

Expert Urban Youth Workers and the Stories They Tell: A Narrative of Lived Experience

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Dedication

In memory of my mother, Jessie Marks Lindall and my mother-in-law, Yuriko Ezaki who showed me through their actions the importance of respecting and loving all children.

Abstract

Relationships are the key to good urban youth work practice. The purpose of this hermeneutical phenomenological study was to give understanding to how youth workers create and maintain trusting relationships.

A literature review looked at what relationship development looks like in the various ways adults work with youth. The literature on expertise in practice was reviewed to understand how youth workers use their experience and skills to create relationships with youth. The approach was to observe, interview, and have informal conversations with five expert youth workers over a period of nine months. The data was analyzed using a selective or highlighting approach.

Three overarching themes emerged: The stance of youth work, the youth work dance and the relational nature of youth work practice. Under these three major themes several sub themes or aspects of each theme were discussed. From the stories of the youth workers a pattern developed; a web of confluence. It is not linear, but for this group of youth workers most of these aspects are present in their creation of relationship. It starts with the stance; and the youth work dance and the relational nature of the work is interwoven with the stance to make it all come alive. The data supports the theory that relationship is the cornerstone of good youth work practice.

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Chapter One: Introduction to the Research

Years ago a teacher called me an anthropologist of urban youth work and as I have observed and interviewed youth workers for this dissertation I have come to truly understand why she said this to me. The cultural anthropologist “tries to understand the perspectives, practices, and social organization of other groups whose values and life ways may be very different from their own. The knowledge they gain can enrich human understanding on a broader level”. (<http://www.thisisanthropology.org/about-anthropology>). In youth work practice we first stand outside the world of youth listening and watching and waiting to be invited in. We need to understand where a particular community of youth is coming from and be able to exhibit that understanding. When the youth worker is invited to step into this world the potential for co creating a trusting, sustainable relationship with youth is born. This is our chance to begin the conversation that allows us to understand the perspectives and social organization of the particular youth context we have stepped into and become a trusted adult who can offer opportunities and support. Youth work practice involves a delicate balance of gaining trust, forging authentic relationships with youth, keeping appropriate boundaries and maintaining the adult role. (*Ahsltrom, Yohalem and Pittman, 2008*)

After many years of practice and conversations with youth workers who work in urban settings and reviewing research articles on youth work practice, I came to the belief that relationships are the cornerstone or key to quality youth work practice. I have a M.Ed. in Youth Development Leadership at the University of Minnesota which allowed me to explore the nature of youth work. I completed an internship in Oaxaca, Mexico and conducted a field study in London, England looking at how youth workers

interacted with urban youth. I was able to observe and work with experienced youth workers whose prime goal was to create relationships with youth who were disengaged from school and society. It was evident to me that no matter where youth workers were practicing their craft, England, Mexico or Minnesota in order to be in the world of youth the youth worker needed to create a trusting relationship that allowed them to guide and support a youth along their path to adult hood. Therefore when people would ask me what is the key to good youth work practice I would always say, “Relationships”. That sounds so simple, but when asked to define it, I found it a very complex thing to talk about. What does being in relationship with youth look like? Will I know it when I see it? Can I explain it to someone outside the field of youth work practice? This was the beginning of my ongoing journey of discovery. Through the years, I have had the opportunity to work with or observe youth workers in a variety of settings. When I see a youth worker who is really connecting with youth and appears to be very comfortable in the world of youth I ask myself, “What is it about this person that draws youth to her?” “What is it I need to know to create that kind of relationship?”

Over the last 20 years there has been a growing body of work on youth work; what it means in the field of youth development; what good youth work practice looks like; and how or do we educate youth work practitioners. Youth work is practiced in a variety of setting from formal community organizations such as 4-H, Girl Scouts, or faith based organizations, to detached street workers. It is practiced in urban, suburban and rural contexts. It can be voluntary or prescribed. Regardless of how or where the work is practiced there are some common traits that all youth workers share. My academic

interest is in understanding how urban youth workers create relationships as they practice in the urban context and why these relationships are the key to good youth work practice.

This research study is an attempt to reveal how experienced or “expert” youth workers conduct themselves in this world of youth and what are the ways in which they connect with youth. The significance of this study is to learn from youth workers themselves what aspects of their practice produce trusting relationships and how we might use this knowledge to educate and support emerging youth workers. To answer the questions about the importance of relationship I found that I needed to look at what effective or expert youth work practice looks like. Youth workers have different styles and techniques for working with youth. Experienced youth workers have learned what aspects are most effective in connecting, creating and maintaining trusting relationships. Therefore my primary research question is “What is the experience of being in relationship with youth in the urban context and what can we learn from listening to the voices of the youth workers”? Through the stories of youth workers we will hear what it is that they do on a daily basis to connect with youth and this knowledge can guide how we educate and support emerging youth workers entering the field.

Background

When we ask an experienced youth worker why and how they do what they do, the youth worker finds it difficult to explain. What is the motivation for what they do so well and how do they do it? In *Urban Sanctuaries* where successful youth workers are

called “wizards”¹; McLaughlin, Irby and Langman (2001) pointed out that “the practices of most successful leaders make the question of primary motivation a critical one... the wizards put youth’s interest first” (p.99). This is not to say that content is not important, but particularly in the urban areas where life can be harsh the focus needs to be on the youth; what they know and what they are interested in doing. Youth must be able to trust that the youth worker is listening to them and will be there for them. Being there is a central quality of good practice and good practice means walking with youth. As Tito in *Urban Sanctuaries* put it, “Kids can walk around trouble, if there is some place to walk to and someone to walk with”. (2001, p.219) Being there and walking with someone is where relationship can begin to blossom. It is being in a lived space with youth; a space where stories are shared and trust is created. The use of the term wizard makes it sound as if there is magic involved, but it is not magic so what is it? In *Hunch: a vision for post-austerity youth in Britain*, they “argue, strongly, that there is an intuitive value to good youth work” (London Youth, p. 37, 2013). Others might call it practical wisdom, but it is the knowing that comes from years of experience and is hard to describe.

Another way to say this is; if Wizards use practical wisdom gained from years of experience² (Notes from meeting with Michael Baizerman in 2012) they can see the potential in youth; they have belief in their skills; they feel they(the wizard) are giving

¹ McLaughlin, Irby and Langman describe a wizard as someone who is an effective leader “ wizardry is not magic, but it is almost as difficult to emulate because it is highly personal”. (2001) They succeed where others have not.

² Notes from a meeting with Michael Baizerman in 2012)

back to community and they are “unyieldingly authentic” (McLaughlan, Irby and Langman, 2001, p.95).

What is this quality of knowing that effective youth workers have and how can we learn to describe it in ways that inform others about how relationships with youth are created and what this means for the practice? There is an art to youth work that is learned through years of experience that has not been captured on paper. Exploring the “lived experiences” of urban youth workers has allowed me to begin to understand the art of being in relationships that matter (Van Manen, 1990).

“Foucault says, ‘we have to listen to that what can teach us: the logos.’ The voking act provides the possibility to ‘know one’s self’, not in the narrow sense of narcissistic self-examination but in the sense of discovering existential possibilities, what it is to be human, what lies at the heart of our being and personal identity. The ‘call’ signifies that we need other selves, others, the Other, through whom and with whom we seek understanding”. (Phenomenology Online, <http://www.phenomenologyonline.com/inquiry/methodology/vocatio/>)

Observing and listening to youth worker’s stories has been a journey of discovery. My challenge was to find and enter the world of the experienced urban youth worker to get at his/her experience of being in relationship. I needed to become that participant observer where I could listen, observe and be seen as part of the group rather than an outsider, yet not intentionally change the context of the youth and youth worker. It required the kind of tact that Van Manen (1990) calls the ability “to act toward others, children or adults, with tact or tactfulness” (p.7). My interest is to find the “essence”, the

universal themes of relationships in youth work or "...the stars that make up the universes of meaning we [youth workers] live through" (p. 90).

Youth workers very seldom start out to be youth workers. In informal conversations that I have had with youth workers over the years, I often hear stories similar to this: "I was in corporate work, but did volunteering at the YMCA and realized my passion is working with youth", or "I was in college and needed a part time job and started working with youth". The experience of working with youth uncovered a passion that was lying dormant. Experience is the key word here. It was not a class or a book, but the hands on experience of being in the world with youth and getting a feeling of satisfaction from the work. They came to be youth workers because being in relationship with youth brought a sense of satisfaction; they were making a difference in someone's life. They saw potential in these youth that others did not see and realized that they could make a difference; this is the way that the journey into youth work often starts.

We know that some people just seem to have a "knack" for developing relationships with others. It is the wizardry that *Urban Sanctuaries* (McLaughlin, Irby and Langman, 2001, p.95) talks about. So what is it that these people do? What is the key? Recently, Dr. Robert Granger from the W.T. Grant Foundation gave a lecture at the University of Minnesota about work that is being conducted by the Forum for Youth Investment to evaluate what happens at the point of service in youth programs. What happens in the space where the youth worker interacts with youth? They are discovering that some programs are better than others because of who that youth worker is and how that youth worker interacts with the youth in successful programs.

<http://www1.extension.umn.edu/youth/training-events/events/effective-best->

[practices.html](#)) Perhaps “point of service” is the juncture where creation of trusting relationships begin.

Again we come back to the question, “What is it that some youth workers do when they are in the world with youth that allows youth to grow and thrive. My research involved a hermeneutical phenomenological study exploring the experience of urban youth workers in order to begin to understand the phenomenon of relationships in urban youth work. My primary question was: “What is the experience of being in relationship with youth in the urban context and what can we learn from listening to the voices of the youth workers”?

Youth Work as a Practice

Youth work has only been identified as a craft or practice in the United States over the last 20 years (Baizerman, 1995). The conversations about youth work practice came about at the same time that positive youth development began to emerge as a field in the 1990’s. This is not to say that youth work was a new idea. Its history and roots go back to Victorian England with the emergence of boys and girls clubs opened to keep older youth off the streets (Davies, 2009). At the same time that positive youth development was becoming a way of talking about how to program for youth, attention was beginning to be paid to the staff involved in youth programming and the term youth worker began to be applied to the staff (Lerner, 2005).

Youth work practice involves a delicate balance of forging authentic relationships with youth while keeping appropriate boundaries and maintaining the adult role (Ahlstrom, Yohalem and Pittman, 2008)). My own youth work experience in the urban context has led me to believe that relationships may be more important than the activities

that youth become involved in. The activities maybe the tool, but the relationship may be the transforming element for both the youth and the youth worker.

Over the years youth work has been discussed and researched as part of social work, adolescent studies, group work, community education, social education, popular education and informal education just to name a few of the contexts where youth work is employed (Baizerman, M. 2000; Jeffs and Smith, 1996, Davies, B 2009, and Skott-Myhre, 2005). Bernard Davies in his presentation to the European Commission-Council on Europe (EU-CoE Youth Partnership, *Defined by History: Youth work in the UK* (2009) responds to an ongoing question, “Why can’t youth workers define what they do more clearly- and more credibly”? This is one of the issues that keep youth workers from being able to articulate how they do their practice. Davies believes that it has been defined over the last 150 years or so and the definitions have been refined and will always be revised because “in all human endeavors of this kind [here youth work] contradiction, debate and revision are permanent features, with the product inevitably problematic and contested, never ‘final’” (2009, para. 1-2). Mark Smith (1999, 2002) also sees youth work as always in revision “defined as activities that intentionally seek to impact young people. This is primarily a set of loosely affiliated activities which have been defined, redefined, examined and reinvented in subsequent generations” (Smith1999, 2002). Davies and Smith are getting at the real dilemma for youth work practice which is that it is ever morphing as youth workers learn more from youth and themselves about how to do practice. Youth work practice becomes a co-creation of life experiences and understanding between the youth and the youth worker.

My research focused on the practice of youth work in the urban youth workers and how the youth worker experiences this co-creation of relationship. In the following pages, I will describe the various definitions, key issues (Key issues in youth work practice are identity and definition, training and support of youth workers and having a voice in the setting policy around youth work.), common traits and challenges of youth work practice and the world of youth work. As these areas are explored I will be focus on how trusting, authentic, relationships always rise to the top of the list as the first and perhaps most important component of good youth work practice.

First I will define key concepts, and then I will walk through a brief history of youth work and look at the practice of youth workers in everyday life.

Key concepts and definitions in youth work.

The key concepts to be defined for the purposes of this research project were youth development (the knowledge base), youth work (the practice), and the youth worker (the person who uses knowledge and experience to carry out the practice). These concepts were chosen because they are the building blocks of the practice of youth work. A fourth concept is the history of youth which shows the early features of what we call good youth work practice. By reviewing the history, I can highlight the early features of youth work that formed the base of youth that is practiced today. I begin with some definitions.

First I took a look at the concept of youth work. In the Oxford English Dictionary the term youth work is not listed. Therefore I searched for the words youth and work.

The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) (1989 ed.) defines youth as “The fact or state of being young; youngness, and the time when one is young; the early part or period of life; more specifically, the period from puberty till the attainment of full growth, between childhood and adult age.” and work as “Something that is or was done; what a person does or did; an act, deed, proceeding, business”. Youth as a time when one is young and work as something that results from what a person does becomes youth work as a particular way of doing with people at a particular time of life. But, this does not really tell us what youth work is.

The literature suggests that youth work is creating opportunities, working with young people, an occupation or a social construct. Jeffs and Smith in their book *Informal Education- Conversation, Democracy and Learning* (1996) stated that “youth work is work with young people that is committed to furthering their well-being”. While Michael Baizerman wrote that “Youth work is a process of creating the opportunities for a youth to choose more often about more things in her everyday life and in this way more thoroughly construct herself” (2001, p.1). Baizerman looked at youth work as an occupation (to do), “anthropology of youth in everyday life” and/or to find out the “lived experience” (how a person experiences and understands her world) of being with youth. (1998). Youth work is “not a career in the United States... while it can be elsewhere” (p.12). Another way of looking at youth work comes from England and Europe where youth work can be both social and political. Bernard Davies in a presentation to the EU-CoE youth partnership described youth work as a “social construct whose creation has to be understood in the context of the wider political economic and social conditions in which it is developed” (2008). The EU-CoE youth partnership itself explained youth

work as an opportunity “to provide opportunities for young people to shape their own futures. Youth work is a summary expression for activities with and for young people of a social, cultural, educational or political nature.” (<http://youth-partnership-eu.coe.int/youth-partnership/glossary.html#Y>, retrieved 3/23/11)

Youth work is many things; relationship, recreation, youth centered and interactive. It has been described by various authors in the following ways: “to develop relations with and promote the development of youth during activities such as recreation, civic, job and daily living activities.” (Krueger, 2005); “the relationship is their job” (Rodd and Stewart, 2009); “Youth work, as part of the nonformal learning sector, is the interactive practice of shared teaching and learning that organizes around the needs, interests, aspirations and well-being of young people.” (Madzey-Akale and Walker, 1999); and youth work as “the possibility of revolutionary collaboration between youth and adults” (Skott-Myhre, 2005). Youth work is all of these things; relational, teaching and learning and even revolutionary.

A clear theme that comes up in the United States, England and Europe is the need for “a clear definition or concept of youth work seems to be important (in) getting recognition for and proving the usefulness of youth work” (Vershelden, Coussee, Van De Walle and Williamson, p138). In other words those who research and practice youth work need to be very clear about what is meant by the term youth work regardless of where and in what context it is practiced as well as why it works.

The Youth Worker

The youth worker can be described as doing “social work among young people” (OED, 1989). However that really does not tell us much about whom and what a youth

worker is. Baizerman expanded the definition this way: “Youth worker (ers) refers to a specialized (semi-) profession, professional or not, paid or voluntary, who work directly with young people or indirectly on their behalf in any social domain or organization or group” (2000, p2). The English term for youth worker is “informal educator.” Jeffs and Smith (1996) defined an informal educator “As educators we work with others to create environments for learning. We don’t change people; people change themselves in interaction with others” (p. 9). It is difficult to find a good definition of the term youth worker. Wikipedia refers us back to *infed* a United Kingdom website on informal education and youth work where the youth worker is defined more by the work he does than who he is (http://www.infed.org/archives/nayc/milson_growing.htm).³

Based on the descriptions of youth workers above and for the purposes of this project, the youth worker was defined as a professional or volunteer who works with young people in a relational way to create an environment for a youth to change themselves in interaction with others. Another way to state the definition is that youth workers work in relationship with youth so youth can change and grow as they see fit (Baizerman, 2000, Madzey-Akale and Walker, 1999).

Youth Development

According to the University of Minnesota Extension Service 4-H Center for Youth Development, “Youth development is the process of growing up and developing one's capacities in positive ways. This typically takes place in the context of the family, the peer group, the school, and the neighborhood or community”. (Walker and Dunham,

³ Wikipedia is an informal source of information.

2005). The Center described this process as taking place in youth development organizations where the primary purpose is the “socialization of youth”. In these organizations the curriculum is based on a set of youth needs called the Eight Essential Elements. These needs are to:

- feel a sense of safety and structure
- experience active participation, group membership, and belonging
- develop self-worth achieved through meaningful contribution
- experiment to discover self, gain independence, and gain control over one's life
- develop significant relationships with peers and adults
- discuss conflicting values and formulate their own
- feel the pride and accountability that come with mastery
- expand the capacity to enjoy life and know that success is possible.

Other attributes of youth development are called the “Five Cs”: competence, confidence, positive connections, character and compassion or caring. There is a “Sixth C” that may emerge after a youth possesses these five attributes and that is contribution [to community] (Balsano, 2005, Lerner 2005).

A brief discussion of the evolution of positive youth development (PYD) is helpful here to show how far we have come in our understanding of what youth development can be. “If positive development was discussed in the adolescent development literature – at least prior to the 1990s -- it was implicitly or explicitly regarded as the absence of negative or undesirable behaviors” (Lerner, 2005). Lerner (2005) goes on to say that adolescence was considered a time of “storm and stress”; “a

time to overcome one's beastly life impulses" (2005, p.4). This was the belief at the beginning of the 20th century when the youth ages 12 to 19 began to become the focus of research under the label "adolescence" (2005, p. 5).

A deficit model of youth development

In the 1960's there emerged new research suggesting the "deficit" model was not universally true. "Most young people do not have a stormy second decade of life, the period that most scientists denote as the adolescent period" (2005, p. 6). However it was not until the 1990's that the deficit model of youth development began to move toward a strength based model (Lerner, 2005). This model promoted the idea that youth who had relationships with supportive adults in inviting safe spaces would promote development in positive ways. "The PYD perspective sees all adolescents as having strengths (by virtue at least of their potential for change). The perspective suggests that increases in well-being and thriving are possible for all youth through aligning the strengths of young people...with assets in their social and physical ecology" (2005, p. 33).

The new research in human development accelerated an interest in positive youth development research. "Beginning in the early 1990s, and burgeoning in the first half decade of the twenty-first century, a new vision and vocabulary for discussing young people has emerged. These interests converged in the formulation of a set of ideas that enabled youth to be viewed as resources to be developed and not as problems to be managed" (2005). Given the focus of this research, a thorough review of the literature on the rise of positive youth development will be left for another time.

Smith, M. K. (2003) in his paper *From Youth Work to Youth Development: The new government framework for English youth services* discussed the use of the term youth development this way:

While there is considerable confusion around the term 'youth development' and something of a tendency in the United States for it to be used as a 'catch-all' for various forms of youth-related service (see Delgado, 2002), some fairly distinctive traditions of practice have emerged over the thirty years or so that the term has been in professionalized usage (p6).

Smith suggested a split in England between youth development as being focused on the individual, target services and professionalized youth work with its “relational and convivial nature” (p11). Smith also saw youth development as the redefinition of youth work in England and a return to a more problem based model of youth. The same thing can be said of youth development in the United States that in spite of the advancements in the way we look at youth development as a positive youth centered model, major funding still goes to programs that focus on the deficit model of adolescence. (Lerner, 2005)

Youth development is relevant to the discussion of youth work practice because so much of what we call youth work in the United States is done inside of youth development organizations such as 4-H, Scouting and The Boys and Girls clubs as well as small nonprofit community and faith based organizations (Lerner, 2005). These are voluntary organizations as opposed to targeted services where youth are mandated to attend a group or class to deal with their particular issues or needs.

Karen Pittman in a 1999 interview noted that “The formula for healthy youth development, as she [Pittman] defines it now, is being surrounded by people with high

expectations who are committed to your well-being. And having the stamina to be different” (p.1). Pittman goes on to say that youth do not grow up in programs, they grow up in neighborhoods and that youth do youth development. In looking at programs, she stated, "I realized that one of the things we do in this country, to the point of obsession, is package these things into programs" (2009).

