AN HONEST DIALOGUE ABOUT STRATEGIES TO PREVENT YOUTH VIOLENCE

Voices
The Mentoring Center
of Oakland

Deyantae Newson first met Martin Jacks, the Executive Director of The Mentoring Center, when Deyantae was serving a two-year sentence in the California Youth Authority for drug dealing. Since 1989, Jacks (and also “Coach” Wilbert Jiggetts, with the San Francisco-based Omega Boys Club) have traveled to Stockton every Friday to mentor under-18 black males incarcerated at a CYA facility for the system's youngest juveniles.

While serving time in 1992, Deyantae signed up to study a curriculum that covers topics ranging from black history to improved conflict resolution skills. Deyantae, 21, now joins Jacks and Coach Jiggetts on their weekly treks to Stockton. He's also in his second year at Chabot College in Oakland.

“The day I met these two men, it's like I've been living a different life,” Deyantae says.

“Nowadays, so many of our young people are like Deyantae, without access to warm, caring adult guidance,” says The Mentoring Center’s Martin Jacks. “People are not born with values. It doesn’t work like that. If you grow up in an environment that doesn’t provide guidance in the ways to act and behave, you're not going to get it.”

“At the Mentoring Center, we say mentoring is a means of artificially reconstructing the extended family,” Jacks says. “There’s different kinds of arts and crafts programs. There’s playground activities, where young people are interfacing with coaches and other rec leaders. There’s one-on-one mentoring. There’s cultural programming. Anything to draw kids in so we can put adults back in the lives of young people.”

“When I was growing up, no one ever mentioned college,” says Deyantae Newson. “No one ever talked about going to work everyday. That might not sound like an important thing, but just posing that question of college has had this huge impact on my future. Now that I recognize all I can accomplish if I put my mind to it, it seems so foreign, what I've done in the past.”

Deyantae—like so many youngsters nowadays—was raised by his grandmother.

“When I was sentenced to the CYA, I was the only one to shed any tears over me,” he says. “There was no one else there. You could say I was on my own a lot.”

Says Deyantae, “If this program wasn’t in existence, I'd probably be locked up today instead of in college. Until the Mentoring Center, I didn't have a work ethic. I didn't know how to fill out a job application until someone there showed me how. After meeting Martin Jacks and Coach, I suddenly had these voices in my head about how it's time to accept who I am and grow up. It was time for me to start taking responsibility for my actions.”
Barrios Unidos
of Santa Cruz

Daniel Alejandro, "Nane" to the hundreds of young people he's helped steer onto a more productive path, started the Santa Cruz chapter of Barrios Unidos, meaning "the United Neighborhoods," in 1977 to "offer an alternative to the madness." Maribel Gallardo was in a gang, selling and using drugs, when several years ago a judge sentenced her to 62 hours of community service at Barrios Unidos. Today, Maribel is drug-free and no longer runs with her gang. She works twenty hours a week at Barrios Unidos while attending Cabrillo College.

"After not having much to do with my days, I'm suddenly a very busy person," Maribel says.

At Barrios Unidos, we expose young people to another world.

Maribel Gallardo was 12 years old when she was jumped by four older girls from another neighborhood. "They beat me up pretty bad, so I started running with a gang in my neighborhood for protection," Maribel says, adding, "It's like everyone I knew growing up was in a gang."

Maribel first encountered Nane at 14, when he spoke at her school. "His group seemed up to a lot of good things," Maribel says. "They offered these Chicano history classes and had a youth jobs program. I'd see him around the neighborhood, and we'd talk. He really got me to start thinking about my future and what I was doing with myself. Little by little, he opened my eyes."

"At Barrios Unidos," says Nane, "we expose young people to other ways of living and thinking. We stress that you can do what you put your mind to if you're free of the madness. It's about giving young people the tools to succeed."

Before hooking up with Barrios Unidos, Maribel could not picture herself in college. "I used to make fun of my cousin for caring about school," she says. "I used to call her 'little school girl' because she was in college." Now, Maribel travels to schools around the Santa Cruz area carrying Barrios Unidos' message of hope and opportunity. "I tell kids straight up where I came from and what I've been able to accomplish now that I'm working hard to improve myself and finally paying attention to my future."
The Community Wellness Partnership

Growing up first in South Central Los Angeles and then later Pomona, Alejandro "Alex" Ornelas managed to avoid the gangs but little else. "I was always getting into fights," Alex says. "I was into graffiti. I just didn't care about anyone or anything back then. If I hadn't hooked up with Community Wellness Partnership, I figure I would have ended up behind bars.

