
INTERVENTION INTERCHANGE

Thorana S. Nelson, Editor

Waikiki Youth Circles: Homeless Youth Learn Goal Setting Skills

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INTRODUCTION

Redemption may not be easy, but it is possible—probable even. Even the worst wounds plaguing a young man or woman, with enough time, effort and caring, can usually be outweighed by light.

—Celeste Fremon, 2004

“I was surprised I did it. I never look in the paper and I never would call anyone, but I just did it, and I saw this cheap studio. So I called and they said to come down and fill out the application. A lot of people were there looking at it when I came. I can’t believe it! I got the place! I’m moving in tomorrow!” Kent, a 20-year-old former foster child, happily explains how he found an apartment during a *Waikiki Youth Circle*.

The *Waikiki Youth Circle* is a group process for homeless youth to find ways to meet their needs and connect to society. The Circle offers an opportunity for the youth to develop goal-setting skills.

To become independent adults, youth need to establish support systems and connect to the labor force. Low academic abilities, including poor reading skills, exposure to violence, mental health problems, and drug abuse are some of the issues that disconnected young people confront. Given the opportunity to engage in programs to assist them, many youth choose not to participate (Wald & Marinez, 2003). This is understandable, especially for former foster youth who have been subjected to rigid government bureaucracy. They want to live on their own and make their own decisions, but lack the necessary resources and support to do so successfully.

Jesuit priest Greg Boyle has helped thousands of wayward youth in East Los Angeles since 1986, particularly Latino gang members, who lovingly nicknamed him *G-Dog*. Father Boyle formed Homeboy Industries, which employs over 100 youth full-time, and around 20 or 30 younger youth who work part-time after school. Father Boyle believes that the best thing anyone can do for these youth is to *give them hope* that they can become responsible people (Fremon, 2004).

CIRCLE PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

The *Waikiki Youth Circle* is a restorative justice intervention. “Restorative justice is a broad term which encompasses a growing social movement to

institutionalize peaceful approaches to harm, problem-solving and violations of legal and human rights” (Center for Restorative Justice, 2006).

The Waikiki Youth Circle is a participant-driven group process that applies Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg’s solution-focused approach. The solution-focused approach uses specific language skills to assist others in finding their own solutions to problems (Berg & de Shazer, 1993). The Waikiki Youth Circle process was designed and provided by the author, a formerly disconnected youth and high school drop out, who lived on her own at age 14. EPIC ‘Ohana Conferencing, a non-profit agency, funded the project.

The Circles use a one-hour group process that meet twice a month. Nine Circles were provided under this pilot project over a four-month period. The Circles were provided for clients of [at] the Waikiki *Youth Outreach Center*, a day-shelter for homeless youth. The Center provides food, lockers, laundry, health care, and access to social services to youth up to age 21. No youth live at the Center, which services between 300 and 400 youth about 4,000 times a year. “The shelter is like their home. It’s the closest thing they have. They appreciate basic services. Sometimes they just need someone to talk to,” says Jeff Kaplan, one of the Center’s long time administrators.

Free pizza, bus passes, and gift certificates were provided as incentives for youth to attend the Circles.

Youth who participated in two Circles in a row were given a monthly bus pass (worth \$40 in Hawai‘i) or a \$25 gift certificate to a department store. The Circles begin with each young person saying what went well for them in the last two weeks, and how their efforts went toward achieving the goals that they had set for themselves the last time the Circle met. Often, the youth describe success in job hunting or applying for social services, but often their responses are unique. One 20 year-old heroin addict said the best thing that happened to her was, “My babies hatched! I found some gecko eggs and they hatched last week. I fed the babies with juice I dripped on the side of the tree. They’re doin’ great!” Another 20-year-old man said: “I actually managed to stay away from the cops and didn’t get arrested.”

Goal-setting questions are presented by asking, “What do you want different in your life?” When the response is a major desire like “Get a home,” “Get a job,” or “Go to college,” the youth are asked, “What’s a little baby step you can take in the next two weeks that will bring you closer to your goal?” When the response is, “I don’t know,” they are asked, “If you *did* know, what would it be?” or “*Pretend* you know.” If the young person still does not know what small step they might take to improve their life, they are asked, “What would the person who loves you most in the world say you should do?”

The other youth in the Circle serve as important resources to their peers. They offer each other their advice and ideas. Youth who are unsure what they should do to improve their own lives are nonetheless a resource to their peers. One former foster child, Sarah, who had lived in a city park for months and who found a full-time job after attending several Circles, carried blank job applications around in her backpack. She shared the applications with other youth who were looking for jobs. "Hey, here's a job app for Starbucks. Or do you want Jamba Juice? They're both hiring," Sarah would say. The youths' goals, including such things as "to stay away from the cops" or "to find a job," are written on slips of paper and given to them after the Circle.