Both Lerner and Pittman pointed out that “community-level efforts” may be the better fit for youth development programs. “The rationale is hypothesized that this relationship emerges due to what he [Lerner] calls the ‘Big Three’ features of optimal youth development programs, i.e., positive and sustained [for at least one year; Rhodes, 2002] adult-youth relationships; skill building activities; and opportunities to use these skills by participating in, and leading, community-based activities” (2005). There are implications in these definitions of youth development for how youth work practice might move forward whether in youth development programs or more community based youth work. It also points to the importance of relational aspect in good youth work practice whether voluntary or mandated. Youth need to be surrounded by caring adults who are willing to walk with them on their journey through adolescence.

A Brief History of Youth Work

A fourth concept is the history of youth work. By reviewing the history I can highlight the early features of good youth work practice. To understand the common threads of practice in youth work that have been pointed to over the years, this section gives a brief overview of history of youth work using the research that Bernard Davies

(2008) has done in England. Davies has written extensively on the topic of the history of youth work and is well respected in England and Europe for his understanding of youth work. In a search for a broad perspective concerning the history of youth work in various countries, it was difficult to find anything as specific as the work of Davies (Verschelden et al, 2008).

Many of the youth organizations that began in England in 150 years ago or so, such as, the YMCA, have migrated to the United States and other countries (Verschelden et al, 2008). Although terms and ways of practice differ between the US and England, there are many similarities in the ebb and flow of how youth work is practiced in both countries. For example, in the previous section both Lerner (2005) and Smith (2003) noted that starting in the 1990s positive youth development began to have an impact on how youth work is practiced.

Davies(2008) explained that in England, there were three landmark periods where youth work practice changed because of changing political and social priorities: The late 1800s to the early 1900s; the period of 1939 to the 1960s and the period since 1997 (para. 4). The time frame of history for the purposes of this study was the early history; the late 1800s to the early 1900s.

In England, youth work can be traced back to the mid-19th century with philanthropic organizations providing clubs for boys and young men and girls and young women (Davies, 2008, para. 8). Even before this period there were networks of youth led clubs and in 1844 the beginning of the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) was considered the first "National Voluntary Youth Organization" (para. 10).

The key features of these groups were: they were youth led; provided alternate ways of learning and a varied educational practice, and youth were learning from people they knew. This was referred to as the “indigenous educational traditions”. This work was also cross-educational (Davies, 2008, para. 11- 14). These were the beginning elements of youth work pedagogy and features such as listed above are still in use today in England (para. 16). Davies (2008) quotes Richard Johnson, a historian, who describes this as an endorsement of “reasonable adult behavior towards children[that] mirrors the long-standing youth work assumption that adults will seek respectful relationships with youth people rather than dominate them” (para. 16). By the late nineteenth century voluntary local clubs such as Boys Scouts and Girl Guides developed across England and migrated to the United States in 1910 and 1912 respectively (Davies, 2008, para. 27, <http://www.scouting.org/scoutsources/CubScouts/Parents/About/history.aspx>, and <http://www.main.org/gsusa/history.ht>). The goals of these clubs were to improve young people’s lives and provide a moral compass for youth (working lads and factory girls) who would otherwise not be using their leisure time wisely (Davies, 2008, para. 28).

There was another reason for the focus on working with youth. Here is an often quoted statement from the 1870s; “If we in the Church of England do not deal with the masses, the masses will deal with us. [Quoted in Davies and Gibson, 1967:38] (Davies, 2008, para. 35).

Davies (2008) suggested that the work of these early youth service pioneers set the tone for “defining the core features of a practice with young people which distinguishes it from other approaches”. These core features include:

- Young people would choose to attend voluntarily.

- Education would occur through leisure time activities that youth ask for.
- Building of relationships would occur between adults and youth (youth workers and youth know and understand each other).
- Participation in self-government; that is the youth would lead the activities.
- There would be a recognition of the need for social friendship groups (the importance of peer relationships).

Here were the beginnings of youth work practice that have been reworked and redefined over the last 150 years. Why is the history of youth work important if it is constantly being redefined? Davies (2008) proposed that “youth work is a social construct whose creation has to be understood in the context of the wider political, economic and social condition in which it developed” (Davies, 2008, para. 4). Youth work is contingent on what arena it is practiced in, what context it is practiced in and the time frame in which it is practiced.

Verschelden et. al. (2008) also used Davies core features in their report, *History of youth work in Europe and its relevance for youth policy today*. They stated that Davies’s words are the most “explicit in defining youth work as a distinct practice in society” (p.138). Although youth work is often included in social work, adolescent psychology and human/youth development, it can be seen as a separate practice and perhaps this will help youth workers began to articulate the importance of the work that they do.

The Key Tensions and Dilemmas in English Youth Service

Before leaving this section, it is important to give attention to the four key “tensions and dilemmas” (key issues) that have characterized the history of the English youth service. Davies cites the core features of good youth work practice, but these tensions and dilemmas can be barriers to creating good youth work practice.

- Universalism vs. selectivity (whether government services should be provided for all youth, or targeted to the nation’s “losers”);
- Education vs. rescue (whether to help youth realize untapped talent and potential, or to rescue them from their inadequacies and divert them from failure);
- Professionalism vs. volunteerism (integrating the volunteer traditions that prevailed in the earliest youth work with the professionalism that grew from the youth work training and bureaucracies promoted through state sponsorship); and,
- Voluntary vs. state sponsorship (whether services to youth should, after all, be provided by the private sector or directly by the state). Erickson (2000)

Although this was not the focus of this research, these tensions and dilemmas come into play when policy makers and others decide what they will see as good or best practices in youth work and what the priorities will be in the education of the youth worker.

In summary although social practices and politics have created change over the last 100 years or so, the key features of working with youth remain viable. Youth need to have a voice, have alternate ways of learning, a varied educational practice and youth are learning from people they know and trust.

Practice of Youth Work in the urban context

Youth work plays out differently depending on the youth and the context they are coming from, and whether the work is based on voluntary engagement or targeted programs. Verscheden et. al. (2008) explained it this way, “Youth work is a contingent practice. The quest for more comparability seems paradoxical, but it must be possible to have some broad lines to guide discussion” (p. 10). Youth work practice is contingent because it happens in many settings, informal and non-formal, street work and out of school time and in youth organizations. It is dependent on the context of each setting. The core features listed in the previous section are true across the sectors of youth work.

Baizerman (1995) talked about youth work praxis in the service of positive youth development and spoke to the issue of youth work not being one practice, but a family of practices which include:

- An orientation towards the healthy development of youth
- Co-creating the work
- Co-creating a community based moral compact with youth
- Developing with youth and communities the capacities for continuing the work.

This work happens in everyday life and because it is in the present and on-going is never complete. The practice involves working with youth in relation to all their various groups, roles and what it means to be a particular youth. Baizerman (1995) was speaking of urban street youth work, but he refers to the many forms of youth work practice worldwide and that this must be accepted and asks that we do not accept just one model.

Youth work practice is a call and response relationship between a youth, a youth worker and a community (1995).

Madzey-Akale and Walker (1999) pointed out that in good practice “youth work is people work”: that relationship building skills are important, that there is a commitment to working with youth, and that youth workers need skills and knowledge in a wide variety of areas. Their study involved youth work professionals who practiced inside of youth development programs. Wherever youth work is practiced, the importance of relationship between youth and adults always rises to the top of the list of good practice skills.

The Notion of High Quality Youth Work Practice.

Another approach that is gaining strength in Minnesota and across the United States is high quality youth work practice. Walker, Gran and Moore (2009) put forth a framework that focuses on the interaction between youth worker expertise (relationship building and critical thinking); Engaged youth (including youth voice and leadership opportunities); and quality program features (at the point of service) to create quality youth work practice. They saw the use of non-formal learning which usually takes place in structured programs as more likely to be of high quality. They considered informal learning as being centered more in home and family. Walker et al (2009) did not dismiss the importance of informal learning, but pointed out that the quality non-formal structured approach is the best support for academic and social learning. “The non-formal learning sector sponsors intentional learner-centered opportunities for young people that are by design voluntarily undertaken, clearly focused, appropriately structured, highly interactive and typically include a healthy dose of fun” (p. 3).

There are other ways to view nonformal and informal learning. Jeffs and Smith (1996) understood nonformal learning as existing inside of organizations and informal learning as learning from everyday experience, but the lines between the two are blurred because youth workers and youth often “organize educational events” as part of their everyday experience. Jeffs and Smith (1996) used the term informal educator in their discussions, but believe that informal educators put other labels on themselves depending on the group or place where they work. For the purposes of this study the term informal education has been used with the idea that it can be inside of organizations as well as the learning that goes on in everyday life.

Regardless of the labels we put on the practice there is merit to fostering high quality practice and Walker et. al. (2009) showed us the way by stressing the links between strong practitioners, voluntary youth engagement and quality programming. In addition to descriptions of good or quality youth work practice is the promotion of “deliberate program structure, design and delivery” (p. 4) This is an example of the tension that exists in the on-going youth work practitioners’ conversations about whether the practice should be structured or informal.

Mark Krueger (2005) who has interviewed and worked with youth workers over the years understands youth work as improvisation (he uses the analogy of modern dance). He sees the purpose of youth work is to “develop relationships with and promote the development of youth during activities such as recreation, civic, job and daily living activities” (Krueger, 2005, p.21). Youth work is not just about structure and delivery. Youth workers need wide experience with a variety of ways of being and working with youth in order to respond to their needs whether they are on the street or in a program.

Wilson-Ahlstrom, Yohalem, and Pittman (2008) suggest that youth work practice “involves a range of judgments and behaviors that must be weighed and juggled simultaneously in order for staff to be effective” (p, 1). The kind of youth work that Krueger is talking about is what we see in experienced urban youth workers. The themes Krueger discusses are crucial to good youth work practice in urban settings.

They are:

- Presence- the ability to show up, bring self to the moment and the ability to “mirror” back one’s experience of youth giving the message, “I am here and will go with you”.
- Rhythmic Interaction- the ability to form human connections, and move in and out of synch.
- Meaning making- understanding the youth’s contextual reality, the search for a mutual reality, by acting with purpose (intentionality).
- Atmosphere-tone, mood, space/place, the environment (Krueger, 2005, p. 26-28).

These are the common threads between working with youth in everyday life (in the world of youth) and youth working with adults. It is not just about youth or youth worker, but about youth and youth worker in a particular context; in this case urban settings. We can’t have the conversation about youth without the youth worker and vice versa (the reciprocal relationship). Youth work as modern jazz, or an art form.

Wilson et al (2008) examined a number of elements in youth work practice and suggested that the research is building a “powerful argument” for making relationship building and a relationship practice a priority in youth work. They go on to say that the

more experienced youth workers can respond to dilemmas in competent ways (the modern dance analogy), but the importance of understanding the fundamental relationship they need to have with youth comes first. Their key elements include: getting the relationship right, treating youth with respect, and knowing what the youth worker herself believes about youth. Baizerman (2001) called this being self-aware of her own biography so she knows how she will view the world (in this case the world of youth). Charles (2000) in his article on working with adolescent sex offenders believes that “the most powerful and influential work with these young people...the day to day modeling, support and teaching moments...is where the real change occurs. At the core of all our interactions was the belief that relationship was the key to change”. Rodd and Stewart (2009) stated that “Good relationships with young people are central to effective youth work”, and that programs come and go but relationship is the constant. They quote a youth worker, “the relationship is the tool, it is my workplace, if I don’t have the relationship I don’t have much” (p.5).

Research and observation of youth work practice over the last twenty years nationally and internationally have shown us the components of good practice. Bruce, Boyce, Campbell, Harrington, Major and Williams (2009) found these components to be: Connectivity (relationship based, sustainable); the idea of long term relationships. A strength based approach (youth respected for what they bring to the table); Capacity building (for staff and youth); an opportunity to build new skills. The last component is contextual and systemic considerations; how youth development/youth work is shaped by the big picture, social, political and economic.

Again it is not just that a relationship is created between youth and youth worker, it must also be a shared learning relationship built on trust and a willingness to explore new ways of understanding each other and the world. Over and over in the research this notion of “reciprocal learning” through relationship comes to the foreground of the discussion of good practice. And this all takes time, “you don’t go straight to the core, but slowly peel back to discover each layer” (Rodd and Steward, 2009, p. 9). The question is: If relationship in good youth work practice is highly important, then where does the youth worker learn this vital skill?

Training and support of youth work practitioners

Another component of good youth work practice is experienced and skilled youth workers. Over the last 20 years there has been an ongoing discussion locally, nationally and internationally about how to educate youth work practitioners. In Minnesota, there is a Youth Work Institute at the University of Minnesota; nationally there is the Building Exemplary Systems for Training (BEST) initiative, a project of Health Resources in Action; and in Europe the EU-CoE youth partnership trains youth workers from several countries. The education ranges from workshops to conferences to full-fledged certificate or degree programs. Questions that arise around the issue of education are: What does good youth work education look like? What purpose does it serve, and who should deliver it? If the notion of relationship being a key quality in good youth work practice, are we educating youth workers in the skill of relationship development?

A key issue in youth work practice is the lack of education provided for youth workers and the lack of ongoing support through good supervision and professional development opportunities. According to *Unpacking Youth Work Practice* (2008), “In

contrast to other professions and other countries, U.S. youth workers are too frequently recruited quickly and ‘dropped’ into situations without adequate preparation or supervision”. This leads to high turnover and burnout for many potentially promising youth workers.

According to Evans, Sicafuse, Killian, Davidson, and Loesch-Griffin (2009) “Youth workers need adequate training and experience in addressing the complex and varied needs of youth. They go on to say that good training is a predictor of good retention and reduces “burnout” (p.36). Baizerman (2001) stated, “Youth work education and training must focus on how to learn about youth from youth in *their* terms, so that the youth worker can struggle with accepting them *on* their terms” (p. 36). These are not incompatible ideas, but looking at training from different angles.

Another reason to train is the idea that a well-trained, experienced youth worker can respond to dilemmas as mentioned previously. A varied set of experiences with youth and on-going professional development gives the youth worker the ability to think “on their feet”. This goes back to the previous statements about youth work being like modern dance or jazz; the ability to improvise in the moment.

What are youth workers looking for in training? Evans et al (2009) in their study on youth work professional development found that youth workers interests varied depending on whether they worked with urban, suburban or rural youth when it came to critical issues of youth, but were similar in seeing the need for professional development that improved their knowledge and skills. Evans et al (2009) showed that youth workers are interested in teach from other youth workers who have more experience and interacting with youth workers across sectors of youth work; formal and informal. Youth

workers also want to learn from youth because youth know best about youth (Walker and Madzey-Akale, 1999). Youth workers want and need opportunities to dialogue with each other around youth work practice.

Another issue in youth work practice is the lack of recognition of the work as a real career that requires expertise. Evans et al (2009) identified the advancing of professional development opportunities for youth workers as the key to promoting the youth work profession and potentially raising compensation, wages and recognition.

Barriers to training for youth workers include: finding affordable trainings, youth worker availability and the varying needs and interests of youth workers. Evans et al (2009) suggested a collaborative approach where agencies come together in creative ways to provide trainings for their staff.

There is an on-going debate among youth workers nationally and internationally about the issue of being a professional. Youth worker who would like to professionalize the field see that retention of youth workers would be higher and would make youth workers more accountable for their actions and their own professional development. For others it would put distance between themselves and the youth they work with. There would also be the question of how people become accredited and who gets to decide what the accreditation would be (Madzey-Akale and Walker, 1999).

Summary of the State of Youth Work

Youth work has only been identified as a craft or practice (Baizerman, 1995) in the United States over the last 20 years. There is a growing body of research on the practice of youth work. It is practiced in a variety of settings from formal community

organizations such as 4-H, Girls Scouts or faith based organizations to detached street workers. It is practiced in urban, suburban and rural contexts. It can be voluntary or prescribed. It has been discussed and practiced as part of social work, adolescent studies, groups work, community education, social education, popular education and formal education just to name a few of the contexts in which youth work is employed (Baizerman, M. 2000; Jeffs and Smith, 1996; Davies, B. 2009; and Skott-Myre 2005).

Youth work practice has a history and roots that go back to Victorian England and over the years has evolved over the years, but one constant is the need for youth workers to establish trusting relationships with youth in order to support the youth on their path to adulthood. Over the years there has been an attempt to have a clear definition of youth work and what a youth worker is. It has become important to be clear about these definitions if the practice of youth work and the youth workers themselves are to be taken seriously. For the purposes of this study youth workers were defined as a professional or volunteer who works with young people in a relational way to create an environment for a youth to change and grow as they see fit.

Youth Development is defined as “the process of growing up and developing one’s capacities in positive ways”. This research study is an attempt to reveal how experienced or “expert” youth workers conduct themselves in this world of youth and what are the ways in which they connect with youth. It typically takes place in the context of family, the peer group, the school and the neighborhood or community” (Walker and Dunham, 2005).

Over the years the youth development philosophy has changed from a deficit model where the focus was on deviant behaviors to a more positive community strength based

model. Youth begin to be viewed as resources to be developed versus problems to be managed.

The history of youth work beginning in England in the 1800's was discussed. Although terms and ways of practice differ between the US and England, there are many similarities in the ebb and flow of how youth work is practiced in both countries

Youth work is practiced in many settings and this research study focused on Urban Youth Work. Good youth work practice is similar among settings, but urban youth work can be a harsh context to work in and the youth worker needs to be focused on the youth in a particular way because, "Kids can walk around trouble, if there is a place to walk to and someone to walk with" (McLaughlin, et al, 2001)

The emergence of the high quality youth work practice was discussed where a structured approach is considered best for academic and social learning. We looked briefly at nonformal and informal learning and the differences between the two approaches. Training and support of youth workers is an ongoing discussion among youth work practitioners. Questions arise around the issue of what kind of education is best; what purpose it serves and who should deliver it. A debate has arisen around the idea of professionalizing the youth work field. Would this interfere with the relationships between youth and the youth worker? Who would decide what accreditation would look like?

Now we move on two chapter two where we will review the literature on youth workers and what research is telling us about good youth work practice and the nature of expertise.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

In this chapter I review literature from two different areas. As I was preparing to do my research, I decided not only look at the importance of relationship in good youth work practice, but to look at the literature around the notion of expertise. My interest in the importance of relationship stems from many years of youth work practice, conversations with youth workers and observations. I saw relationship as the key ingredient to a strong youth work practice. Through education and in depth experience working directly with youth, a youth worker becomes an expert in their field, but what does it mean to be an expert in a person's work? How would an expert describe their expertise? Part of understanding expertise is seeing it in action and part is listening to the stories an expert practitioner tells us (Benner, Tanner and Chesla, 1996, p. xvii). This idea will be discussed more fully in chapter 3. This literature review looked at the importance of creating trusting relationships with youth; what youth are looking for in positive relationships and what roles adults assume as they build relationships. Then we review what expertise looks like and how expert practitioners talk about their work.

The Concept of “Relationship”

To begin with it is useful to look at the dictionary definition of the concept of “relationship”. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) (2011) defines “relationship in two ways; first it is “The state or fact of being related; the way in which two things are connected; a connection, an association. Also: kinship”. Second, it is “A connection formed between two or more people or groups based on social interactions and mutual goals, interests, or feelings.” We see that relationships are ways of being connected through family, (“kinship”) or associations with two or more people who share “mutual

goals, interests or feelings” (OED, 2011). The second definition could be applied to youth work and to the non-parental relationships with caring adults; relationships that happen in programs or in community in non-formal ways and provide a different level of support (Grossman and Bulle, 2006). What does this mean in relation to the practice of youth work? Relationships are the key to creating a positive experience for the youth that come into contact with the youth worker and how youth workers learn the skills of relationship building is the key to a successful practice (Krueger, 2005). First we will look at the importance of relationship in youth work practice and then we will look at the notion of expertise.

Relationships in Youth Work Practice

The parent-child relationship (kinship) is the first important relationship in life and continues to be throughout childhood and adolescence (Walker, 2011). However for the purposes of this study, the focus was on the second notion of relationship to examine what the literature tells us about the non-parental relationships in youth work that youth and adults form together outside of the family. Non-parental relationships between youth and adults come into play throughout social work, youth development programs and in the community (Mcleod, 2010 Walker, 2011).

In youth work practice relationships may take many forms; teacher, mentor, friend or parent depending on the context (school, program, community,) where the work is being done (urban or rural) and what youth need (Walker, 2011). The literature review on relationships focuses on four research studies looking at ways of being in relationship from four different contexts; social work, apprenticeship programs,

mentoring programs and youth development. I chose these four contexts to show how across the various ways that adults interact with youth the importance of relationships stand out. Although the staff in these four areas may not be called youth workers, they are creating or building relationships with youth and the qualities used to describe these relationships look similar in each context. The qualities most often named were: authenticity, empathy, friendship, being an equal, having fun, being reliable and consistent. The criteria used to select the studies were: research on adult/youth relationships, looking at the qualities that created strong relationships, what youth looked for in relationships with adults and the context in which these relationships might be formed.

