagnosis by self-reporting the use of drugs and alcohol on over 250 occasions. Like many youth in the trenches, Jake had made an art form out of being categorized and labeled.

His mother never did show up for our meeting. Jake made his appearance as I was preparing to leave. He offered no explanation for being a half-hour late.. Instead he defiantly threw a folded piece of paper onto the table in front of me. I slowly picked it up not bothering to disguise my irritation at being kept waiting. The note stated in no uncertain terms that the 15-year-old youth who stood before me was no longer in the care or custody of his parent and was to be treated as an emancipated individual. In other words-an adult. It was signed and notarized by his mother.

I thought this must be a new strategy in parenting a teenager. Although it is not possible to legally emancipate a youth at the age of 15, I've observed with growing alarm the number of parents who do just that. They feel justified in divorcing their children at younger and younger ages because of their lack of tolerance or inability to control their acting-out adolescent. Jake was another "disposable youth" in a culture of throw away relationships.

I returned Jake's appraising glare with a good natured smirk. "Want to play Hacky Sack?" I asked. Jake nodded his approval and we went outside. Hacky Sack is a kicking game that many of the youth that I work with have mastered. It consists of passing a small bean bag back and forth without touching it with your hands. To be good at Hacky Sack demands excellent eye-foot coordination. This is a developmental stage that I somehow missed in my growing up process. Nevertheless, I have discovered Hacky Sack to be an excellent way to disarm the bristling defenses of a 15 year old man/child who has been living on the streets while carrying a note from his

mother giving him permission. Within moments Jake had assessed my semi-tolerable abilities and took it upon himself to keep the Hacky Sack in the air. To the rhythmic patter of the game, Jake told me his story. We have been friends ever since.

Jake had survived many of the same ordeals as a staggering number of today's troubled youth. Physical violence, emotional abuse and rampant alcoholism were common features of his childhood. This did not diminish his loyalty to his parents. He was obviously still torn by their separation and questioned his responsibility in their breaking up. With youthful enthusiasm he confessed that he may have a drinking problem. He acknowledged that he only seemed to break laws when he had been drinking. He was nevertheless confident that he could handle his drugs of choice: pot and acid. These are volatile and destructive ingredients in the unstable hands of an out-of-control youth. The effects of Jake's self-inflicted "chemical warfare" had etched its pervasive nature into his psyche. He appeared unaware and indifferent to the annihilation taking place.

I listened to Jake's story carefully. Above all else I've learned to listen to the stories of youth. Unearthing the confused and chaotic stories of troubled youth is the quintessential element to initiating change. Unlocking their personal histories and life experiences is the first step in creating rapport and hope. Only by embracing their perceptions of today do we have a chance at holding sway for their tomorrows. One of the predominant developmental characteristics of adolescence is metamorphosis. The fight for flight, freedom and control are all part of the teenager's indomitable aspiration to evolve. The very nature of adolescents rebels, challenges and transforms the world around them. Jake's personal struggle to prevail was as resolute as Life itself. The only question was, would he survive?

I helped Jake and his mother reach an agreement for his return home. We conducted parent/child mediation sessions to clarify roles, expectations and formal agreements. I also rehearsed and coached Jake until he found a job serving soft ice cream. Within three months he was managing the kitchen during his shift and was enrolled in a work/study program at school. He paid his restitution and eventually completed his community service hours.

Throughout this period of time we met regularly to discuss progress and problems and to play Hacky Sack. Although he never did finish his drug and alcohol treatment program, he did attend AA meetings occasionally. He helped his mother by making a monthly contribution to help with rent. He dropped out of school and had other small brushes with local law enforcement. He eventually was able to get his GED and satisfy the conditions of his probation.

Like the vast majority of youth that I've known, Jake responded positively to fair and consistent treatment which included and encouraged hope. Like most teenagers he thrived when treated with a good balance of nurturing and structure. Over time Jake began to invest in his success as he recognized his ability to contribute and belong. I felt honored to witness

Jake grow up and grow out of the problems that had plagued him since childhood. He eventually “graduated” out of our program and earned an early release from probation in the juvenile justice system.

Nearly 5 years had passed when I bumped into Jake again at the grocery store. Although he called me by name it took me several moments to recognize the clean-cut mature young man in front of me as the same defiant teenager I had once known. He had moved back to town to be close to his mother who was ill. He reported that he had been staying out of trouble, was working as a welder and was engaged to be married. “Did you sell your hair?” I asked. “Naw,” he drawled with a thoughtful expression, “I was a dumb-ass kid.” The impish grin had turned into a shy introspective smile. An awkward silence followed as we stood with our carts in front of the stewed tomatoes. He finally asked, “Do you still play Hacky Sack?” I replied that I did. “Give me a call sometime and we’ll kick the Hacky Sack around.” We agreed to get together and play.

It occurred to me as I turned to leave that when I started my career as a child and youth care worker, I was about the same age Jake is now. As I approached the end of the aisle I glanced back to see Jake busy reading the ingredients on a label of spaghetti sauce. I could only stare and marvel at the upstanding young man that Jake had grown into. I couldn’t help but wonder if someday he might help a youth entrenched in confusing and difficult times. As if reading my thoughts he looked up and smiled. “Hey, let’s get one of those kids you work with to play with us,” he called. “All right!” I replied.

Sometimes life in the trenches seems to work out all right.

Allan D. Nass has been a child and youth care worker for 18 years and is the Regional Director of the youth and family service agency, the Jacob Center.