The Circles are managed with the solution-focused approach. All homeless youth are considered appropriate for the Circles as long as they have the capacity to participate. We had several youth participate who were marginally intoxicated and sleep deprived, but who were able to successfully contribute something. If they nodded out a bit, their peers sitting next to them nudged them to wake up and said, "It's your turn." If any youth were hostile and aggressive to other youth in the Circle (which was never experienced in this pilot project), they would be told, "This Circle is about finding out what you want different in your life and how you might do that. If you can put your anger aside while we do that for the next hour, please stay."

The Circle concludes with all of the youth complimenting each other one at a time on strengths they noticed in each other. For Kent to hear his peers say, "He is a hard worker," and for the gecko lover to hear, "She is compassionate and caring" was powerful. The youth enjoyed renewed optimism generated at the Circles. Many who came to the Circles with flat, unengaged demeanors, left smiling and chatting.

One young prostitute reported, "I have a tendency to be hard on myself and not give myself credit for trying, but the Circle was really optimistic about my efforts." At her Circle, other youth suggested that she work in retail sales because of her good rapport with people. Kent said the best thing about the Circle was, "Saying good things and being positive to people." Kent noticed that not only *hearing nice things* about ourselves makes us feel better, but also *saying nice things about others*, makes us feel good.

CIRCLE RESULTS

The average size of each Circle was five youth, including at least one representative of the youth shelter. The average cost for conducting each

Circle was \$400.00, which included the facilitator's fees, pizza cost, and the incentives provided the youth.

During the four-month pilot period, sixteen youth who participated in the Circles set goals for themselves and seven of these youth reached their goals. The youths' goals were pragmatic and included filling out job applications, making appointments, going to job interviews, looking in the newspaper for rentals, and getting medical clearance to get back on methadone. Only three youth had goals about connecting with other people. One youth had the goal to call a friend about "a place to stay when he leaves the island"; the gecko lover wanted to "find and connect with Dad"; and Kent wanted to visit his ill mother on the island of Kaua'i. She died shortly after he visited her and after that, Kent made the goal to attend her funeral and renew relationships with other family members, which he also accomplished.

Data from surveys collected after each Circle show that participants were highly satisfied with the process. Kent reported that the Circles "helped me get things done in which I would procrastinate. I appreciate being helped with my goals in life."

Jeff Kaplan believes that "The Circles give youth the opportunity to set goals and it gives them tangible services (e.g., bus passes) that are vital for achieving their goals." Eventually youth who consistently come to the Circles and establish sufficient credibility could be helped with their more costly needs like rent, tuition, uniforms, etc., the same sort of resources that families normally provide for youth this age.

CONCLUSION

The Waikiki Circle program succeeded in assisting youth in learning goal-setting skills, which is essential for connecting to society. A 44% success rate is significant. The Circles invite youth to develop goals to improve their lives in an environment where others listen to them and their ideas are respected. The Circles give them hope for a brighter future and encourage motivation by being solution-focused and optimistic. As both a restorative justice and solution-focused intervention, the process invites and motivates youth to deal with their situations and does not blame or ask them why they are in their particular situation.

Juvenile justice programs could apply the Circle process. Mandated youth are likely to appreciate the self-directed process. They are accustomed to case management and having adults formulate plans for them. The Circles

offer them the opportunity to define their needs and make their own decisions about how they can best address them. Circles could be used as a diversion or in addition to correctional interventions. As a diversion, probation officers could mandate youth to participate in Circles to stay out of court and judges could mandate participation to avoid detention. Additionally, incarcerated youth could participate in Circles before they return to the community. Similar Circles for individual foster youth and adult inmates have been developed in Hawai'i (Walker, 2005; Walker, Sakai & Brady, 2006).

Mandated attendance could have positive outcomes. Youth could become motivated by their peers and learn from the process even if they initially were not interested in attending. Certainly, no one can mandate genuine participation, but if Circles offer a chance that youth might find ways to connect to society, it is worth providing them. This is an easily replicable, and inexpensive program that builds on resilience. It certainly is more cost effective than the outcomes for youth who fail to connect (e.g., unemployment, welfare, prison).

POSTSCRIPT

Six months after the last Circle Kent attended, he moved from his one room studio into a larger two-bedroom apartment. He and Sarah, the other former foster youth who shared job applications and got her first full-time job, have become roommates. Together these two formerly disconnected youth are succeeding in maintaining their independence and connections with society.

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