Relationships in Social Work

First I looked at the role of supportive relationships in social work. This is a relatively new way of looking at a social worker's role while working with youth. Alison McLeod (2010) in her phenomenological research study in Northern England on what youth (ages 9-18) thought made a good social worker questioned whether it was possible for social workers to be a "friend and an equal" when keeping appropriate boundaries was a hallmark of the work. According to McLeod there is a "consensus" (p. 2) growing in social work that strong, stable relationships promote good outcomes for youth in care systems. The question is what should be the nature of the relationship? How can you keep appropriate boundaries required in the social work profession and at the same time listen to youth and take account of their views on life? McLeod conducted in-depth

interviews with 11 social workers and 11 youth. In this research article she focused on the data provided by the youth

While examining possible themes, McLeod (2010) found that youth overall did not have positive things to say about their experiences in care, however, they did talk about the relationships with their workers in a positive light. She did not ask the youth a specific question about relationships with social workers in the interviews, but in answering questions about the experience of being in care the youth often talked about their relationship with the social worker. McLeod was able to draw out the themes through close examination of the data. The youth who saw social workers in a positive light described them as allies that helped them “survive in a hostile environment” (p 4.); while youth who had negative experiences with social worker looked at them as unreliable and unavailable. Two themes in relationship emerged from the data; being a “friend” and being an “equal” (p. 1). McLeod found that all the youth used similar words to describe the qualities that made for a good social worker who was seen as a “friend and an equal.” When she analyzed what youth meant when calling a social worker a friend and an equal, they were really describing what a good social work practice was like.

The youth saw a friend as someone who got to know you as person, not just as a client, and treated you with respect. A good social worker was reliable (being there when they said they would be) and honest with you even when it was uncomfortable. They used the word “equality” (p 6.) to describe someone who treated you with respect and did not talk down to you. They saw it as an attitude rather than the idea that the social

worker was on the same level with them. Based on what the youth told McLeod the ideal social worker is:

Accessible, trustworthy and reliable; s/he is sociable and listens; s/he offers effective practical and emotional support; perhaps most crucially, good social workers are fair, respect children as autonomous individuals and do not abuse their position of power. In the children's terms, this ideal worker is 'like a friend' and 'treats you as an equal' (p. 7).

McLeod (2010) stated that supportive relationships help youth develop a sense of optimism and that consistent long term relationships contribute to better long term outcomes. When McLeod looked at what youth meant by the terms "friend" and "equal", it was clear that supportive/friendly relationships "far from being a professional impossibility, can thus be seen to be consistent with social work values" (p. 13).

McLeod's research has important implications for how social work practice might look in the future. However, it would be important to know what the social workers would have contributed to the conversation. What the youth in care described as good qualities in a social work relationship relates to what good youth work relationships are all about as we will see in the next study.

Multiple Roles of Youth Workers

While McLeod (2010) looked at what youth identified as a good social work relationship, Kathrine Walker (2011) in her qualitative study on the multiple roles in youth work practice drew from social role theory and developmental theory to examine the roles that program leaders (youth workers) used to develop sustained relationships

with youth in various school and community based programs. Social role theory suggests that all roles involve reciprocal relationships and developmental role theory tells us “that different types of role partners may help youth develop in different ways” (p.3). Walker stated: “they [youth workers] have a portfolio of role relationships with youth” (p. 2). A portfolio of role relationships means knowing when to be in the “role” of a friend, parent, social worker, etc. Zeldin, Larson, Camino, and O’Conner (2005) suggested “that the ability to balance the different roles they create is the most important skill in the art of sustaining relationships with youth” (P. 3).

Walker (2011) used the data gathered from high school youth and interviewed adults to determine the kinds of relationship roles the youth workers employed in their work. The participants came from urban, small cities and rural areas in a variety of programs. Following are the multiple roles and the key relationship qualities that youth workers used to build sustainable relationships with the youth in their programs.

- Friend: Qualities included, having fun, spending time together, mutual regard, and respect and sharing similar interests. There is an understanding by the youth that although there is a friendship quality to the relationship the program leader is still staff, but the qualities of friendship helped to build trust. In other words, they were not friends in the traditional sense (p. 8).
- Parent: Qualities included the emotional support and closeness of parents, the authority and discipline, but not with same intensity as parents. They were like a “second parent”, but still the program leader (p. 9).
- Mentor: Youth described the youth workers as providing emotional support, guidance, wisdom, sponsorship, and advocacy. They are older and wiser (p. 11).

- Teacher: In this role program leaders provided more instructional than emotional support. They had more intentional learning objectives. However, as with the parent role the teacher role was more “like” a teacher, but more personal and less prescriptive (p. 12, 13).
- Boss: While in the role of boss, the program leader provided supervision, direction and accountability, but also provided support in learning how to do the job well. The youth recognized the power difference, but were “ok” with it because they trusted the program leader (p. 13).

This research suggested that the versatility of using multiple roles in different contexts to establish relationships in youth work practice can be an effective strategy in working with youth over time. Youth seem to understand that these roles were “like” yet “different” than the real parent, etc. She concluded “The findings suggested that by creating trust, being responsive and being consistent, the program leader can balance... multiple roles” (p. 17). However, this is a strategy that comes with experience as described later when the review of “expertise” is discussed. Walker’s research showed that inexperienced youth workers were not able to “switch roles” (p. 17) well and lost trust with the youth. Also, experience helps the youth worker “nuance” the roles to fit the situation of being “parent” or “boss” like, but also keeping trust (p. 16). Here is where the importance of having experienced or seasoned youth workers working with youth shows itself.

Relationships are the key to quality youth work and the ability of youth workers to build sustainable relationships over time. To do this it requires a large tool box of

strategies. Youth workers are also in a unique position because they are in what Walker (2011) calls the “intermediate zone” (p. 19) between teacher, boss and parent. They have the opportunity to build trusting, clear and consistent relationships in a unique way with youth. This study included interviews with youth workers to learn how they came to use these strategies over time. This study did not suggest ways in which youth workers might learn to balance these multiple roles.

The previous section looked at the qualities that make a good social worker and how the use of multiple roles as a youth worker can help build effective, sustainable relationships. The following section looks at a particular form of relationship, mentoring, as a way of reaching youth in a non-formal setting. The next study also alluded to the idea of mentors playing multiple roles.

Mentoring

Renee Spencer in her research project, *Understanding the Mentoring Process between Adolescents and Adults* (2006) used relational theories as a guide to understanding “the processes at work in closer, more enduring mentoring relationships” (p. 5) where there were likely to be positive outcomes for the youth. Spencer used a qualitative interview study with mentors and their mentees to explore the nature of their experiences and understand the nature of the relationships. Case managers from a Big Brothers and Big Sisters Organization choose the pairs and the participants whom had been in a mentoring relationship for at least a year. This length is considered as a significant aspect of a successful relationship. Consistent contact over a period of time allows the youth and adult to get to know each other and become comfortable in the relationship.

Spencer (2006) used several indicators defined by relational theories for strong relationships: authenticity, empathy, mutuality, collaboration, pleasurable experiences and shared meanings. Spencer found through her analysis of the data from the interviews that the participants in their conversations were able to attribute the success of their relationship to the core indicators mentioned above. Authenticity and empathy were important in the early stages of the relationships. The participants needed to learn how to be honest with each other; when mentors could understand the issues that the youth were dealing with then they could begin to work together in a natural way (collaboration); to be in a relationship that allowed for shared meaning and pleasurable experiences. The participants used terms like “working together”, “we enjoy each other”, “he had to be real with me” and other ways of describing the core processes in play in the mutual relationships (Spencer, 2006). Adults and youth can move to a more organic relationship as time goes by and evolve to a relationship based on wanting to be together rather than an obligation. Spencer (2006) argued that the mentoring relationships depended on the commitment of both the youth and the adult; although the adult might have to prove themselves first in order to build trust and help the relationship become one of equals working together (p. 24, 25).

Another aspect for the mentors was the need to play multiple roles such as teacher or friend as well as mentor; similar to what Walker (2011) suggested as ways youth workers meet the many needs of youth. This research study highlighted what good mentoring relationships can do for youth and what contributes to the development of these positive relationships. A limitation of this research was not hearing from the youth and adults who did not succeed in developing sustainable relationships. Managers of

mentoring programs might learn strategies that would help them give more support to beginning mentoring relationships.

The notion that mentoring relationships become more organic over time brings in another view of mentoring relationships described in a study in Australia. In a study of 106 young male apprentices conducted in Australia, Tim Corney and Karin du Plessis (2010) examined the existence of mentoring relationships with “significant others” (p. 1) and the potential impact the relationships might have on the successful completion of apprenticeships. They define “significant other” as “anyone who plays a supportive or constructively significant role in a person’s life” (p. 2). Corney and du Plessis found this area of mentoring unexplored and decided to research the nature of mentoring relationships with significant others. A questionnaire given during an educational session and was anonymous and voluntary. If participants wanted to discuss the nature of the topic in private, they were allowed to do so. The findings supported the idea that existing natural or organic relationships with significant others may be more useful in successful career-related outcomes for older youth and young adults than formal/structured mentoring relationships.

Apprentices viewed the psycho-social aspect of their mentoring relationships as the most valuable and had a number of these informal personal relationships. Corney and duPlessis (2011) included: parents, close friends, teachers, employers and co-workers. It appeared that they relied on a number of people in their lives as a support network. They concluded that young people have a high need for “friendship” and that the findings supported the fostering of mentoring relationships with “significant others” (p. 7) and it would be useful to provide structured and formal support for these relationships. They

stated, “facilitating and strengthening young workers ties to existing support networks” (p. 7) will enhance their psychological health and success in their work.

This research project was small in scale, but it did point to the idea that young people need many kinds of relationships in their lives including those they choose themselves. There is a place for both formal and informal mentoring relationships. A limitation of this study is not going beyond the questionnaire and interviewing the apprentices to hear their stories about these relationships. Another weakness is leaving out female apprentices. How would their contributions enhance or change the outcome of the study?

The Instrumental Relationship

Robert Halpern (2005) looked at relationships from a youth development stance in an apprenticeship program in an urban setting. He singled out a particular kind of relationship that works well with older youth; the instrumental relationship. This type of relationship is developed indirectly with the focus being on the task or project and the adult treating the youth “matter of factly” (P. 5). Halpern’s (2005) research in an after school program in urban Chicago which focused on 20 week apprenticeships for high school students. This research gives us a view of a relationship model built around gaining expertise rather than a youth development/youth work model. The instructors in this program had expertise in a particular craft, but no professional training in youth development; however, they were effective in supporting the development of the youth.

Why was this true? Halpern (2005) argued that older youth sometimes need a relationship with an adult who can teach specific skills and expertise; for example in an apprenticeship setting. In an instrumental relationship youth are taken seriously and the

staff are not focused on the need to “fix” them but to help them develop specific skills. For adolescents and for urban youth in particular the instrumental relationship where the focus is on the work can be an indirect route to youth development work and be a highly successful strategy. Halpern stated, “the consequences of accumulated hurts and insults (that urban youth experience) are best addressed indirectly in the context of relationships that are about something else—that is, joint work on a task or project, or in a discipline—and are, in some respects, incidental” (p. 5).

In instrumental relationships the staff focuses on the work rather than the youth. They were working and perhaps talking together and the sometime tedious process (the revising and correcting of a task) of the work created a kind of bond and trust. The youth was being taken seriously because of the work not because of a label such as “inner city youth” (p. 5). This process allowed for incidental discussions around other parts of a person’s life. This kind of “task-focused” (p. 8) problem solving work may help a youth learn to reframe his/her thinking about whom they are and how they can fit into the world (2005). As Halpern concluded: “It has been argued here that instrumentally oriented relationships between adults and youth, in the context of inner-city youth programming, create conditions for reworking, as well as for developing, ‘selfhood’ (p. 8).

It was difficult to pull out the qualities of strong relationships in the discussion of this research. However, it was there. Support was shown through encouraging and suggesting ways of improving the work, Empathy showed in the adult understanding of the youth need to try new things and learn a skill that he had not had access to before. Trust, collaboration and equal status showed in the joint work and shared endeavors as the staff took the youth seriously and they work together to complete a task.

The idea of a youth development approach where staff are focused on the teaching skills such as theater, journalism, visual arts or mixed media has potential, but as Halpern admitted, there is more research to be done. One limitation concerning this article was the vagueness of how the research was done beyond observing the program. How was this carried out? How was data collected?

What Youth Want in a Relationship

There is one other qualitative research study that I reviewed that looked at what youth wanted in a positive relationship with youth. Karen Stroebel (2008) looked at qualities that attracted urban youth to after school settings, specifically in Beacon's programs. Although the research was not focused specifically on relationships, the findings supported the notion of particular qualities, such as, guidance, support, mentoring, keeping confidences and mediating conflict that youth look for in positive relationships with adults. Another interesting fact in this research was the use of youth ethnographers to do field work that could potentially access youth not usually heard from and hear a different perspective (Stroebel, 2008).

Participants in this study were low-income, academically at risk populations of youth in urban areas who were involved in at least one year of programming. This was a qualitative study looking at understanding youth's subjective experiences and meaning making (Stroebel, 2008).

The data revealed three themes that youth found important: safety, relationships (with peers and adults) and opportunities to learn. I focused on the adult relationship findings, but with the understanding that the themes of safety and opportunities to learn are affected by the way adult relationships play out with youth. In this study youth

described good youth/adult relationships qualities as: informal (use of staff first names), staff provided guidance and support, and they appreciated full time staff that was there consistently. They saw adult roles as: mentors (listening, informal, open, trustworthy), confidants (emotional support, can tell secrets, share personal life, equals) and mediators (problem solvers, can deal with “the streets” p. 13-15). Not all staff was seen as supportive; youth voiced disappointment about staff that did not connect and high staff turnover. The idea of the multiple roles (mentor, parent, friend) (Walker, 2011) that youth workers take in relationships with youth were revealed in the qualities that youth are looking for.

A limitation of this research study is the lack of input from the staff in the programs. The youth participating in the study were for the most part regular attendees. Although the youth ethnographers were able to interview some students who did not attend regularly there could have been a greater attempt to reach those students to hear more about why they did not attend on a regular basis and what would bring them back to the program.

Common Threads in Trusting Relationships

In this review of the literature on relationships there are common threads or essential elements that run through the research.

- The importance of the relational process in positive youth/adult relationships. Those processes being:
 - Authenticity (being real or genuine)
 - empathy (understanding the youth perspective)
 - collaboration (working together)

- companionship (supportive, friendship, being like family)

(Spencer, 2006 Mcleod, 2010)
- The use of multiple role relationships to meet youth needs. Youth workers assumed these various roles to meet needs in particular instances (Walker, 2011, Stroebel, 2008))
 - Parent like
 - Friendship
 - Mentorship
 - Teacher like
 - Boss
- The types of relationships that can be built using the core processes and multiple roles. These are also called non parental relationships (Mcleod, 2010 Walker, 2011)
 - Instrumental Relationships
 - Supportive/companionable Relationships
 - Mentoring Relationships. (formal and natural organic)
- Mentoring relationship with significant others. A natural relationship that youth may form with supportive adults in the community. More research needs to be done here, but it is an interesting idea to build on relationships that youth self-select. (Corney and duPlessis, 2010 Halpern, 2005)

The common threads or essential element that are present when youth workers are creating relationships are the tools that experienced youth workers learn over time and are used as needed with specific youth in a specific context.

The Complexity of Youth Work

The work of developing strong relationships with youth is a complex task for youth workers. It is not enough to want to engage or “hang out” with youth and hope for the best. It requires knowledge of how relationships are built, an understanding of what youth want in a relationship with youth workers and an understanding of the context of a particular group of youth. Learning from their experiences is vital to building a strong practice. This work requires a kind of expertise that comes from experience and knowledge of youth development practices.

Working with youth in the urban context requires the same strategies that would be used with any group of youth, but youth workers need to have a clear understanding of the obstacles that urban youth face. Halpern (2005) asked, should this work be done within structured programs or is there a place for naturally occurring healthy youth/ adult relationships as one research study suggested (Corney and du Plessis, 2010)? Youth workers need support and guidance to develop their relationship building skills over time no matter where they carry out their practice.

The research on relationships suggests that youth workers need a kind of expertise based on skills developed over years of experiential practice. How youth workers become “experts” needs to be looked at in order to provide guidance to new youth workers entering the field. The next section of this literature review looked at the notion of expertise. First I looked for research in the youth development discipline, but I found very little information. The area of research on expertise is huge. I expanded my search into other disciplines and found the research on expertise in the medical field, specifically nursing and physician practice. This was the most appropriate because the expertise

discussed in these studies have elements that could be universal to other disciplines working with people. Two of the goals of the research study on nursing reviewed was to “delineate the practical knowledge embedded in expert practice” and to “describe the nature of skill acquisition in critical care nursing practice” (Benner, Tanner and Chesla, 1996, p. xvi). By observing and interviewing nurses about their everyday experiences the researchers were able to tease out some essential understandings of what it means to be an “expert.” This research study can inform us about what expertise looks like when working with people in vulnerable situations where understanding what the context is and when and how to act is crucial to positive outcomes. In Jerome Groopman’s book, *How Doctor’s Think*, as being something learned through “sustained practice” but also by receiving regular feedback on successes and failures. (2007)

Toward the end of my literature search I found a chapter on expertise in *Advancing Youth Work: Current Trends, Critical Questions; edited by Dana Fusco (2012)*. This book brings together contributors who can articulate what exemplary youth workers are currently doing. Chapter four in particular examines the idea of youth work expertise.

The Notion of Expertise in Nursing.

What does it mean to be an expert in a given profession? In the online Oxford Dictionary (OED) (August 2013) an expert is defined as “one whose special knowledge and skill causes him to be regarded as an authority, a specialist”. A person does not just have knowledge, but has developed skills over years of practice that allow him/her to be

seen as an expert. How youth workers become “experts” needs to be looked in order to provide guidance to new youth workers entering the field.

In *Expertise in Nursing Practice* (Benner, Tanner and Chesla, 1996) the researchers looked at “the nature of nurse’s agency” (the ability to act) and how this helped them to understand “existential skills of personal involvement (p. xiii)” knowing when to step in and when to step back in critical situations. They go on to say that this skill, personal involvement or relationship, is essential in gaining nursing expertise. This idea of agency also applies to the notion of youth worker expertise. Youth workers learn to read their youth just as nurses learn to “know their patient” (p. xv).

The research team also stressed the importance of storytelling as a way to get at new understandings. “A story allows for less linearity, more parentheses or asides, and better captures practical clinical reasoning as it occurs in transition” (p. xiv). The stories also help us to see “patterns of meaning and action” (p. xv) that develop over time as a result of experience in practice.

Another term that comes up in this research study is practical knowledge. Baizerman referred to youth work expertise as practical knowledge, Mother’s wit, practical wisdom or Phronesis, rule of thumb and folk knowledge.⁴ The idea that through experiences we gain a sense of how to act based on patterns we see or intuition based on experiences. Benner, Tanner and Chelsa (1996) state that we gloss over this idea in western culture, “that skilled know-how is a form of knowledge in its own right, and not a mere application of knowledge. Experienced clinicians have mastered a kind of knowledge not available from the classroom” (p. xv). We need to make room in any of

⁴ Personal conversation January, 2012

our people based practices for “a progression from principle based practices guided by science, technology and ethics to a response based practice guided by practical knowledge guided by engaged reasoning” (p. xv). Following are the key aspects of the clinical world of expert practice or the large themes of what it means to have expertise according to Benner, Tanner and Chelsa (1996).

Clinical grasp and response-based practice

Getting to know the patient, know the patterns of responses and the immediate demands and concerns of the situation. This also means having “a good clinical grasp” (p. 148). Responding to both clinical and human dimensions.

Embodied know-How

This is a combination that requires a good clinical grasp and the ability for swift action. “Thinking in action is lodged in the body, the hands, the eyes and practiced habitual responses to situations” (p. 152). It includes teamwork, responding with shifting roles and functions depending on the expertise of the staff in the room. It is a well-orchestrated response of thinking and acting.

The Big Picture

Grasping a sense of the whole; the past, present and future situation. Pace and timing as well as pattern recognition. I have seen this pattern before. What does it mean in this situation? Also an understanding of what is going on (peripheral vision) in the room. Do I need to attend to what is going on in the background? Knowing when to intervene.

Seeing the unexpected

Knowing from experience what is to be expected; the when the unexpected happens being able to recognize what is different, what is missing and looking for reasons why. “The little tiny trends” (p. 157). Here is where the expert can utilize their moral agency; taking a stand to say we need to do something different

The second part of this list of aspects is moral agency (the ability to know what is right and wrong). “Moral agency for the expert is relational and situated and constituted by experiential learning in a group of health care practitioners, patients and families. While it is not possible to fully explicate the moral agency of the expert, we can give voice to what we heard and saw in practice” (p. 162) Following are the three major aspects of moral agency that the researchers discovered.