How do you turn a wayward youth into a contributing member of society? At the Community Wellness Partnership, based in Pomona, the key is empowering young people as anti-violence advocates and at the same time teaching them basic life skills.

"We train youth so they can become leaders," says the CWP's Bernardo Rosa. "It's like with Alex: we want to give young people the principles and the tools they need to live productive lives, and also the skills and cultural knowledge so they can contribute to reducing youth violence."

The "Knowledge Is Power" program that proved so critical in Alex's life blends cultural history lessons with motivational talks and exercises that stress issues such as time management and improved conflict resolution skills. "The programs at CWP are all about taking responsibility for yourself," Alex says. "They stress that you have to start thinking ahead to the future, and not just today or tomorrow. It's there that I first learned that decisions you make now can affect you the rest of your life."

Today, Alex works as a peer mentor in a program geared to younger males. "We see the Male Involvement Project as an opportunity to promote responsibility among young men," Rosa says. "It's in this program that we train young men to better deal with their anger. We teach them how to be responsible men and fathers, and to do their part in reducing teen pregnancy."

"I tell kids straight up: you drop out of school, all you are is a number," says Alex. "You're not a person anymore, you're just a statistic on a piece of paper somewhere. You've got to start caring, because if you don't, you're going to amount to nothing, because no one else is going to care for you."
Jason Simmons
of San Diego

In 1995, Jason Simmons was sentenced to 90 days in a San Diego juvenile ranch facility for stealing several expensive cameras from his high school. A judge also imposed a $600 restitution fine. Rare is the offender who actually pays restitution, especially when paired with time locked away, but upon his release Jason took a job as a busboy to start making restitution payments.

"I wanted to pay the money back as fast as I could to show my remorse," Jason said shortly after paying back the last of the $600. With the help of Alan Francey, a counselor with the Public Defender’s Child Advocacy division, Jason, 18, is now applying to local colleges in the hopes of studying engineering, with an ultimate goal of a career in the Merchant Marines.

There are a lot of caring people inside the juvenile justice system, but they’re so overburdened with cases that kids like Jason fall through the cracks.

A teacher he met while incarcerated in San Diego’s juvenile hall inspired Jason to work on his high school equivalency degree. Later, after he was arrested for fighting, he met Alan Francey of the Public Defender’s office.

"Alan has been real important to me, as far as keeping me on the straight and narrow," Jason says. "He helped me find a job, and now he’s helping me with college. It’s meant a lot to me that I’ve had someone who really believes in me. I’ve been on my own a lot, and I’m not used to anyone in my corner."

Alan has been real important to me, as far as keeping me on the straight and narrow.

"I started stealing when I was like in the 3rd or 4th grade," Jason says. "I used to see my mom steal from stores, so I guess I thought if my mom could do it, then I could do it too." Jason was taken away from his mother when he was 14. He moved in with a foster family that gave up on him shortly after he was arrested on a burglary charge. For a time, Jason was without a home.

There are a lot of caring people inside the juvenile justice system, but they’re so overburdened with cases that kids like Jason fall through the cracks," Francey says. "To me, if we’re going to go through the trouble of processing a child through the courts, then we should go through the trouble of trying to give that child whatever help we can before they move up to the next level. If we’re serious about dealing with crime in this state, we need to be focusing far more attention on kids like Jason before they commit more serious crimes."
The Resources for Youth campaign begins with the assumption that youth violence is a problem that affects all of us. While ensuring public safety is a priority, we believe much more can be done to prevent youth violence and crime. Discussion of solutions is often difficult because this issue has become both polarized and politicized. One thing we can all agree on is the need for an honest dialogue. The campaign will provide California policy makers and community leaders with facts, perspectives, voices and strategies to prevent youth violence and crime so that together we can become resources for our youth.

We hope you will listen to these voices and invite you to share your thoughts with us.