Getting Back on the Right Path

Mental and behavioral health disorders are major issues facing young people in the United States. Yet, the majority of youth who need support do not get help. Additionally, there are significant disparities in who gets treatment based on race, ethnicity, gender, housing status, and sexual orientation. Young people tend not to get help for two interacting reasons: systems barriers and personal reasons for forgoing treatment (e.g. lack of trust in formal mental health service providers; fear of being stigmatized; etc.). Youth-Adult Partnerships (Y-APs) have the potential to improve mental health programming for young people, yet, there is little research about Y-APs that have focused on youth mental health or the extent to which Y-APs lead to long-term community change. Healthy Options for Prevention and Education (HOPE) Coalition works to fill this gap through the work that they do with teens in our community.

Margarita (not her real name) is a 16-year old female and long-term member of the Boys & Girls Club. A counselor from the HOPE Coalition, Walter, had had quick check-ins with Margarita in the Teen Room over the years, Margarita had never engaged in one-on-one sessions with Walter until this year. At the beginning of 2017, staff from the Teen Room, Gym, and other support staff expressed concerns to Walter about Margarita's behavior and language.

Due to Walter's prior informal interactions with Margarita, it was relatively easy for him to establish a rapport with her. He learned that Margarita was struggling with school attendance and performance, peer relationships, and a new boyfriend. During one-on-one sessions with her, she talked about her school, family and personal life in a very negative way. As time went on, Walter learned that her attendance issues were actually quite serious. She was having constant power struggles with her teachers and was about to be expelled. Margarita’s self-esteem was low, and she was upset about her school performance. She was also facing family challenges. She told Walter about issues with her mother—a single parent—regarding what she perceived as unfair expectations, curfew, social life limitations, and an overall lack of support. She was also experiencing high levels of stress due to having her first boyfriend and peer pressure to be intimate with him.

Walter and Margarita met over 20 times over a six-month period. Some of these meetings were quick check-ins, while others were more extensive therapeutic sessions. He worked with her on more productive ways to express her anger and disappointment. Most importantly, he listened and validated her feelings. Over the past several months, she has come a long way in all areas of her life. She transferred to an alternative school where she got along much better with teachers. Her attendance improved dramatically, and she received no suspensions. Her peer group at her new school was more supportive because they were more like her than students at her previous school.

After having the opportunity to practice new ways to communicate with Walter, she began to see her relationship with her mother improve as well. They began talking more and Margarita reported that her mother did not yell at her as often. Her mother started stepping up for her at meetings and in the community.
Staff at the Boys & Girls Club noticed that her attitude was improving, and she was swearing less. She started to assist staff in activities with younger children; she participated on a panel regarding youth-police relationships; she completed intensive boxing training; and recently competed in her first amateur boxing event and graduated from State Trooper Training Camp. Although Margarita continues to struggle in some areas, overall her attitude and connection to the Clubhouse have improved, while her engagement in risky behaviors has declined. Having a counselor available onsite when she needed help was a critical component to Margarita's impressive turnaround.

Your gift to the United Way of Central Massachusetts helps to fund mental health programs administered by the HOPE Coalition that helped Margarita get back on the right path. This is only one of many examples of how your donation is invested in our community. Please consider making a gift today to the United Way of Central Massachusetts. You will be helping the people in your town, those in our community and those most vulnerable among us.