Skill of Involvement

There is an understanding of what the caring relationship is all about. “One must do one’s best, one must be guided by patient responses and desired outcomes learn from inevitable failures” (p. 164). There is an assumption that there is a “right” level of involvement with patients, but according to the researchers, the nurses stories illustrated “there is no context-free “right” level of involvement” (p. 163).

Managing Technology, Preventing Unnecessary Technological Intrusions

Having the experiential wisdom to know when technology is safe and when it is harmful or futile. Nurses talked about “following the bodies lead” (p. 166). Because experts know when to step in and step out, they become the “cultural standard bearers” (p. 165) and pass this knowledge on to others. “Becoming practiced in a field opens one to a kind of conservation based on getting used to the environment and the technologies used” (p. 167). Knowing when to quit is as important as when to use technology.

Working with and through others

Knowing when to go to others with patient concerns. “Recognizing the unexpected” (p. 167) and marshalling others to get the right responses. Knowing “boundaries, limits and possibilities” (p. 168). The work cannot be done in isolation. It requires working with others so the burden is shared and all resources can be brought to bear (p. 168).

These are the key aspects of expert practice as gleaned from the research of Benner, Tanner and Chelsea. They believed that these aspects are transferable to others working with people. They state, “It is impossible to spell out all the implication of any expert practice, just as it is impossible to completely formalize expertise. The most notable implication is that we should study and learn from expert practice” (1996). One aspect that I found interesting was Benner, Tanner and Chelsea stating that “Scientific theories and information become knowledge and judgment only in the hands of skilled practitioners who have the opportunity to clarify and extend general explanations through understanding particular situations” (1996). Again, Benner, Tanner and Chelsea stated, “These nurses take for granted that their work is located in relationship...One must do one’s best, one must be guided by patient responses and desired outcomes, and learn from the inevitable failures” (p. 164). This could translate to youth work practice by saying that the variety of experiences youth workers encounter as they build their practice is as important as their academic knowledge. However it is a combination of experience and caring attention to the work that helps to create expertise.

A Doctors Expertise

Jerome Groopman (2007) tells us that “How a doctor thinks can first be discerned by how he speaks and how he listens” (p. 17). One doctor he interviewed said “If you listen to the patient [hear their story], he is telling you his diagnosis” (p. 16). He goes on to say that in medicine today that technology as important as it is in medical practice has diminished the patient’s story.

Through interviews with physicians and reflecting on his own practice Groopman has come to understand that “keeping an open mind” and asking himself the question, “What is missing” are two key ingredients to making a good diagnosis. He goes on to say “Clinical intuition is a complex sense that becomes refined over years and years of practice”, listening to stories and examining patients and, “most important, remembering when you were wrong” (p. 20). Expertise requires the ability to ask yourself what is wrong with this picture.

Groopman talked about how doctors learn to think and act simultaneously. They need to learn to recognize patterns (p. 39), understand social context and be careful of stereotypes (p. 92) particularly in crisis situations. He stated, “Medical care...is a human interaction between patient and doctor within a context and in a social system” (p. 99). The same could be said about youth work. Groopman is talking about the importance or relationship within the context of his words.

Expertise in youth work literature

After looking at the expertise in the nursing field, I looked again for research on expertise in youth work practice. It appeared that there is emerging research, but not to the extent in the medical field. Toward the end of my literature search I found a chapter

on expertise in *Advancing Youth Work: Current Trends, Critical Questions*; edited by Dana Fusco (2012). This book brings together contributors who can articulate what exemplary youth workers are currently doing. Chapter four written by Walker and Walker (2012) in particular examines the idea of youth work expertise.

They begin by saying, “Daily youth work practice is complex and dynamic. It is riddled with situations that are layered and require dealing with multiple considerations and changing circumstances”. (p. 40). Looking back at what nurses in particular said and it sounded very similar even if the language was different.

Walker and Walker proposed that youth workers need to develop “practitioner expertise” which includes knowledge and skills (p. 40). They looked at various ways that educators trained effective youth workers using a variety of frame works and found that the frame works tended to focus on the operational, more measureable components of practice (p. 41). What was missing from this approach?

Looking at the notion of practical wisdom (phronesis), they stated, “For the youth worker, phronesis represents the kind of wisdom required to appraise the diverse problems and situations encountered in daily practice, the thoughtful deliberation of the merits of differing paths of action and having the strategic skills to respond” appropriately (p. 42). The expert youth worker needs both technical and practical wisdom. “Expertise is not just ‘knowing that’, it is ‘knowing how’... Moreover it involves practical know-how or making sound choices in particular situations (p. 42).

Walker and Walker also talked about expertise coming from prolonged practice and that one can view “practice” as a way of handling knowledge (p. 43). As with doctors they also discussed the need for ongoing feedback and reflection about the work.

They stated that three decades of research on expertise “suggests that beyond sheer years of experience or even natural ability, it is ongoing deliberate practice with feedback that appears to matter the most in developing and maintaining expertise” (p. 44).

Summary

I have reviewed two areas of research, the importance of the nature of relationships in good youth work practice and the notion of expertise as it applies to nurses working with patients in vulnerable situations, doctors in practice and the emerging research on youth worker expertise. I looked at the nature of relationships in four research studies looking at ways of being in relationship from four different contexts; social work, apprenticeship programs, mentoring programs and youth development. First defining the concept of relationship, then focusing on non-parental relationships that youth have in their lives.

McLeod’s study on the nature of relationships in social gives us an idea of what youth are looking for in their relations with adults. Kate Walker looks at the multiple roles that youth workers use in their youth work practice as they help youth navigate their world. Spencer discussed the relational nature of strong relationships built on authenticity, empathy, mutuality, collaboration, pleasurable experiences and shared memories (2006). Corney and duPlessis examined relationships that youth found through their significant others (defined as anyone who plays an important role in a youth’s life). The idea being that not all relationships need to come through organized efforts. Robert Halpern focused on instrumental relationship that are developed through teaching youth specific skills in apprenticeship programs. In this kind of relationship the developmental support comes as the youth and the teacher work side by side and engage in conversation.

I also reviewed a study where youth ethnographers interviewed other youth about what qualities they were looking for in relationships with adults. Three themes emerged; safety, relationships and opportunities to learn.

The second area of focus was looking at the notion of expertise. Using Benner, Tanner and Chelsa's study *Expertise in Nursing Practice (1996)*. This in-depth study of expertise in the field of nursing has many parallels with expertise in youth work practice. The key aspects discussed in the literature review can be translated to how youth worker gain expertise as will be seen in future chapters. Jerome Groopman (2007) gave voice to importance of the doctor patient relationship in making sound decisions and the importance of feedback on successes and failures.

Walker and Walker (2012) gave me a glimpse into the emerging research on youth worker expertise and reinforces the notion that looking at nurse and doctor expertise was a good fit for this literature review. The studies showed that the importance of a sustained practice over years with good feedback was essential and regardless of the context (working with patients or youth) relationship was the key ingredient for successful outcomes. Expertise in good youth work practice is essential for creating authentic relationships and expertise comes from a sustained practice in working with youth.

An area of research that still needs more work is to understand how urban youth workers truly learn their craft and how we can support and nurture their development. The current literature is telling us what youth need and want. The research is saying that relationships are the key to good youth work practice. We need to know how youth workers learn to navigate in the world of youth by taking on multiple roles with

authenticity in order to create sustainable relationships. Listening to the stories of expert youth workers will show us the possibilities. How we begin to understand how expert youth workers learn their craft will be discussed in chapter three.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This study used a hermeneutic phenomenological approach based on the work of Van Manen (1997) who describes this approach as “human science which studies persons” and “edifies the personal insight” (p.6 and 7). The study was designed to describe and understand how experienced urban youth workers learn and work their craft. “Phenomenology is the study of essences”. Here Van Manen is quoting Merleau-Ponty. (p. 39) He goes on to say “essence” in this respect is not “some kind of mysterious entity... rather the term may be understood as a linguistic construction, a description of a phenomenon” (p. 39). Van Manen says that we need to find what interests us, what phenomenon or experience we want to understand, to ask the question and then to “construct a possible interpretation of the nature of a certain human experience” (P. 40-41). My interest was how experienced urban youth workers worked in the world of youth; what this looked like from the youth worker perspective. Therefore I found this approach a good fit for the overall research question: “What is the experience of an expert urban youth worker and what can we learn listening to the voices of youth workers”.

I explored this question by observing and interviewing and hanging out with experienced youth workers because in interpretative models of research, “we can best understand human beings from the experiential reality of their life worlds... reflecting on it phenomenologically, we may be presented with possibilities of individual and collective self-understanding and thoughtful praxis” (p. xi). Dahlberg, Drew and Nystrom states, “Life manifests itself in experience. Phenomenology seeks the patterns of

experience, the principles, in order to grasp the meaning of the phenomena in question, which is then described as faithfully as possible”. (p. 95) Listening to urban youth workers tell the stories of their experiences and what they found meaningful in their work with youth offered me an inside look at how they used these experiences to learn their craft and how this helped them create meaningful relationships within the world of youth.

Dahlberg, Drew and Nystrom (2002) in *Reflective Lifeworld Research* discusses Gadamer’s approach of open hermeneutics; “Gadamer is adamant that the study of the world, especially not the human world, cannot be reduced to any single method, and certainly not a set of measurements. He maintains that the world is understood through our experience of it in which measured facts are but a part of the whole picture”. (p. 81) They go on to say that Gadamer always returns to the notion of “openness” or keeping an open mind in order to discover something new, “The life world cannot be reached through method, but rather met in an *open* way of approach, which is the natural way in which we belong to the world, the way of true understanding”(p. 81).

Attempting to research and write about relationships is a difficult thing. We know good relationships when we see one by how the two people act in their interactions and their “lived other” (Van Manen, 1997). We can recognize it for ourselves when we have developed a relationship with another person, but can we describe how it happens? Describing how to develop a relationship or even to understand how it happens can be elusive. One of my interests is what happens in the space between the experienced youth worker and a particular youth; the notion of intersubjectivity (Van Manen, 1997, p. xvii). How do I capture the meaning of this phenomenon when it is something that happens in

the space between me and the other (Van Manen, 1997, p.11, Dahlberg, K., Drew, N. & Nystrom, M., 2002, p. 70)? These are the questions that I consistently asked myself.

Van Manen (1997) tells us “the human science researcher is a scholar-author who must be able to maintain an almost unreasonable faith in the power of language to make intelligible and understandable what always seems to lie beyond language” Van Manen, 1997, p. xviii). Van Manen also states that human science research is a form of writing which is not separate from the research process (1990, p. 111). My goal was to be a faithful listener and reader of the texts that I gathered and through careful examination and writing gain insight into the everyday lives of experienced youth workers.

Karin Dahlberg in her article *A Lifeworld Paradigm for Nursing Research* states, “The overall aim of phenomenological research is the description and elucidation of the everyday world in a way that expands our understanding of human experience” (p.2) and hermeneutics as the “philosophy of understanding gained through interpretation” (Dahlberg, K., Drew, N. & Nystrom, M., 2002, p70). Van Manen (1997) speaks to the notion that phenomenology describes the “lived experience” and hermeneutics interprets “the texts” of the experience. (p. 4). He describes hermeneutic phenomenology as “trying to be attentive to both” the terms of description and interpretation because description lets us get at things as they are and interpretation because hermeneutics “claims there are no such things as un-interpreted phenomena” (p. 180).

The Approach

Phenomenology is “a philosophy or a variety of distinctive, yet related philosophies” but it is also a method and is based on the works of Husserl and Heidegger (Ray, 1994, p. 118). Below are the procedures I used in this research.

Target Population

The target population for this study was experienced urban youth workers practicing in a large Midwestern city. In order to recruit initial participants for the study, I asked experienced youth workers, youth work professors and upper level management in a youth service organization to nominate people they knew that would be considered “wizards” in the field of youth work and fit the criteria. In doing this I found an organization that was trying to change the culture of youth work at their recreation centers. They were using their most experienced practitioners to achieve the change. I was able to observe and interview five youth workers from this organization and also become part of their weekly youth work practice meetings facilitated by a local youth work professor. This gave me three views of what their thinking processes were. By observing, interviewing and listening to their reflections I was able to see their thinking from three angles.

Criteria for inclusion

The criteria for inclusion included: youth workers who came from non-profit or faith based organizations, worked in an urban context, had five or more years of experience and were culturally diverse. Exclusion criteria included: youth workers from suburban or rural organizations, youth workers from public schools or community

education programs, with fewer than five years of experience, or youth workers who have dropped out of the field.

Letters of introduction with background information on my interest and reason for the study were given to each participant. Consent forms were presented at the beginning of the research period and assurances were made that the interviews would be confidential and that the participant could stop the interviews at any time.

Observations

Observations were conducted at recreation centers and the interviews were conducted in a place that allowed for privacy and the ability for quality recording. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Transcriptions were kept in a secluded location. Five urban youth workers made up my sample. They all came from the same organization and all had more than five years of experience and were considered by others in the field to have expertise in youth work practice.

Confidentiality

Confidentiality was assured by removing all identifying information from the interview transcripts (changing names or using numbers for informants). Interview recordings and transcriptions were kept in secure locations. An application was submitted to the Institutional Review Board to determine if permission was needed for this research study. Informed consent forms were with participants. Recordings will be deleted or destroyed after one year. The sample was small so extra care was taken to ensure anonymity. The final written product was reviewed carefully to assure that interview participants cannot be identified by demographics or other identifiers.

Data Collection

Data collection included observations and interviews as well as informal conversations with youth workers. I prepared for the interviews by reviewing what I already know about the topic and reconsidering what questions I wanted to ask in light of what I saw during the observation period. I also reviewed my journal notes and notes from the youth work practice meetings.

Interview questions included:

- How did you come to do this work?
- How do you do your practice?
- What keeps you in the work?

I asked the participants to tell me stories around these questions. If needed for clarification, I asked probing questions to get to the deeper stories. The follow up interviews were informal conversations with the participants to revisit certain stories.

Observations

To begin the process I observed five urban youth workers from a large Midwestern city in their work environment. They all worked for a publicly funded city wide organization. Within this organization I chose to begin with observations in order to see what the work looked like. Observing allowed me to see how the youth workers connected with youth, what their body language was like and how the youth interacted with them. The youth workers met youth in recreation centers in parks and on the street. I also observed the youth work practice meetings held weekly at one of the recreation centers where they reflected on their work and shared their stories.

Interviews

After observing for several weeks I conducted in depth one to one unstructured interviews and informal conversations with these experienced urban youth workers. Van Manen (1997) tells us that the “hermeneutic phenomenological interview serves vary specific purposes”. (p. 66) In this case it served the purpose of gathering data to gain a better understanding of how experienced youth workers came to learn their craft and how they work in the world of youth. The conversations allowed me to follow up the interviews with a more casual discussion of youth work practice which gave me deeper insight into their work. The youth work practice meetings helped me to understand how they process what they are doing through reflection and consultation with other youth workers.

Issues of Bias

Issues of bias included my prior knowledge of the youth work field and the philosophies behind the work. Van Manen states “ The problem of phenomenological inquiry is not always that we know too little about the phenomenon, but that we know too much.” (p. 46) I was careful not to make assumptions based on my prior experience or how I view the work should be done. When doing my own practice with youth I always tried to leave what I knew behind me when first meeting with youth in order to see with new eyes. I tried to bring this same stance to my interviews. This goes back to the idea of “openness”. Dahlberg, Drew and Nystrom describe it this way, “If the person who seeks knowledge maintains an open position then the phenomenon will show us how it can and

should be studied and how it is. Openness is the mark of a true willingness to listen, see and understand.” (p. 97) Before and after I conducted the interviews I needed to come to terms with myself in how I perceived the youth workers and what my stance is in youth work practice. Van Manen (1997) speaks to coming to terms with the “self” and “others”. (p. 89) Before I embarked on the study I needed to do self-reflection on what I thought I would find and be able to set these ideas aside and be open to the possibilities. Dahlberg & Drew (1997) refers to the idea of staying “optimally open”. They describes it this way, “identifying and setting aside preunderstanding to be truly open and available to the phenomenon under investigation”. (p. 308)

Qualifications of the Researcher

My background includes 30 plus years working with urban and suburban youth in educational and nonprofit settings. I have a M.Ed. in Youth Development Leadership at the University of Minnesota which allowed me to explore the nature of youth work. I completed an internship in Oaxaca, Mexico and conducted a field study in London, England looking at how youth workers interacted with urban youth. I was able to observe and work with experienced youth workers whose prime goal was to create relationships with youth who were disengaged from school and society.

The Analysis

In hermeneutic phenomenology analysis really begins with the interview. Van Manen (1997) tells us “all recollections of experiences, reflections on experiences, taped interviews... are already *transformations* of ... experiences”. (p.54) As people tell their stories, they are interpreting their experience. The following definition of hermeneutic phenomenology helps to explain this idea:

Hermeneutic phenomenology tries to be attentive to both terms of its methodology: it is a *descriptive* (phenomenological) methodology because it wants to be attentive to how things appear, it wants to let things speak for themselves; it is an *interpretive* (hermeneutic) methodology because it claims that there are no such things as uninterpreted phenomena. The implied contradiction may be resolved if one acknowledges that the (phenomenological) “facts” of lived experience are always already meaningfully (hermeneutically) experienced. Moreover, even the “facts” of lived experience need to be captured in language (the human science text) and this is inevitably an interpretive process. (p. 180-81)

Bearing this in mind, my analysis began with the data collection. After the interviews were transcribed the analytic process included:

- After the interviews were transcribed and checked for accuracy, the text of all the narratives were read through at least three times to get a sense of the overall meaning of the text. Eberhart and Pieper (1996) refer to the “hermeneutic circle” as a way of engaging the text. This experience is an encounter between the reader and the text and becomes a “dialogue that builds shared meaning” between the two. (p. 48) Van Manen (1997) talks about organizing themes as a way of getting started. (p.168) My first analysis was to write portraits of each youth worker. At this time emerging themes and new questions to explore were noted. Journals were used to record thoughts for future reference and to reflect on my own thinking about the data.

- After reading the text several times and developing the portraits I began deconstructing the text to further develop thematic analysis including looking at the text for discussion of the youth workers stance in the world of youth using the notion of the four existentials: lived space (what is it like to be with youth in their space), lived body (under the gaze of youth how does the youth worker conduct his/her self), lived time (what is meaning of time when a youth worker is with youth, does the age of each influence how they are with each other) and lived other (the relational stance the youth worker has with the youth). (p.101-103)

- Looking for similarities and differences in the stories. What experiences appeared to stand out as exceptions from the rest? What was the meaning of particular phenomena?

- Writing the portraits was used as a form of analysis. Van Manen (1997) states, “Writing separates the knower from the knowing...but it also allows us to reclaim this knowledge and make it our own in a new and more intimate manner. Writing constantly seeks to make external what somehow is internal” (p.127). He goes on to say "To be able to do justice to the fullness and ambiguity of the experience of the life world, writing may turn into a complex process of rewriting (re-thinking, re-flecting, re-cognizing) (p.131). This allows us to refine our understandings as we write and rewrite. In *Writing Qualitatively, or the Demands of Writing*, Van Manen states, “Qualitative writing may be seen as an active struggle for understanding and recognition of the lived meanings of

the lifeworld” (2006, p 713). The great challenge is to write clearly enough to capture the ambiguity of the lifeworld (Dahlberg & Drew, 1997, p314).

- Through the examination of the text and the development of the themes, it became crucial to look at the parts against the whole of the text and refer back to the original question to make sure the meaning of the text is being honestly and correctly developed. The idea of the “whole/parts/whole” is where one reads the whole text to get a feel for it and then take it apart to look for themes and then move back to the whole to get at the “larger picture” (Dahlberg & Drew, 1997, p. 313).

- The final interpretation was to bring all the parts together in a rewriting of the whole to create a product that makes the implicit meaning of relationship building in youth work explicit to the reader. The reader will feel a sense of relationship to the narrative and perhaps have a new understanding of what it means to be an urban youth worker.

Rigour in the research study

The Oxford English Dictionary (Third edition, June 2010; online version September 2011) describes rigour as the “Strict sense or interpretation; precision, exactness; (in later use also) the quality or condition of being highly detailed, accurate, and thorough.”

The following criteria for quality or rigour as defined by Koch and Harrington (1998) was a good fit for this study:

- Credibility, vividness and faithfulness to the description of the phenomena

- Fittingness, when data can fit into a context other than the one in which they were generated
- Auditability, the decisions made by the researcher at every stage of the research process.

In addition I included their notion that including reflexivity as sign posts that rigour is being maintained will help the reader of the research product decide if the work is creditable. (P.885-87) I propose to use all four criteria to ensure rigour or quality in this study.

Working with the Oxford English Dictionary definition of rigour as exactness, it was necessary to put careful thought and careful planning into each step of the research process (recruitment, selection, informed consent, explanation of the study to participants, anonymity, and confidentiality).

Reflexive practice included journals of self-reflection and incorporating the reflections into the final account to show my thought process, but this was balanced by the quotes from the stories told by the youth workers

Marilyn Ray (1994) tells us in her discussion of richness in phenomenology, “Credibility and affirmation of phenomenological research can be understood best by Heidegger’s (1972) concept of truth as unconcealment and Ricoeur’s idea that truth of the text maybe regarded as the world it unfolds (Thompson, 1981)” (p.130).

I have listed out the method I followed in the researching and writing, but I am reminded by Van Manen (1997) not be mesmerized by the steps as the method is somewhat artificial and the actual process was not straight forward. It was a back and forth process. (p. 34) Dahlberg, Drew and Nystrom put it this way when discussing

method, “If a researcher follows ‘a marked route’, that is, adheres to a previously determined method step by step, then openness is at stake and the possibility of truly understanding the phenomenon is seriously undermined”. (110)

My goal as the researcher was to be truthful and thoughtful in my analysis and writing, therefore, unconcealing the meaning of the text, the readers will recognize this experience and can identify the experience as something they could have had and can give it Buytendijk’s “phenomenological nod” mentioned by Van Manen (1997). As Van Manen says, “A good phenomenological description is collected by lived experience and recollects lived experience-is validated by lived experience and it validates lived experience.” (p. 27)

Summary

The study was designed to describe and understand how experienced urban youth workers learn and work their craft. I selected a hermeneutic phenomenological approach because it suited my purpose of studying the lived experiences of youth workers. The methods for collecting the stories of the youth workers were observation, interviews, informal conversations, and participation in weekly youth work practice meetings. Thematic analysis included careful readings of the full texts and the selective or highlighting approach to uncover themes. Listening to urban youth workers tell the stories of their experiences and what they found meaningful in their work with youth offered me an inside look at how they used these experiences to learn their craft and how this helped them create meaningful relationships within the world of youth. Careful readings and analysis of the texts and clear writing could lead us to a better understanding of what good youth work looks like.

Here is an introduction to the youth workers you will meet in chapter four as well as the context in which they do their work.

Howard: He has 25 plus years working with youth and is identified by fellow youth workers as a “wizard”. He is the elder of the group and is looked to for support and advice. He has mentored youth and youth workers over the years. Howard describes himself as a “watcher”; noticing where the “hot spots” are and where the youth are just hanging out and do not need his attention. Through years of experience he just knows when to watch and when to move in. He also sees himself as a teacher and looks for the “teachable moments” with youth and youth workers. Youth work is his calling.

Ross: Ross has been doing youth work since he was a teen ager. He grew up in park and recreation centers. They were a home away from home for him. Bob and Howard saw his leadership potential with the youth he hung around with in the streets. Knowing that he needed guidance they gave him opportunities volunteer at the rec center. As Ross put it, they started throwing “birdseed” in his path to lead him into leadership roles with other youth. They helped get his first youth work job at a recreation center and now he is trying to provide those same opportunities to the youth he works with. His story will show how youth workers can learn their craft through the guidance of experienced youth workers.

Bob: Bob has been a youth worker for 15 plus years and was the director of a recreation center when I met him. He started to get involved in youth work as a teen ager when a teacher recognized his ability to work with children. Bob has “people skills. He is a big guy with a big presence and knows that he needs to be the one to say “Hello, how are you? Welcome to the center”. He has a playful way with youth and knows how to

draw them into the center. He was also mentored by Howard and now is a mentor to youth and emerging youth workers. Bob told me that you have to have a passion for youth work and a passion to continually learn about the work to be good in the work.

Ben: Ben has been a youth worker in several countries. He mentors youth and youth workers and brings an international perspective to his youth work. My first impression of him was that he is passionate about youth work, a fast talker and an intense guy. He told me you have to see each kid individually. For him it is all about making youth visible and letting them be the center of what happens at the teen center where he works. He sees the teen center as a place for building relationships, doing something and helping youth to see their strengths. The teen center can be a challenge at the best of times, but that challenge is what makes Ben thrive.

Jazmin: Jazmin works for two youth serving organization. In one she works in street outreach and in the second one works with Howard and Bob at a recreation center. She also mentors emerging youth workers. Her youth work stance is to observe first and move in later. One of her professors told her, “You stand at the door of the world of youth as an open invitation and the youth will come to you if you keep the door open”. She talks openly about her challenges as a youth worker; keeping good boundaries and limits in the face of overwhelming youth needs. She told me she tries to work off of the energy of the youth she works with and sees her work as having a global spiritual component to it.

The Setting for the Work

The context for the research was a recreation center and a teen center in a public city wide organization serving youth. The two centers were located in a low income neighborhood. The centers served as safe spaces for the youth of all ages in area where youth gangs were a source of concern. At the recreation they offered day camp activities, basketball games, martial arts, arts and crafts classes, movie days and teen leadership group opportunities. The center was also a place where youth could hang out with friends and start their own games outside.

Youth workers spent time inside the buildings and out on the playground. They engaged with youth informally and worked to make sure all the youth were safe. If there was conflict they were right there to mediate. Junior youth work staff usually led the more formal activities inside the building. The building was open evenings until 8pm.

The teen center was membership based and restricted to youth 12 and up. They were open week day evenings and youth had a variety of activities to choose from including cooking, video games, computer time, basketball, leadership council, girls group or just hang out time. The youth leadership group also planned semimonthly parties. While I was observing at the teen center, it was a popular place to hang out and usually had anywhere from 30 to 70 youth any given night.

I observed over a summer and fall at these centers several days a week for four hours at a time. I also attended events at other recreation centers when the summer basketball tournament was in session. There was an opportunity for me to do site visits at various recreation centers to see how they operated. Each center had its own way of operating; some were more youth friendly than others.

The recreation center was where the youth work practice meetings took place once a week for two hours. I attended over a nine month period and had the opportunity to see youth workers learning from each other in a reflective dialogue. These meetings had been held over a period of 8 years and one of the outcomes of these ongoing meetings was their transformation into seeing themselves as professionals in the field of youth work. The facilitator for the meetings was a professor from large Midwest State University who was a well-known youth studies undergraduate program and master's program in youth work. The professor teaches in the youth studies program and is internationally known for his knowledge of youth work and youth work practice. You will see references to him in chapter four.

Next chapter four will show the portraits of five very experienced urban youth workers and their stories of their everyday life working with youth.

Chapter 4: The Portraits

This chapter introduces the stories of five experienced urban youth workers who all worked for a public organization serving youth in a large Midwestern city. The following portraits are a snapshot in time in the lives of the youth workers and you will see real stories in their own words. The stories tell us about their successes, challenges and how they see themselves as youth workers. You will see similar threads running through the five stories, yet each youth worker has their own style. This is the raw data collected over nine months of observation, interviews and conversation about youth work. I started during the summer months observing the youth workers inside the youth centers, out on the playgrounds and in a teen center. I observed them as they worked with youth and interacted with other youth workers, parents and the community.

The setting for the work was inner city neighborhoods where life can be harsh for youth and their families. Three of the youth workers I observed grew up in these neighborhoods so they had a good understanding of the community culture and knew who to go to for resources to support the youth. One youth worker grew up in another country and his experience has been gained working with urban youth in other countries. The fifth youth worker did not grow up in this city, but worked hard to immerse herself in the communities she worked in so that she could understand and relate to the youth she worked with.

Howard is the elder of the group. You will see him mentioned often in the stories that Jamar, Bob, Jazmin and Ben tell. The stories not only show the importance of relationship, but they show how relationships are as important among the youth workers

as with the youth. Relationships are the key to good youth work practice in all areas of the work.

Following are the stories of the five youth workers who could be called “Wizards” like the youth workers described in *Urban Sanctuaries*. (2001). I begin with Howard.

Portrait of Howard

I met Howard for the first time when I was doing an action research project as part of a yearlong fellowship. His supervisor was also in the fellowship and when I said I was looking for youth workers to be part of my focus groups she said, “Oh, you have to interview my youth workers. They are rock stars”. Howard was not able to attend the focus group meeting, but I was able to meet with him later for a one to one interview. To say that Howard is a rock star is right on target. Howard is the elder in an experienced group of youth workers within a public organization serving youth within a large Midwestern city. He is not only an expert youth worker he is also a mentor for young youth workers and had mentored three of my interviewees as they were learning their craft. He is looked upon as the expert among this group of youth workers although you would never hear him say that. When I began my research for this dissertation, I immediately thought of including Howard and also of asking his advice on who to interview. He is very open and welcoming to everyone he meets and agreed to be part of the research group for my study. I was able to observe and interview Howard over a two month period. The first thing you notice about Howard is that he is always moving around when he is in the realm of youth. When I first met him he told me he is a “watcher” and in this context that means he knows everything that is going on in the area

where he is working. He talks to every youth he meets; sometimes it is a simple “How’s it going” and other times it is a bit more probing to get a sense of what is going on. Because his workspace is a recreation center he is inside and outside and literally seems to be everywhere at once.

Welcome to our World

When I sat down to interview Howard I asked him why when an incident happened at the center all the workers would say, “Welcome to our World”. Howard said, “I just think that for this place there is never a dull moment, you know”. He described it in this story.

What I mean is there is always something going on when you turn the corner. As you seen the other day you can have a sweet night, nothing happens, but somebody will go crazy, something will blow up. Always expect the unexpected. In all the years I was here before I left it was always like that. You know the way Bob moves around that is exactly how I used to move constantly moving around; if you are here you have to be on the move. Like at Plymouth and this is where I learned how to put myself into a position where I could see multiple spots. I learned to master the position here because back then you did not have a whole lot of staff; sometimes I was all by myself or be me and one other person. So you’d have to kind of say, okay you go inside for a little while, I’ll go outside for a little while ... and so you learn to in motion. For instance, the youth used to gamble on the corner outside the gym so they would always have people watch to see where I was and they would have little kids watch and probably give them a dollar or something. So what I would do is act like I was going into the building, cut

through gym and go straight out the back and I would know when they were gambling because when the little kids were just sitting there watching me; something was going on. So now it is more pre-teens, but when I was here before it was a lot of older kids and when I was here before there was a lot of gang issues. Now there are some kids that are gang affiliated, but on the whole most of these kids are not. But Plymouth taught me different; that was all gangs you know and so I think what Yang was meaning to say is there is never a dull moment.

Howard went on to say that sometimes people would come here and say, “oh my god” and Howards response would be, “Welcome to our world; this is what we see every day”. He said that when he was at other recreation centers they were similarities with pre-teens having little skirmishes and back and forth.

The first time I observed the staff at the center I noticed that the staff was “positioning” itself in various places. One person might be outside the center, some are inside in the gym or the hallway. If there is a crowd outside, you might see staff standing back or watching up close. I asked Howard to tell me more about the “position”. He has told me that he is a “watcher” and this is a story about how he does it.

We are doing that (moving around) more to be ahead of any issues. So we are not trying to get intimately into their conversations or anything like that but just watching for posturing, watching for some angry words or... like last Monday night for example. Monday night there were these girls that had the dresses on and you know the one I told to smile was there. Her and another girl with the pink dress on. The one that I told to smile is probably 14 going on 20 and the other one is probably 15 going on 25, but they still hang around with younger

girls and some of the younger boys and so they position themselves most of the time in the tennis courts. That is why Bob put them out (of the tennis courts). And there is another group of girls that doesn't hang around with them that would go by the playground. What they are doing is talking about each other and so there was a little boy that was coming and listening to what these girls were saying and then go back and tell them and then listen to what they had to say and go back and tell the other girls what the first group said. So what I did, how I caught them was I stood back, you know under the overhang, and I just stood there and watched him go back and forth and each time I watched him deliver messages. So I let him do it for about 15 minutes and each time he delivered the message they were getting closer and closer to "let's go fight". So when the crowd in front of me got riled up, then I stepped out and started talking and immediately addressed him. And then I went over and after I got those girls then Bob came out and he started talking to the girls. So I went to the tennis courts and said, "I don't know how old you girls are, but you walk around and you seem to me like you're a little bit older and so how old are you?" One girl said she was 14 and the other girl would not tell me how old she was. I said, "Well you guys carry yourself like you are a little older so when I hear you say I haven't got times for these little girls". Then they stopped acting like little girls and I told them both of your groups got suckered by a 10 year old and he's telling them what you're saying and then they were shocked that I knew, but they were also shocked that he manipulated them.

You know, I mean this is just years and years of doing this and you just pay attention for something different. It is like listening to music and you notice the music changed for a while. Like have you ever turned to the weather channel to check the weather and the music is playing and then you're preoccupied, you might be reading a book or something and then all of a sudden realize after 15 minutes you still have the weather channel on and the music is still playing on that loop, then something changes and you say to yourself, I am still here and you change the channel?. That is what I always look for. You know, me and Bob talk about this all the time. To look for the out of the ordinary, and number one don't make everything a 911 emergency, you know, and then also to our biggest thing that we try to push is that every moment is a teachable moment. That if you are going to correct something, it is how you correct it; especially if they're going to receive it. You got your opportunity to teach them something so that's what we strive to do, you know. And me and Bob really push that hard to really say if there is a situation, let's talk that all the way out so that everybody's on the same page.

Making the Shift to Experienced Youth worker

I asked Howard, if he knew when he had made the shift from being a good experienced youth worker to this very experienced improvisational youth worker. Did he know when he made the shift from knowing what to do intellectually to where it became just a part of "how you do what you do?"

In all I think when you think you are good, then you're not. You know what I am saying? Some of it comes back to; it is in us naturally. Innately, there is

something in some people and I just think that most people that I come across that say that they are good youth workers and then you watch them do it and then you say, “You’re okay”. You know? Not that I am even saying that I am this or that, but I am saying that the moment you read your own press clippings then you start to lose it. I feel like, what makes you good and what makes me good is to still have my hands on kids because the moment I don’t do that then I will still be okay, but I won’t be good. Because you have to be in tune with how the kids change. I mean because we all want it to be how it was back in the day, but this is not back in the day, and those of us that understand that can move forward and continue to be good youth workers. But those of us that could really, really be good but are stuck back there are the ones that start to fall off because it becomes too hard. Then we are stuck on (the idea) that these kids are so different, they are so hard. No, kids are kids, there is just different issues.

You have to understand that whatever the culture of people you’re around, you have to understand the language, you have to understand why they do what they do or how they do it. Those are things you have to watch. When you learn those things, then you can navigate in that stream. But the biggest thing is you can’t, if you are going to be good, you can’t just be good culturally. You have to be good with all kids. I mean, if you really want to be good. Because it’s easy to be culturally good because you’re stepping into your own safe zone. Because you say, “I can do this because they look like me”, But I gravitate away from that and say, no “I am an African American and I’m proud to be” and yes I would innately want to help the people that look like us a little bit more; that is human nature.

But at the end of the day we have to look at it and say, “do I want to do good youth work”

Howard and I talked about the idea that you need to know your own culture and be comfortable in it, but also that underneath there is a youth culture that is not about being African American or Japanese, but about having common traits of youthness. Howard explained it this way.

You have to have your hand on the pulse of people. You will understand that it’s not about culture of colors it is about pre-teens, teens or youth. There are all kinds of subcultures inside of those cultures. You have to be aware or just observe so you can absorb some of those things just by watching and in seeing what they do or what they like to do. And then sometimes that might be your inroad into getting a conversation started and then possibly into some kind of relationship.

An Incident

There are times when a youth worker is called on to work with situations that not directly involving youth. One evening when I was at the center for a youth work meeting, there was an incident as the center was closing for the night. It started out with two boys, one younger and one older, who had gotten into a scuffle where the older one was hitting the younger one and then ran away. The younger one started chasing him and along the way picked up a piece of wood to throw at him. They ran to the doors of the center where a crowd of youth and adults were leaving. The adults were there picking up their children. The younger boy made a motion as if to throw this piece of wood at the other student and Howard was able to grab him before he could throw it. One of the

parents got very upset and accused the staff of not being in control and what if this “rock” had hit her child and in front of all the students said very derogatory things about the staff. She also said that the youth were nothing and will be nothing and had no purpose and that is why they die.

I was so surprised at what she said about these youth in front of them and asked Howard about this incident. He said that his and Bob’s biggest concern (Bob as director of the center had come out to talk the mother down) was, “she could talk crap to us all day, because we are not coming down to her level. I’m not because she is not hurting my feelings because I know what I do and the kids know what I do”. Howard and Bob’s concern was that the youth would be taking in this message. I thought she was a little crazy because she just could not stop talking. However, Howard looked at it this way. “It’s easy to say, well something is wrong with her and then on the other side of it, this is something she has been wanting to say for a long time and she just chose this opportunity to say it because it has been brewing inside of her and who knows where it comes from. But she wanted to say it and all she was missing was a soap box”. This was an interesting perspective that Howard in spite of the “craziness” of what she was saying could see that she needed to get this out of her head. The woman actually called the police reporting that the youth were surrounding her car ready to throw rocks. I was there and know that this was not true. Bob kept trying to talk her down and when the police arrived they asked Bob what he wanted them to do. Bob just wanted the police to talk her into leaving. Howard said they were successful in doing this. Because the staff at the center have developed a relationship with the police, they were able to resolve the issue.

I asked Howard about his take on what happened. He saw the incident from a different stance. This woman is looking like she is going crazy, but she is not crazy.

Howard take is philosophical. This is his story:

Instead of looking at her like she was crazy it... it is not just experience, we could look at the situation that she is all pissed off and we could join her in being pissed off, but I think my thing is let's dig deep. It is like with kids; you go, there is more to this situation than what's happening right now. This is extra; like kids would say "get your hands off me, don't touch me". That is said every day; but when it goes to the extreme, then there's more going on than just that. And when she could not let it go, I could tell her body language was: I don't like you guys, I don't like this place. Once she got her opportunity and when she got her soap box she was going to get everything out. Right now I am going to give it to you and then when she got it out and then she expected to come back. So the next week when Bob and Jane took her in the office to talk she expected a fight and was ready to fight. Instead nobody thought that. They said we are going to work with you. We want everybody safe up here and the focus is not around what you said, but your behavior around these kids. We said that we made a mistake and we want to work to keep everybody safe and that is what she wanted to hear so now she had her victory. Now every time she comes she is friendly and she talks to us. She had her opportunity to vent and she thinks she won, but she didn't really win it. She was harboring this stuff for a long time. It is like when we roll things around in our mind. It could be like five guys came to jump on me and when I keep thinking about it, it could turn into 20 guys. (Laughter)

By reading the situation in the moment and making decisions about what to do based on years of experience, he is able to see that this woman was expressing all her fears. What could have turned into a larger confrontation was resolved through communication and negotiation. This is the practical wisdom gained through years of working with youth.

Howard talked about the fact that their job is hard enough as it is, but “you also get the parents that appreciate what you do, what you’re doing so it’s tenfold the other direction. The ones that are always telling you are not doing your job are the ones that you wish you could say... I would pay you to come here and be me for a week and then tell me I’m not doing my job”. So the question becomes how do youth workers deal with the dynamics of what they think is the “right” way of working with youth and what the community thinks should be done. What is the right way to discipline? This is one way Howard thinks about it.

Number one you got to be willing to see that we're doing something about it.

Number two you have to understand the dynamics in which we're working because number one because you have so much to say about this community obviously you know what kind of community this is. So the issues that come along with that, so there is a daily battle and then there is a daily tight rope that we have to walk. Do I set the bar here as far as punishment? I mean do you want to walk in and see kids hanging from the rafters as punishment or do you want us to say, look can we take this moment and try to teach them something. Because we can't beat them, you know, and so you want to save the worst you could do for the worst that happens. Some kids get in a fight and you can make the kids shake

hands and they leave it alone and then talk about why they were mad. Do you want to still punish them or do you say “I’ll punish the one that said he was defending himself and I tried to stop and this guy won’t stop”. Then this guy won’t listen to us when we were trying to talk to him and then I have to discipline you and then you have to leave. But when you come back I am going to tell you why you had to leave because sometimes it is not the action it that makes them have to leave but the reaction afterwards. Because we can deal with the issue but when you magnify it there has to be some form of punishment.

This is the youth work dance and it is always a negotiation. Howard says, “It is a give and take and you always have your trump cards and you only pull them when you need it. You know you don’t pull them every time. I mean if I got two families that are trying to fight and I know I have a trump card for this group here, I will pull it. But I ‘m not going to pull it for two little kids, I am going to pull it when I need it”. Howard as an experienced youth worker always has something in his tool kit to work with.

Balancing direct youth work with added responsibilities

Howard has been asked to be a trainer, teaching others how to be a competent youth worker. He struggles with this opportunity because he does not want lose his “edge” working with youth. He thinks he could do both jobs if the administration would let him keep a home base and go to other sites as needed, but he knows how easy it is to get absorbed in the details of planning and answering e-mails and reporting. All the things that would take him away from the youth. Howard puts it this way. “It’s not easy to just drop back into the work and keep in lock step with how these kids are constantly changing their lingo and their interests (here Howard snapped his fingers to show quickness)”. He

believes in this day of technology you have keep on top of everything and know what you are talking about, “then I am not just the old guy, then I am the old guy who knows what he is talking about”.

Because of his knowledge and experience, Howard is also becoming a mentor to new youth workers coming on board and also is involved in training workshop for the new staff. Howard is ambivalent about this idea because he wants to remain connected to the youth. He has become invested in working with a group of youth who are gang affiliated. Howard and his fellow youth workers reached out to youth and met with them weekly to discuss life issues and play basketball. It has been described as “The everyday lives of the most disconnected and disenfranchised young people has just collided with caring adults committed to helping them grow, develop and succeed in ways neither they nor the community had witnessed, or perhaps even imagined”. (Korum, K. 2012. National Afterschool Matters Minnesota Fellowship Program Final Report. P. 17-20. University of Minnesota). This is very meaning work for him and it is directly related to youth.

Howard said, “I said over and over again what to me personally in my own heart of hearts, what makes me good is that I still am connected to youth. If I have to go to too many meetings and all this other BS, then I don’t want it”.

It gets boring to me. I want to “bother the kids, I want to talk to them, you know, and at a certain point in youth work it's something that you can’t just walk into and be good at, and it's something you can't just walk away from and then return and still have the same edge. It’s like athletics; you have to have your edge, you still have to have your game, if you lose your game you lose your edge.

Especially with this world moving so fast now with Twitter and face book and this and that. Kids are right now

There are times when I'm talking to the kids...and they are saying certain things to me or telling me a story sometimes I won't even ask one of them what it means. I just listen to the context of the story and then go "how does that fit"? Well, some of them I'll ask because I'll go "what?" and then they'll laugh and say "oh yeah, I forgot you weren't there."

Howard is ambivalent about the changing nature of his work. He can do both supervising and direct youth work, but he knows he needs to keep up with the ever changing language of youth to "keep an edge" and he will have to find a balance within these two areas of work.

Because Howard has been doing this work for a long time and has learned how to talk about what he does, I noticed that in meetings when people are asking questions about how the work is being done they tend to look to Howard for answers. He puts it down to the fact that he is one of the older youth workers with the most experience so when there is a meeting about how the park and recreation department are working with youth the questions are directed to him. He tries to defer some of the questions to other youth workers in the room because he does not want to be "the dominant voice" but when I referred to a particular meeting with potential grantors Howard said, " Yes, I noticed that and they kind of gravitate towards me. We have a really good relationship and I don't know, maybe it's just because of all my years of experience."

The Youth Work Zone

Howard and I talked about the nature of this youth work and how it can be an art form or a Zen way of working. We also talked about getting into the zone when working with youth. This is part of having an edge and being able to keep it. Some days you can really get into the zone and stay and other days it is harder to stay in that zone. Howard talked about the days “when life wears you down, your own life issues, and you are there, but sometimes you are not all the way there. But you’re still there enough that the kids don’t notice it”. I found this interesting because he is very self-aware to be able to recognize that he can sometimes only be part way in the zone. Howard told me this story about how he got his edge back when he moved back to Rockwood from another center.

When we talked about the zone and having an edge, I thought back to when I was at Oakridge. I worked with gangs, teenage boys and some younger kids. So coming back here I had to just watch for a week. It's almost like doing double Dutch and you're waiting to go in a new way; you wait. And then I told Bob, “Okay I'm ready to start asserting myself”. I know a lot of the kids I knew their brothers or their cousins or some of them just knew me from other people but a lot of these little kids had no clue who I was. So I was telling Bob the other day that when I was dealing with some issues outside some kids said “who's that”. The other kids said, “Oh, that’s Howard, that’s Howard”. I told Bob, “Now I've got them; they know who I am”. It’s like when the flow comes, sometimes you don't even notice it, and you just get in it. You don't even notice that that you got in, but then but you notice when you come out. You notice when you're out because like you said your life hits you. Then you come back out and you start thinking about

your issues that you have to deal with your family or friends; that's reality.

I asked Howard to describe what it is like after he comes out of the zone. Can he do it right away or does he have to wait until later. Before he met The Professor, he could not describe except to say, "This is what I do". But after being in dialogue over time and learning how to talk about the work, he can name what he does because he says, "I am constantly thinking about it". Howard has learned to reflect on his work over time and now can describe it. Here is an example of how he describes what he does.

Everything I do is premeditated. How I act is premeditated. I 'm doing it not only for the negotiation piece; I am also doing it for a reason. That reason could be; I don't know you and I want to make some kind of connection with you, call you a different name. Then you say, "that is not my name" and I say "well, everybody's saying that is your name. Then I will say, "What is your name?" and now I will get the name. So, everything is for a reason. I think that to describe what it's like; it is like a bright light gets on everything and you see it. I think about the fight over there and I can say come here, well doing something else like catching someone pulling hair, while talking to these two about fighting. There have been times when I'll point at somebody and say, "stay right there" and dealt with this situation and walk over there and they go, "what, what?" And I say stop, I saw you pull her hair, stop". And then they're looking at you and they want to say, "But" and I say, "I saw it". To be good, especially when you have a lot of kids, you have to be able to multi task, but you have to be able to see this over here and this over here, you know?

One week when I was observing. I asked why we were standing under the

overhang by the rec center building. Howard said it was because of the weather, but also because he was positioning himself to see more than one angle and to be far enough away not intrude, but close enough to intervene if necessary. This goes back to the idea of being a watcher and to being in the zone and know when to act or when not to act. This is what he would miss if he became a manager and a trainer. Howard said he likes talking about the work and maybe learning something from others, as well as teaching others, but he loves doing youth work. He is not willing to let go of it. He says, “I know that I will dance with the issue of doing this training, because he respects his boss’s vision of changing the culture of how youth work is done in the organization.

The Challenges in Youth Work

There are other challenges in being a youth worker besides how to do the work and what happens when you are asked to take on work that is not directly working with youth. I asked Howard to tell me a story about a time when he has worked with someone and the relationship did not develop well. This story is twofold; the relationship between two youth workers and the one of trying to create a positive relationship with a group of youth who were on the road to trouble.

I could speak about the last relationship I was in at Plymouth and Wildwood where I talked in the past about the groups of guys who were causing the problems. There was a double message, we could not reach them because when I pulled the other person (a fellow youth worker) pushed so the kids couldn’t understand the dynamics of what I was trying to accomplish and what the other person was trying to accomplish. It was clear what the other person was trying to accomplish, and in reflection, at first I was really pissed about it because of the

fact that I felt this certain group was being alienated and they were. Then in reflection I realized what perpetuated it was fear (the other youth worker's fear of the youth) that was not acknowledged and that fear continues to this day. I think now what was happening was that because of the relationship we (the youth workers) had they put us together in places that were troubled. Now that I am no longer there and not saying that I am the end-all, be-all they (the organization) are finding out that this other person can't handle it. Now it is more pronounced, whereas I would deal with that or help cover it up so they did not see it and I did this for six years and it just got to the point where it was too much.

It was clear that the dynamic of the relationship between us youth workers was, if I'm around why is it okay, but when you come around, it is not okay? You know what I mean? What I was trying to do when I told you the story about the kids walking down the street, they were the ones who said, "You are the ones who hate us". To me at this point where I stand in doing this work; I try to find the teaching moments. When is the moment to step in and be able to teach them something and maybe be that voice that they never heard or have them look at something in life differently?

Here is where negotiation and knowing when to have that "teaching moment" can change the dynamic between youth and youth worker and it was not possible because the youth workers were not in sync. When Howard reflects back he realizes his role in creating the dynamic and sees it as learning moment for him. This led in to a conversation about the youth worker role as teacher.

Youth Worker as Teacher

For Howard seeing himself as a teacher is not just when he is working with youth, it is also a chance for him to pass on to other youth workers what he has learned through years of experience. Howard is now mentoring other youth workers in a more formal manner, but he has really been mentoring young youth workers throughout his career. He mentored Bob and Ross and many others who started out as youth going to a rec center and being noticed by a good youth worker named Howard.

At one of the youth work practice meetings, The Professor asked Howard how he saw himself. Howard's answer was, "I see myself as a teacher". I asked Howard to tell me more about what being a teacher means to him. This is what how he explained it to me.

For me now, you know, after doing this for 30 some years, I think you get to a point where if you are going to be good, if you consider yourself good, then at some point it's not just being a youth worker, and you don't know when you are there until all of a sudden you are there and all of a sudden you look at things differently. You don't just look at it as covering the center or just opening doors, rolling out the basketballs and making sure the proper programs go. It is the relationships and the opportunities that kids provide for you to step into their world. You have to learn to gingerly walk that line of what's enough, what's too much, is it not enough. You look for things, instead of looking at things as cut and dried. I read a book "the professor" gave me probably five years ago and it is called, "How Doctors Think". It had nothing to do with youth work, but it had everything to do with youth work as far as I was concerned. Because you can't

diagnose everything the same. You see something and go, “oh that’s a broken arm” or “it’s a headache” and give them some aspirin. There could be more to it. So you have to make sure you are always seeing things and not seeing everyone exactly the same. I don’t know if I am even saying that right, I just know that you need to do each individual individually.

Howard looks for teachable moments with the youth workers and the youth.

Here is another example of how he mentors a youth worker and a youth. He can look for those teachable moments and recognize the opportunity.

Bob had this boy who was really bothering him, really getting under his skin. Bob was getting to the end of his rope. He was thinking, “I might snatch this little dude up and this might be my last day”. The boy was really disrespectful and was challenging Bob. He was a big kid about 16 or 17 years old. So they had a big blow up and the kid was asked to leave the center so he said he was going to get the gun, go get his uncles, etc. So Bob called me and I let him get it off his chest and listened what he had to say. When I saw there was a lull in the conversation, I said, “I hear you, but was this just today or was it the fact that this has been building up and you two were heading for this fork in the road.” Then Bob was like, “yeah, I am pissed off, but you are right.” So I said “Ok, you know he has to pay the consequences for what he did”. Bob said, “Ok, I will talk to him, but I am not ready.” And I honored that. (The consequence for the boy was not being able to go to the gym). One day the kid asked me to let him into the gym, because Bob was not there. Howard asked him if he wanted me to disrespect Bob like he (the kid) did. “If I let you in I will be disrespecting Bob and Bob is my friend. I got

love for you, but I would not disrespect you like that and I won't disrespect him like that. And the truth of it is, what would you have done if that grown man had jumped on you?" The kid protested and Howard said, "No he would've beat you up. How you would like it if somebody called your mother names (the kid said I would be trippin') and Bob is somebody's dad that you were being disrespectful to? I am not mad at you but there are consequences for everything." I told Bob about what happened and we laughed and we talked about it, then I said "now you've got it" and so I wouldn't tell Bob what to do, but a couple of days later the kid came and asked to talk to Bob and he said yes, but I am busy right now so he made the kid wait there for a while. I left and when I returned Bob was in talking to the kid and a parent who had come in to talk to Bob told me what Bob did was awesome. Bob started the conversation by saying what he did wrong instead of allowing the kid to say, "But you". He said, "I want to apologize for grabbing you." So that took the wind out of the kids sails so he said "I want to apologize for cursing and disrespecting you." When I talked to Bob about it afterwards I told him, "That is the key. You gave that kid an out by your throwing yourself under the bus first and that allowed him to do the same thing."

Howard and I talked about the need to have faith in yourself to be able to say "I was wrong." Howard said, "Especially with these kids. What can they take from you? They can't take your manhood unless you allow it to be taken so it is not your manhood. Respect is huge. I get all that, but I look at it as give respect, you get respect." We talked about the issue of respect having to start someplace and that lead to Howard saying that even with cussing it does not have to be a "911 emergency". He will deal

with it, but if it becomes too much then he will call the kid aside. He does not call a kid out in front of everybody because, “sometimes there are things you could do to them that maybe you can never come back from; where they would never trust you again.”

An example of not calling a youth out in front of everyone was an experience I observed one day at the Rec Center. There was a youth staff who need to fix her hair and Howard just said to her, “Let me talk to you about your hair later”. He did not say anything else and I thought that was interesting. Her only reply was “I don’t do my hair”.

Later that day he gave her a ride home and they had a conversation. Howard said to her, “You are a beautiful young lady; you don’t have to walk around looking like Buckwheat” (She laughed). He said he was not being malicious, that she was at work and she could find five minutes to do her hair; even if it was just to pull it back with a rubber band. She told him, “I know, I was just being lazy”. Howard said that usually if you turn it into a joke they are going to get it. “I could have called her out in front of everyone and embarrassed her in front of everyone”. But he did not do this and the girl knew it and appreciated. Howard had only worked with her for a few weeks, but she had seen him joke with others as well as herself and he felt he could say something to her and it worked. We talked about the fact that if he had called her out in front of everyone it might have crushed her, but Howard was able to read the situation and know how to handle it and she got the message.

Youth Work as a Dance

The youth work dance has been touched on in Howard’s stories. Through years of experience youth workers like Howard have learned a kind of “dance” knowing when to

step in and out of situations. I asked Howard to tell me more about where this comes from in his inner being. He describes it this way.

I think maybe it is a gift. For instance when you want something it doesn't have to be the way you (Howard) frame it. If you want the kids to move out of a space, it doesn't have to be the way you want it to be or as fast as you want it to be. My thing is if you need them to move and they say there are going to move, trust that they're are going to move. Then if I have to come back and talk to you again, then it might be a different talk, but the first time I am not going to stand there and watch them. It doesn't have to be my way as long as the job gets done and things go in the direction they need to. I mean because even if you make a joke out of it or the next time you say if I have to ask you to stop shooting when it's time to go you might need to take a day off so I can have a day off from having to deal with it. Then they start laughing and say "Oh, my bad, my bad". Then I tell them I am not mad I am saying I am tired from working two jobs and I want to go home, it's not personal. If you explain your circumstances they will get it. They don't know if my wife called me and complained about something. I am not going to take it out on the kids because I am going to be who I am that they know, and if you do that you don't have to fake it. They know who you are and will thank you for that.

The Call of Youth Work

At this point I asked Howard if this was his "calling" where you are in a certain place in your life and you know this is what you were meant to do. Howard had talked about what it means to be good and how you have to be keep your edge. We had an

informal conversation about this during my observations. He expanded on his earlier thoughts.

Sometimes you will find with this work that people who are really doing this work, if they are called to do it or whatever the phrase might be, even if somebody tells you that's what they are all about, you will know if they are really good. They may be good, but not as good as they think they are. I try to say that to myself. "I am not as good as I think I am". I always want to learn, because the moment I think I know it all, it is over. I think my future is over if I think I am better than advertised. Every day I can learn something new. So having people like Bob and Jazmin, those who are younger than me and Dick and all of them are asking me questions; I enjoy answering their questions and helping them navigate through things. I tell them about things I see and that they are already good or I might say if you did it this way it might make it easier for you.

Youth Worker Support

On Thursday nights a group of youth workers meet with "The Professor" to reflect on their practice and discuss how to work with issues that arise in the neighborhood. Here is where Howard and Bob can talk about how they do the work and troubleshoot with the younger youth workers. Howard see this as the place where people can get support to improve their practice. "When we talk it is cool because it is like minded people and people who want to learn. Sometimes it is the best part of my week, however the super best part of my week is teaching kids to see. And then like I say, 'being the old guy'. Now I am the old guy that use to tell me stuff. So now I am him and telling kids stuff."

This is one way that youth workers learn their craft. The older generation passing their stories and information unto the new generation, understanding that the context may look different for the new generation, but that the “bones” of good youth work practice are timeless.

The Comfort Zone

Howard talked about youth workers, especially new youth workers needing to get out of their comfort zone to learn to understand the different youth sub cultures. It is too easy to always work with the youth you know. In organization Howard works with people (especially non-African-American staff) could pick and choose where they wanted to work and what they wanted to do. Howard’s contention was if you want to be a good youth worker you needed to be multi-faceted. He said, “Me and Bob laugh and talk about this a lot. If you took me to Mars and dropped me on Mars and there were a bunch of Martian kids, by the time you came back and picked me up they would know my name”.

At one of the youth work practice meetings one of the youth workers talked about the queer kids and the need to have particular youth workers supporting them. Howard believes, “if I can’t do that (work with the queer kids) than I am not as good as advertised and if I believe I am as good as advertised then you can take me over there and I’m just going to be fine, but you have to believe that”. He felt the youth worker was saying that there are these limits to Howard and Bob (being African-American) that were not transferable to other people and Howard is saying, “If you are talking limits then you are limited, so my thing is take me and Bob anywhere and you will find...”.

Barriers to Doing the Work

Howard came from the Boys and Girls Club where the population was multi-racial, a place where “I don’t see color I see kids”. When he moved to his current job things were divided and he was pigeon holed. He began to notice that he never got transferred to other sites. This is how he told the story:

Until the professor came around, I had been pigeonholed and so were bunch of other folks. Until I said hold up. I am seeing other people who can’t hold a candle to the stuff I’m doing and they are getting promoted and this and that. For me one of the golden rules of the organization was/is that you should not stay in a center too long. While I never got transferred because nobody wanted to come here; which was good for me, but I also thought it was a bad thing because you can’t see what else I can do. Because you kept me here, and pigeonholed me and believe it is what it is. At the same time nobody else came over here to learn how to do this. Because for me I could do good youth work and all that because I worked at the Boys and Girls Club...but the city didn’t know nothing about that. Then people tried to say we are going to send somebody there because it would be a good move for them because they would learn something. People would say I am not going to Oakridge, I am not going there because I fear for my life. But it’s ok for me to be up here every day. So my thing was once the professor and I started talking, I wanted to start the movement that every black guy is not security and that we have brains and if you talk to us you would know there is more than just what you see. So my push has been the staff should know how to run open gym, how to be a field monitor and between me and you they are having trouble

finding field monitors because of the push that me and Bob started. Now all the African- American guys are saying we won't be a field monitor. Because you see they (other staff) don't want to deal with the football teams because they are mostly Black parents that go crazy or the Hispanic parents, so all the white workers go, "I don't want to be a field monitor". But that's ok. Or I don't want to be the gym monitor, but when we would say no they would say you need to go and do that. When you are caught up in the middle of it you don't realize that's what you're doing because you think I'm just doing my job and obviously I'm good at it because they always ask me. So they ask me to go work where there is a big fight and I go "sure" and then I would go deal with all the issues, but I am doing a good job, I'm being a good soldier. Then I start to look around; hold up, I'm doing all this and then other people are flying up the ladder and I am still down here. Then they give me this person; I want you to make this person shine and I finally said, "When do I shine?" I can help people shine, so when do I shine. So, when I started doing that, people started looking at me going. "What's wrong with him?" Then me and the Professor started talking and I told him, Professor this is the wrong path. At this point I don't want to quit the Parks, but I want to be part of changing the culture and that is the beginning of where we are today.

After he told this story Howard said, "Yesterday before I left (the youth work practice meeting) I said I want everybody to understand that we are all we got. We have to learn on each other because we are all we have; because the culture is not going to change tomorrow or next week or next year. We are all we have so when we call on each

other we have to be able say, “I got you”. Here we see a youth worker who comes to understand that he can affect a culture change within his organization and with the support of fellow youth workers can make it happen.

Howard talked about another incident where being out of the comfort zone was an issue for the administration. The directors and others are not in the field very often so they do not see the way youth workers interact with the youth. One day the director a city council member were observing at a center. They were in the gym when a youth worker said to a kid, “what up light skin with your nappy head?” The Director and the council member were taken aback and did not know how to respond to the situation saying, “I am not African-American so I don’t understand how they talk to each other”. He asked a supervisor to find out what was going on. So they asked Howard to help with the situation and he said, “If that were a problem, I would have lost my job a long time ago. Sometimes you have to use a different approach with these kids.” Howard went on to describe the situation this way:

I says things that allows the kids a place to play with you in a respectful way and a space for you to play with them and it is not disrespectful. Sometimes adults don’t understand that when you’re doing that you are really building a relationship with this kid and sometimes kids will get mad when you don’t say something to them. Why aren’t you teasing me?

So they will call me a name so I have to say something back and then they will go away. They are having fun and think that was funny and Howard acknowledged me today.

Howard said he has worked with this particular staff and he does that with kids. The

supervisor said this guy was not in trouble, but the director wanted to know what was going on so the staff person said, "I will not do that again". Howard said he did not agree. "When I am in the gym with the YMF kids and nobody else is there and they are cussing a little bit I will not say anything. But if there are visitors I will walk into the gym and say there are people in our house; we've got visitors and you guys know the deal." Howard goes on to say that this guy should not be in trouble, but he should learn to check the room. Howard does not want this guy to stop being who he is because he is good at what he does; he just needs to check the room.

Howard pointed out the fact that you don't want to neuter the staff person and make him feel that he can't talk to the kids. He said he has laughed at back and forth of some of the interactions between this staff and the kids. There was nothing malicious in what happened and more than likely the kid was waiting for him to say something.

I asked Howard if the administration people were all white and he said yes. This could have been a cultural thing that they would not have understood.

Working in Tandem

I asked Howard about his working relationship with Bob. I said that they were like two cops in the police car that knew each other so well they could play off of each other. All they had to do was give each other the eye. How did they come to this point in their relationship?

We played basketball together. We played in all kinds of leagues together. I was best man at his wedding. But it goes deeper than that. It was one of those things where Bob was in the streets and he says, "I was one of Howard's first YMF kids. I was a little older than Bob so we used to go to these basketball tournaments and

when everybody else was in the back talking, me and Bob would sit up front talking and I told him you've got a lot of ability, you should put it in a different direction. I convinced him, the first time, to come work for our organization. Then he added another job through a friend of ours. He was a bartender and then he became a union steward so he was doing really well. At one point he left the organization. Right before the Professor came around I told Bob to come back to the city. Now is the golden opportunity. I convinced him to come back and my supervisor need somebody at Benedict and I told her I have somebody who used to work for us. She hired him back because of his experience. Then the professor came around and I asked Bob to come to a youth work meeting. At first he was like "Hmmm" and then he got into it. Then the next thing you know Bob started to blossom and it has really been good for him.

Going back to the idea of working in tandem. Howard called Bob a "free spirit" By that he meant that he really gets the idea of how to do youth work and when you find people like that it make it easy because you don't have to spend all your time trying to show them how to get it. You can just go with the flow and then "you don't have to explain why you did it, you just see it and do it and it is taken care of". He talked about how "you do so much stuff together that a lot of time you just don't even think about it; you did it and it is done."

The Last Words

When Howard made these comments about not even having to think about what you do, it creates this idea in my mind that Howard is one of those "wizards" that they talk about in Urban Sanctuaries (Mclaughlin, Irby and Langman, 2001). When I

observed him in action I had to pay attention because his moves were so subtle.

Howard said the Professor would always ask him, “Why?” And Howard would say, “It is just what I do”. But the more that he has talked about what he does Howard is better able to tell his stories. The Professor has Howard write book reviews and he told Howard he could do better. Howard was not writing the way he talked. He said it was because “I want to use the right words instead of being free flowing.” We also talked about telling our stories and the difficulty in talking about it because “you don’t want people to think you think you’re the King of Kings.” Sometimes people cannot see what Howard is doing and when he is able to show or tell them, they suddenly see it and understand why Howard positions himself in ways to see more and have the larger view. “It’s not like I had this great revelation, well I will stand right here and then I will see. It was that I could not see so I moved to where I could put myself in the position of seeing multiple spaces.” The Professor would ask him why he positioned himself where he did and why he stood the way he stood. Howard’s answer was that he wanted to be inviting to kids so they would think, “I could talk to him”.

Howard’s last comment was “Bob said something good.” When you come into the center and when the kids come into the center, I want them to say “Where’s Bob, Where is Jasmine, Where is Howard because when they know your name you are doing good work; otherwise they would not come looking for you.

Ross: Growing up in youth work.

I met Ross when he was 26 years old. He is a slight young man with a winning smile and a charming personality. Although he is young to be considered an experienced youth worker, he grew up in park and rec centers and was mentored by two very skilled youth workers. Although he did not know he was being mentored at the time, youth workers saw his potential and knowing he needed guidance gave him opportunities to volunteer. His stories tell us something about how someone can grow into the practice of youth work when they have support and backing. Interwoven in Ross's stories are clues to what good youth work practice can be like, and an example of how youth workers can change the course of a youth's life in a positive way.

When I first met Ross, he was working at a rec center in another neighborhood than the one he grew up in. This was his first solo experience without his mentors, Bob and Howard and a test of abilities to work outside his comfort zone. His story is about how he grew up in youth work and how it became his journey into the practice of youth work.

The first day I observed Ross it was an afternoon when there were few youth in the building. When I arrived he was playing a basketball game with two boys about 10 years. They were playing a version of "Horse" and he had them laughing and trying to beat him in shots. When they tried to take a shot he would yell or jump at the ball. This was a way for them to learn to focus on the shot rather than what others were doing. Of course, it made them laugh and sometimes they made the basket anyways, but many times they missed. You could see that

they really liked being around Ross. When the game was over they shook hands with Ross and left to go home. Since there were no youth left in the building we sat and talked about his work. He is fairly new to this park and has many ideas about how to increase youth participation beyond just the usual sports activities. He is working with his new mentor (Ben) to start a teen night on Fridays which will include sports, but also implement activities that youth ask for. The plan would be to have the youth help design the teen night. In order to make this happen he is connecting with the nearby junior high school to get to know the youth and encourage them to come to the rec center. This takes time as he will need to create relationships with the youth so they will trust him and buy into the idea of a teen night.

Ross is part of a new group of center staff who have been assigned mentors. The mentors are all experienced youth workers and their job is to support the new staff as they develop their youth work practice. In Ross's case he is already very skilled having grown up mentored by skilled youth workers, but needs the support to let him know that he will be able to implement his ideas in his new setting.

When Ross and I sat down for the interview, I asked him how he came to be a youth worker at this stage in his life. The first thing he told me was that he was a youth who grew up inside a rec center doing activities. "The first time I went to the rec center it sort of drew me in so I started to volunteer". He said it seemed like fun, so he tried it out to see if he would like it. He came in contact with directors who took an interest in him. At the time he did not know they were

mentoring him, but when he looks back he realizes that by making the center fun with sports and after school programs and having a staff that actually got involved with him they were drawing him into leadership roles. Ross was about 12 years old at the time.

How did Ross make the transition from youth participant to youth worker? When he was around 15, he started to help out on field trips keeping track of the younger kids and making sure everyone had tickets. “I officially started to feel like I was doing the work instead of just being a participant in the activities”. The city was beginning to hire youth to work at the center. He kept volunteering until the “door opened” and he could work on “a probationary period” and then if he showed ability he could be hired as youth staff. Ross was also part of a program that worked with African American males who were gang affiliated; to help them succeed in their life goals. “They (the youth workers who staffed the program) actually pushed me right out there so the people of the city could see me...that my skills were helping out at the rec center, that I could actually solve problems that I could work with people”. The program made it possible for Ross to go beyond volunteering at a center and move into actually working for the city. By showing he was responsible and ready to work he eventually was hired. Ross credits Howard, the youth worker who took a direct interest in him, for showing him the way. Ross said, “it was basically through Howard’s free will ‘I am here, come talk to me’ and that is how it started. I started to go there and he asked me some of the things I wanted to do. I told him I’d love to work for the city, actually work for the city. I know how to do this stuff, not everything, but I know some things, I

know how to work with people, I know how come to work and learn, so that is when the opportunity came”. He had to show the city that he could be responsible and do the work. It took a while because there was a staff freeze, but Ross was persistent and got the job. He went into the work with the attitude “if there is something I want to learn I will ask you, and if it is something I know I will show you, and Howard said, you know how to do this so do it”.

Why did Howard single Ross out for mentoring? Ross thinks it was because of his determination. Ross said:

They targeted me because of, you know, my determination. They gave me my opportunities to mess up and branch off. I feel that Howard seeing that no matter what was going on I would come back to the center. Stuff would happen in the neighborhood and Howard would look for somebody, you know, it could be anybody it didn't necessarily have to be me, but he would look and he would say I can't find out what's going on and then it would be me; I would always come back and tell him, Howard, this is what is going on and if I was scared I would tell Howard I was scared and this is what is going on and he would kind of do that for you; this guy really likes being around here and likes being involved and so he would keep throwing “seeds” to see if I would keep coming back and so it is like he kept babying me in to see what opportunities I would take and when Howard finally came to the assumption, okay, this is the time, ok, What do you want to do?

This is where Ross started to talk about how he grew up and how he came to be a “rec-rat”. This is the story he told me.

You know when I was growing up, it makes me laugh now, it makes feel crazy now, when I look at all the things that Howard and Bob were showing me and it was like all the things I learned out of them showing me I learned when I started to volunteer. They would start to say, “Look at all this trash around the park” and at first I would say, “Give me a quarter and I will pick it up”. But after a while they would say, “We got all this trash in the park” and I would say, “I got it”.

That’s when they started to realize that he would pick up the trash just because he knows this is his area. That’s when I really started to feel that Oakridge was ours.

When they built the new center is when they came to us (Ross and his friends) and Howard came right out and said, you all know this is your building. It is not my building, or Bob’s. This is the communities’ building so treat it like it is your own home. And that is when I started to get more and more involved. Like I said, I didn’t have my dad, didn’t have no uncles; I am the oldest of six so like it was pretty much at 15 or 14, what do you want to do. Howard was actually the man who came to me and said, “You’ve got some things, so what do you really want to do”. So that is why I am saying he was throwing “birdseed” just to see what I would do. Now I see it when I look at it, it took time. But this was really training me this whole time for 10 years, 10 years of training and it was six years before I even knew. (I said this was like a long apprenticeship). Ross said:

Howard is a smart man. He made you feel like you know there are people that want you to do better. ‘Cause it was like you know when our building got shut

down, we didn't have a rec center for a little time. It was like Howard still came out and was like "I am still at the park". All we had was just the playground and he still was at the park. It made us feel like Howard is really with us, he really cares about us. So that is why I say, when you get a relationship with youth and you get the one who is kind of like the leader, it is always good. Because once he met me, when something happened he would not even have to say it. He would look at me and I would say, "Man why you all do that. You know Howard is going to be mad at all of us. You know the gym is going to be closed for everybody". So you know it is kind of like he is using his skills and using me as an advocate with the others. (I asked Ross if he saw himself as a leader). At first I didn't, but when I started to work with Howard I did. When I started to branch out everybody wanted to know "what'cha doing". "I'm working with Howard". "Why is Howard working with you" and you know it turned into "I want Howard to work with me too". And it turned into everybody saying "Howard, man, how can you help me"? Man, I need help too, you know what's up man, you are helping Ross out, and you know you are good". I was just talking to everybody about it. "Man, you know why do you go to Oakridge every day?" He said, "they got open gym man, and Howard let you hoop, man and teach you how to play ball". I didn't know basketball, I really didn't. Now I do because of Howard and Bob. Bob showed me how to shoot and Howard showed me how to really play. Like I say, after years of me just learning and being around them and starting to get comfortable with Howard and Bob that's when I started to open up and started to feel okay this is something I want to do. That is

how I found my gifts with in the city and working with people and now I see it is something I want to do. I can see myself being Howard and running a rec center and having stuff to do all day with youth until it is time to go home. I can see that this is one of my visions and like it is crazy; it seems Howard already seen this before I saw it. Howard was just trying to get me to open up. He just kept picking and picking.

Now it was Ross's turn to work with youth. What convinced him to take the plunge was the fact that a park board manager was recognizing him for the work he was doing as recreational staff. He realized that people really cared about what he was doing and were willing to give him a chance to step up. Ross said, "That is when I started to know that what I was doing was the right thing and I can keep doing it and it is a perfect for me now. I love doing this, I love kids and it doesn't matter white green blue purple. I like them having fun. I like to let them just hang out and let them do what they want to do just to see what they go at". This is the youth work style kicking in; by letting the youth show him what they are interested he can start to throw out the "seeds" to draw them into leadership roles. One day when I was observing Ross at the rec center I noticed that he went to sit by a youth who was all alone and did not talk or engage in the activities. The youth did not want to bake cookies and Ross did not push him into the activity. I asked him what drew his attention to the youth. Ross said, " it seemed like he (the youth) was distancing himself from everybody so for me when I came in I noticed it and it made me think why don't I sit with him just to see what's up and that's how I usually come in with something and I asked him, you know, what is your name. He said it was Jacob and when I talked to him I realized that he was really shy and

maybe not around a lot of people...Once you start you talking with them (the youth) and play with them and get close to them I see them open up more; just a little bit, a little bit, just a little bit. With him I just noticed that somebody got to say something to him. If nobody says something to him all day, he will just sit there". Ross has learned to pay attention to the subtle signals that mean a youth needs attention. You just need to start somewhere and something will happen. Here is another story from Ross that shows his youth work practice abilities:

We have a young guy who is autistic and when he feels under attack he will go in straight defense mode and he has no problem defending himself. I tell him you know it's cool you have no problem with that, but don't try to defend yourself with me when I am trying to help you. I am the only person that can go out and see him and say 'what's up, how are you doing. He will say 'hey, what's up Ross" and he'll talk to me. And everybody else says you know him, you know his name and what he's doing here and that's when I tell them he just walks around, just hangs around you know. If anything goes wrong you just tell me, don't go to him, I don't want him to like flip out and say why are you saying something to me, why are you following me around. Like I say he deserves the park like everybody else; he deserves to have fun. They thought he was an adult; he is a teenager. He has his little facial hair, is growing up like I said you can tell he is a young man. It's just you know special needs kids look a little older. But that's all it is and he's a cool dude, he speaks to me and every time people are around he makes sure that he is seen with me so they know that he is cool and

that's. Like I say I got no problem with him. As long as everybody respects you and you respect them. He don't speak to nobody, he just walks around.

Ross is learning to use the tools that Howard taught him. When youth feel ownership of a place they will learn to respect the rules and the people in it. As he said, "That is how I was taught. This is your area, you help take care of it...whatever happens to the building is up to you all...the building is yours and if you live in this neighborhood you and everybody else it is yours just as much as it is all the kids in the community". In good youth work practice helping youth feel ownership of a space means they will take pride in it and make it safe for everyone.

Ross told me a story about how some park centers excluded youth. He said he was a "gym rat" growing up. He played all the sports, soccer, flag football, etc. There was one park, Coffman that gave him the feeling that he and his friends were not welcome. "It was like the staff were older men and they would come in and sit in the gym and watched us and we could not play basketball because they were watching us. They acted like we had done something already. It was the looks." There was one staff member who would not speak to the youth and kick them out of the gym if their pants were too low. He would not give them a chance to pull the pants up he just told them to "go home". "They would scare a lot of people from going up there". The contrast is a rec center where the staff operate as youth workers. There is always something to do and someone to talk to. Youth are made to feel welcome. Ross said that the youth get dropped off in the morning and don't see their parent until nighttime. "There is always something going on, but when you go there you are working and you're doing what you are supposed to do and the kids will love you for it...they just want to be known and to have fun."

Ross said his first encounter as a youth at Oakridge was just walking past and “Howard saying, ‘what’s up man’. That is exactly how it was, I promise, and the crazy thing about it that made me think, why this crazy old man is talking to me. The next day it would be, ‘what’s up, what’s your name now?’ My name’s Ross”. Everyday Howard would talk to Ross and finally invited him go into the rec center and check it out and when Ross found out there were all these activities and that is how the relationship between a youth and a youth worker can begin. Ross would go hang out, do his homework there. Ross lived across the street from the center and Steve knew his mom so if Ross and his friends were acting out he would go knock on Ross’s door and let his mom know. “That is the kind of relationship that Howard has with kids; once you got involved with Oakridge Howard knew you and your mom. Once Howard knew you, momma knew everything you did because Howard would pick up the phone or go to the house, ‘How are you doing Janay? I saw Ross today and he was acting up’ and that’s how you get it”.

The youth worker relationship goes beyond the youth to eventually the whole family. Ross said, “That is how you find out what the environment is like. You are involved with the family of brothers and sisters and you start to see what kind of circumstances there have been.” A circle of support can be created. It doesn’t always work. Ross has a brother who is in jail. Howard tried to work with him, but he would not go to the rec center. He felt that Howard was coming down on him when he told him he was “messing up”. “Instead of hanging out there (the streets) you need to come in here (the rec center).” Ross said, “That was my thing; I always stayed going to the building. I never quit. I believe I may have took the wrong path if I didn’t keep going there and if

Howard didn't keep throwing bird food at me. It is hard when you don't have nobody, when you think everybody is against you. You start thinking, oh well whatever. But with Howard there like you can't give up, man, you just can't give up".

In his youth work practice now Ross sees many youth who don't have somebody behind them. "These kids don't have anybody like that; that's why teenagers run away, they don't talk to nobody. That's why they act out in school because nobody is asking them what is really going on and Howard was that keep it real guy and that is how he got to all of us." Ross said that Howard is the kind of youth worker that will tell you right out that it is not ok to rob a bank and if you do you are going to jail. "I can't protect you from doing wrong".

Ross is a youth worker now and he is a youth worker because he was "raised" by a youth worker. Here is how he tells it:

Howard's job is to give us all the knowledge and the keys to do what we want to do so ever since I've always followed what Howard would say. It has not led me wrong and I ask him about my family, my personal life. I asked him about my work. I asked him about being a man sometimes, Howard, I am hurting man. And I am a man, I can't cry. He would be the one to say you can cry if you want, men cry all the time. And I started to realize that Howard really cares for what you want to do. He is not just in it for nothing. He wants you to help yourself and he doesn't want to take the credit for it. The whole time I've been working he never wanted to take the credit. I would say, "Howard, thank you man for helping me man", and he'd say, "What you thanking me for? You're the one who did the work. All I did was put you out there, but you do what you do with it after that.

And that was the perfect thing. I always say, he is a great man, I wish there were different people like Howard in different colors and everything for everybody to have that opportunity to have a Howard to touch with.

I asked Ross to tell me more stories about his youth work practice. This gives a glimpse into his world now as an experienced youth worker building on what he has learned and how he thinks people see him now.

Ross and another young youth worker started a group with 4 or 5 youth at the Coleman Rec Center. They patterned it after the program Howard was doing with gang affiliated youth. A lot of “stuff” was happening at Coleman stealing, gambling, etc. They started out slowly letting the youth get to know them. This is Ross explains it:

It was their community; we had just started working there. We didn't want them to feel like we were coming over changing stuff. But we knew something had to change. So I started up working there and meeting with them and started building relationships with some leaders over there. That Jones and Rush Street area, that is like Washburn Street. It is the area to be in; a hot spot for teens; between Coleman and Halifax. When Coleman was there, we started to do the Thursday thing where we were meeting with them and we would pull them out of the alleys, maybe 30 or 40 kids, the four or five that we had (the leaders) would go out and reach out to the 30 or 40 that we had. This is Ross, this is John, and they work over here so they respect us. So that is when I started to build my relationships with them and we started to change Coleman around. It was hard at first. They were used to smoking around the building, shooting dice, used to just hanging out.

And after they learned and started meeting with me and John, they said, “We respect you all and we are going to move around. So then I changed the place from Howard to me, because he was the director there and when Howard was gone, they would say, “Hey Ross, you the boss man we are going to move around”. And now when I say stuff, it only takes one time. And that is when I realized that this is working. They respected me because I respected them. They are thinking he didn’t just barge in on us and change things. And that was the first time the tables were turned and I was doing what Howard was doing. (Here is where Ross is really beginning to see himself differently). Like I say he can go to a group of cats and be like I want to talk to you all. I ain’t trying to be your father; I just want to talk to you and that make their whole perspective change to Howard, we’re going to move around. We’re not going to smoke around here. And that is how it was with me like it was my first time feeling that. It was hard; it was really, really rough. At first some of them walked away, but I had one or two the first day because they were like, man, I know you. Everybody else didn’t. They knew me from the street and that is when I first started to rein them in. The kids who did not know me were teenagers. I was 25 or 24; I was older. They were 17 or 16, but the few that I knew they were, just off the respect; you came at us with respect so we give you respect. It just turned into everybody saying, “Ross, What’s up man, I want to smoke a cigarette where do I gotta go?” Instead of I smoke right here. I say, “Just go right across the street or walk down the street; smoke your cigarette; not over here; not in our parking lot”. Coleman was the first spot I feel like my skills were being used and I was finally getting my

recognition, like I finally got recognized for being stand up, you know grown up about it. You know I could have said you are kicked out; the building is closed down. At first it was really bad; the play station came up missing, food was coming up missing, the stuff kids were doing all the time. Man, when I came over here one of the kids said the staff let them shoot dice out in the back. “Like outside?” “No, in the back room”. I said, “Bro don’t even ask me if you could shoot dice, it is not going to happen with me. It is definitely not going to happen with me so just know it.

I asked Ross if he was doing similar things at their age, and he sees now the value of doing life a different way? Tell me what it means

Ross said that he wanted to open everybody up to let them see the change in him and he did not have to be stuck. He felt that a lot of people were thinking he would not be able to change; not amount to anything. Now they see him and they say, “Damn, you are successful, man, you work”. And Ross says, “yes, I go to work and I love going to work; I have fun. Working with kids can be fun. They make you smarter”. He said that people are thinking they can change too when they see what he is doing. “Two of the smarter cats who were hanging at Coleman were not a part of the program I was involved in; now they are involved because they see me working. The main key to my transition is to tell the truth. They want to know what the people say because they are scared”. Ross tells them that the police are not bad when you are not doing anything wrong. He is beginning to see the police as allies in supporting the youth. Now that Ross is showing what he is capable of the police ask him to be a communication link to the youth. The

police want him to let the youth know they are not interested in chasing them down. They want the youth to be safe.

I asked Ross, “10 years ago did you ever think you would be doing this work?” Ross said that ten years ago he was the teenager that knew everything and part of that was the fact that he was the oldest child and with his brothers and sisters he was the boss. His father had left when he was nine so he took on the father role. When he was nineteen he met his father and they reconnected and are close now, but it was tough because Ross felt like his father just left and that was it. His father left after one of the brothers died and the other brother was in the penitentiary. When he finally got in touch with his father he was just glad that his dad was part of his life and could see that he was doing well. This was another transition moment. Ross told me that now that he is a father he understands what it means to be there. “I know firsthand how it would be without her having me. So that is another thing that changed my perspective of being in the streets and being in a gang. Where do family come in with something like that. These guys are out here doing things for their gangs and they don’t really care for their family and they go to jail forever and their children grow up not knowing and I don’t like that.” Ross wants his daughter to know him and he wants to be part of her life. That is his main goal and he knows that his other goal is to make a difference in his community. “If I can change even a few guys even if I don’t know them, I will have served my purpose, you know, it will make me feel better. I will feel good to pass on the knowledge that was given to me. So let me pass it on.”

Ross would not say this is his calling, because when he was growing up he did not know what he was doing, but “Once I knew what I was doing, once I got a taste for it, my

sample of this is how you create life, this is how you grow, and this is how you know you move on. So that is when I like, ok, let's do this. It is time to be a man." For him it was an intersection where he had to make a decision and Howard just left it to him to make the choice. "When I looked at Howard, and he was like, man, this is something good for you and when he said, 'for you', that's what stuck for me. It's for me not for Howard. You know he don't care, all he care is if I'm doing the right. He's going to love me regardless."

Now Ross is at Lyndale practicing his craft and trying to do right by his family at home and his "kids" at the park.

Bob: Life Lessons

Bob is the assistant director at a rec in a public organization serving youth in a Midwestern city. At this time he is juggling being a youth worker and transitioning to an administrative position. He told me he is trying to balance this dual position by doing the administrative work in the morning so he can be a youth worker in the afternoon when the youth are around. When he is in his youth worker role he is one of three youth workers on site. It is summer and they spend a lot of time outside moving around watching and interacting with the youth as needed. The afternoon I first observed Bob, he was still in the office working on the computer. I asked him if he was interested in being a participant in the study and he was not sure. He was still in the middle of making the transition and did not feel comfortable taking on another task. Since I was observing youth workers at his site a couple of days a week, he had a chance to see how I worked and eventually agreed to be part of the study.

The Approach

Bob is a big guy with a big presence. He told me that people say he is a big teddy bear, but Bob says, “No I am not a big teddy bear (laughter)”. He said that people who don’t know him might not approach him because of his size so he takes his size and demeanor out of it and focuses on the other person. “I will be the one to approach and say ‘hey, how are you doing? So that I am not looking like a bodyguard with a mean face. It is a smile and a hand gesture and a simple how are y’all doing today and I find that is a positive way of moving on someone.”

Because Bob is big guy and looks intimidating, he uses the same approach with youth. If he uses the stance of a bodyguard he will push youth away, but if he uses a

smile and hand gesture or say how y'all doing today, he is "putting a positive move" on the person and they are drawn in and then a little teasing helps draw them in some more. For Bob it is all about the approach. Every person is different and sometimes he just needs to say a few words of encouragement. He also told me that he tells the other youth workers "take the attention off yourself and put it on someone else" that's what I do. It becomes about the youth not the youth worker. Bob said he is at the point that he does what he does without realizing he is doing it. The approach has become part of who he is.

When Bob interacts with youth it looks natural and playful; teasing, asking about what they are doing. One day a girl asked to share his snack and he said, "I care, but I do not share" and then laughed and gave her the bag of chips. She looked like she was going to eat them all and he said, "I said share not take all" and they bantered back and forth. It was playful not hurtful and the bond between the youth and the youth worker was growing.

Observing Bob I could see that he has this way of working with kids where he teases them, reminds them to be appropriate, touches their shoulders and just continually interacts with them very subtly. One girl was picking up trash because she wanted something to do. When the youth workers see a youth show this kind of initiative, it becomes an invitation to the youth worker to invite the youth to become more active in the community of the rec center. This helps youth feel a sense of belonging and helps them grow in their leadership skills.

Later the same day a youth came in and Bob said "Remember the last time we met up you cursed me like an adult. We still need to talk about that. I did tell your

mother, but we still need to talk”. The youth tried to ignore him, but it was not easy. Finally he left and Tim explained to me that he had cursed him out like he was talking to an adult and that needed to get sorted out before he could be in the rec center. Later I found out this was a bigger story. This is how the story was told to me.

When Bob was moving into his current position there was a night where he got frustrated with a youth. Tyrone was disrespecting Bob as he has done before and apparently went too far in his remarks. Bob put his hands on Tyrone to help him leave the gym and Tyrone got upset and there was a verbal confrontation where Tyrone cursed Bob out and made threats. Tyrone was “showing out” for his friends and Bob asked him to leave and he was banned from the gym for the time being. Bob was angry about the whole situation and called Howard to debrief. Howard who has been a mentor to Bob talked him down by asking questions and throwing out alternative ideas. Bob wanted to ban Tyrone from the rec center permanently and Howard suggested that they use another method. So when Tyrone came back and wanted to talk to Bob, Bob told him not now. He would talk but he was not ready so Tyrone could not hang out with his friends at the rec center. Howard’s role was to talk to Tyrone about what was happening and how his friends could go into the gym at 6:30 to play basketball and he was the one left sitting on the bench. So Tyrone kept trying to talk to Bob and even asked Howard to intervene and convince Bob to talk. One day when Bob left early Tyrone tried to get Howard to let him in the gym and Howard said no that would be disrespectful to Bob and he could not do it. He also said I see that at 6:30 all your friends go in the gym and you don’t. Trying to help Tyrone see what his actions had caused. Finally one day Tyrone asked to talk to Bob and he said yes, but you have to wait until I finish what I am doing. When they talked,

Tyrone complained about Bob putting his hands on him and Bob said, you are right I should not have done that, but you also need to talk about what you were doing that prompted it. Tyrone was willing to say what his part was and Bob said, I will not put hands on you again and Tyrone said I will not be disrespectful and they worked it out. It was a negotiation. A parent who was waiting to talk to Bob heard the conversation and afterwards told Howard that how Bob handled the situation was the coolest thing he had seen.

The youth worker who told me the story said the brilliant part was that Bob waited until he could talk to Tyrone without anger and Tyrone had a chance to see how his actions blocked him from the gym. The youth workers see the youth who screw up not as someone to kick out but someone who is crying out for help. They often work as a team to keep them coming rather than to push them away. As you can see in this story, Howard and Bob did just that.

On another day at the center, it was a sunny day and everyone was outside. One of the girls kept asking Bob to let her play football. She wants to go practice with the boys. After much banter, he said, “why don’t you all go play football right now?” So the girls went to gather up a team and they found boys and girls and went out to the field and started up a game. An older guy who is new to the neighborhood acted as the coach. Another youth worker, Jazmin, joined in the game and Howard and Bob watched. The teams were coed at first and then split into a boys and girls team. They were playing serious football. The girls held their own. There was no fighting just hard playing for an hour and a half. Everyone had fun and it was great to watch. When it started to rain, the game ended with happy exhausted youth. Bob and Howard were the encouragers. At the

center you will often see the youth workers take various roles; sometimes observing and sometimes interacting. As a director Bob is beginning to step back and let the younger youth worker engage so that they can build their relationships with the youth. Here is what he told me about this. “I will go into the gym and make a point of making myself visible still not taking away from the other staff I don’t even go over there or nothing I just walk in the gym. If they have a problem [the youth] I say talk to her [the youth worker] I am just in here as one of you all”. This is his way of staying in touch and not inhibiting the other youth workers.

Bob has “people skills”. Whether he is working with you or needing to solve a problem with adults he can negotiate a situation. For example: one evening at rec center two students were caused a minor disturbance outside at closing time and one of the parents got very upset and accused the youth work staff of not doing their jobs and basically calling the youth “hoodlums. There was a crowd of families leaving and youth hanging out together in front of the building.

Bob was called to deal with the situation because he is the director. This is what I observed and how Bob explained it later. He decided to go in with the confidence that he knew what he was doing. He tried to keep it positive and not argue although he got “pissed off” when the woman told the youth they had no purpose in life. She also told Bob he had not purpose, but he just said, “I do have a purpose it is the all these kids”. But when she insulted the youth he got mad. His goal was to get the woman to leave so when the police arrived and asked Bob what you would like to see happen, He said get her out of here. The police pulled the woman aside and talked her into leaving the area.

Bob had also asked the kids to leave. This way everyone could cool off. The kids never did show any anger. They just watched this woman go on and on.

The following week Bob and a park supervisor had a meeting with the woman and her husband. The supervisor apologized for what happened because he wanted to smooth things over, but Bob said that he did make it clear that although she and her family were welcome at the center she could not berate the staff and youth in the future. The whole family did show up the next week and Bob said, he decided to be the better man and went over to the couple and thanked them for being willing to discuss the issue and he hoped to see them continue to bring their children there. He also told them to let him know if they had concerns and Bob said they have been coming up and saying hi and things are good right now.

Bob was willing to make the first move for reconciliation and that relieved the tension. He has a way with people and he smiles at you and looks you in the eye and disarms you. He does it with the youth too and he is straight forward and does not dance around things.

One night Bob had a staff person take the older girls to the craft room to make art. They were mostly using coloring pages. One girl was drawing her own pictures and when she was finished, she brought it to Bob and they talked about how she had drawn the picture and what he thought about it. Bob was very engaged with her and although I could not hear what they were saying you could tell they were having a real conversation. At this moment the girl needed some attention and Bob was there to talk with her. The conversation happened in the gym where it was crowded and noisy, but this did not

matter they were in relationship over the picture. Here he has dropped his director's hat and acted as a youth worker who knew this youth needed some attention.

When Bob talks about how he came to do this work, he talks about lessons learned. I asked him about his playfulness and the ability to tease. Bob said as a kid he learned how to tease in a certain way; to tease in a way where you hurt a person's feelings or teasing as a friend where "I'm teasing you to playfully mess with you". There is a way to tease and protect at the same time to draw out a youth.

When he is in the rec building and the building is full of youth, he always seems to know when to check up on things. It is as if he has eyes in the back of his head. He listens to the sounds in the building, "how the noise is bouncing off the walls, you know this echo is getting a little high I better go check or maybe it's a little too quiet...if you listen to the walls, they tell you a lot." What Bob is doing is being intentional about how he approaches, how he listens and how he moves in and out of a variety of situations.

Becoming a Youth Worker

I asked Bob how he came to be a youth worker. We all come to this work from different places and different experiences; so how did Bob's experiences inform how he does his youth work. This is how Bob explained it.

I grew up around the Boys and Girls Club and Park and Rec. I started going over to the parks when I was in high school and got a job as junior staff. In high school I was in an acting class with a drama teacher who to this day; that's my girl. One time we had these kids from a nearby school at the rec center and we got to play with them and I was like I'm not going to play with those kids and the teacher was like "no you are". The next thing I know is all these kids are

following me around, chasing me around and you know she said, “You like working with these kids. You didn’t see what I see, you had almost every kid with you, whenever you sit down the kids are around you. That tells me something, that ain’t just happening.” So I started working in the day care center. I did that for a couple of years and then I worked as an outreach worker with teens and a variety of kids and then I did other stuff, but I kept getting called back to the rec center. I said to myself you are good you know. I was volunteering at Forester and they said fill out an application and take the test. Howard and others told me to and I did this and that is how I came to work at the rec center.

Bob left park and rec to work elsewhere, had struggles with life and jobs and had to start over again. A fellow youth worker, Howard, encouraged him to come back. Bob was not sure he wanted to return but Howard said, “There is an opportunity here for you and you should go back”. Bob has known Howard all his life because he was the youth worker that mentored him. Howard told him, “we worked very well together, we had a system and knew how to work with these kids, a variety of kids, the good ones, the bad ones, and we work with them”. Finally Bob agreed to return to the organization he is working with now because he knew he was a good youth worker and from his life experiences realized that this was where he belonged. Bob said, “That was another “calling” for me to go back and get some stability in my life”

Lessons Learned and the Calling

Bob said learning from life experiences is important. “I have a degree in life” If you make a mistake and learn from it and move on then you can say “I learned some valuable lessons some good, a lot bad, but you know I learned” These are the “lessons learned” that he uses in his youth work practice. He talked about being able to tell kids about options concerning the situations they are going through and “that it is ok to walk away, maybe they call you a chump or a sucker, but so what; you are in a situation to better yourself and right now you are around people that won’t help you better yourself. Are you a follower or a leader? Be your own man. [Bob tells them like this] I don’t knock what you do or how you do things, so don’t knock what I do or how I do things.” He is telling the youth to be their own person and make their own decisions not let others do it for them.

Bob talked about the issue of education. He tells people to get educated. People imply he doesn’t have a degree so therefore he is not educated. His education came from life lesson and many of those lessons, he learned from his mother; such as not to give up. He went to school during the time of desegregation when black students had to be escorted to their bus and were called names by white people. His mother told him that everyone is different so don’t judge others by what one person is doing. “My mother said; just because you have a bad experience there don’t mean this person is the same way”. He learned lessons from his mother that you don’t necessarily learn in the classroom, especially during times of strife. Another lesson Bob learned was that you don’t realize how hard it was until you think about it later. “It was almost to the point that we don’t really know or understand until we get older that it was traumatizing in a

way.” Because of this Bob tells people he has got a degree in life. He and Howard talk about this with other youth workers who tell them, “I am going to school trying to do what you’re doing” and it’s like, it’s almost a calling. I asked Bob to tell me more about this and he told me this story.

I always say and I joked around saying it without understanding it, but saying I am a prophet (laughter). It is interesting and I even told Howard we are prophets because of the stuff that we do, the situations we go through. I said in some ways it is God's calling you know. And then I look at it as it is God's calling; it is God putting me in the position of being where this is what you are good at, this is what you're calling is you know. And then it’s a calling or saying it is Howard calling me. (Laughter) Is Howard God? It is that other prophet, but it's bred in us and not knowing it. You know like I was saying no matter how much you are being taught, no matter what degrees you have working with kids... and I tell them, I tell the students you can’t be in here for the money even though we like to pay our bills and that, but you have to have a passion for, you have to have a passion to help, you have to have a passion to teach, you also have to have a passion to still learn. And if you can’t learn and if you don't love and that's where a lot of youth workers get hurt because they always want to have the power and that is something where Mike has helped me to understand. You know what one thing that you are doing is you all give kids power and sometimes you don't know it and they don't know it.

We talked about how you may never know how you impacted youth and Bob said he has often run into adults who tell him that “you don’t know what you and Steve did to

help... how you all were there for me”. Bob calls this another life lesson. Youth might not like what they are hearing at the time, but when they realize how Bob and Howard helped them they appreciate it. Bob says “I tell them you hate me now, but you will love me later” and their testimony proves him right.

So what does Bob do that makes him a “prophet”. He tells me he is an observer. “I am quiet, I observe”. “You get in where you fit in”. When he enters a new situation as he works, he observes and watches how others are working, how they collaborate, how they handle situations he takes “mental notes”. An example of this is when he became a director a new park, the park building was attached to a school, but there was no collaboration going on. After he watched this for a while, he went over to the school and introduced himself and told them to let him know if they needed help with anything to let him know. “If you trust me, I’ll trust you and that’s where I start building the trust level up”. Now Bob and the school are working together. He saw how a youth worker handled a situation with a youth. The youth worker wanted Bob to talk to the youth because the youth was black and the youth worker was Asian. Bob had to explain that that was not how it worked. Then he told this story.

I do have my beliefs I do believe in God. I believe in life after death. I have my beliefs. I always wonder why is it that if we have one God why do we always have so many different religions, the Baptists, Catholics, and Lutherans. Why if we are one nation why are we divided into Democrats and Republicans or liberals. To me we are one nation; we are America. But we look at all the divisions we have that really separates us. We got the poor, we got the middle class, we got the rich; you know there's so much separation that keeps us at battle. We battle with

ourselves. We are at war just like the other countries maybe not as much as they're doing with suicide death but you look at the wars that we have here. We've got the racial wars we've got the wars with in each other and it's not talked about but it's there and it's a battle. I've learned; I've had my pros and cons. I've learned to really say; to each his own. I was homophobic. I had to get that away from me; where I can say to each his own. I believe in the American Way but to each his own. I won't judge you. I won't do none of that. I say the final call at the end of the day is I am not the one to judge; the person above is the one that judges you, not me so it wouldn't be fair. That's my take on everything and I just look at it and go it's a crazy mixed up world.

How it Works

For Bob “how it works” is seeing each youth as an individual and getting to know him/her so he can meet them where they are and begin to create a relationship. Color, religion and lifestyle do not matter, what matters is what the youth want or need and so Bob meets them where they are with a high five or a tap on the shoulder. Bob is very playful with the youth and banter back and forth with them, touching in some way every youth that walks through the door. “Sometimes all the kids really want is a little attention, sometimes it is ‘what are you doing’ and they will look ...you are all right, you are not alone. Sometimes that is all it is.” But his focus is on the youth that is “on the other side, the fat kid, the ugly kid, the kid being talked about that don't have no friends” These are the youth he seeks out and shows them friendship. It might be the youth who is “a late bloomer” and wants to play basketball, but just can't seem to get it.

Ross was one of those youth. Bob saw something in him, he was “feisty” and had

the quality of wanting to learn so Bob worked with him and now, as an adult, he is coaching other youth at a rec center. When Ross thanked him for helping him to get to place he is in now, Bob told me he said to Ross, “That is what we are here for; Howard and me”. Then Bob went on to say, “We are not here to sit here. It would be easy to just sit here, but what difference would we be making.” Bob talked about going the extra step to help other youth with their basketball skills even when he was tired at the end of the day, but his rule was “if I work with you we are going to get something out of it”. There is always a negotiation in the process.

Playful teasing as a way of inviting in the youth is another aspect of Bob’s work. It is like the tap only verbal. It goes like this. “Hey, what’s up scrub”? “Man, I ain’t a scrub”. And then the youth comes back a little later to say, “What’s up bum”? Then Bob knows they know he means no harm; the conversation can start. If a youth does take it wrong, he apologizes and tells them he is sorry. Bob is reading the youth as they come in the door and knows when to tease and when not to tease. I asked him if he ever mis-reads a youth. Bob said, “Yes it has happened to us. If we haven’t mis-read we won’t have no learning. If I miss out on a mis-read than I am taking everybody as the same”. He doesn’t call everybody a “scrub or little duffle bag”, because he knows how to pick his “battles”. There is a negotiation going on here. Do you trust me to tease you? And the youth saying, “Yes, I do. “Here is another example of teasing to invite a youth in.

I will do that when they come in and say, “Is there open gym?” And I will say yeah, we do but it's only for hoopers. (Laughter) I used to do that at a lot. They come in, you know, they have to sign in. “Hey man, I am signing in, is there hooping?” I look and go, man, you can't sign in, “Hunh, why can he sign in”?

Because he looks like he's ready to come in and play ball and you look like you ain't got no game. Get 'em like that, You know and that's just an invitation because then the kid will say, "well, come and watch me" and I say, "ok, I will come and watch you" It is just an invitation of me saying something to them, of loosening them up. It is part of inviting them in.

Bob needs to create relationships with the other adults in a youth's world; youth workers and parents in particular. He will talk to the parents when youth are having problems and even when the parents don't agree he is able to negotiate with them to solve problems. He has had a parent call him and apologize for being angry, but his child will not be back, Bob's response is "I am sorry to hear that, but if he does come back he will be treated like he is ours". Bob wants parents to understand that he will not treat kids differently because he and the parent have an issue. "I am not going to judge just because you and me had a little problem. I'm not going to punish the kid; that's not really fair on my part".

Part of Bob's job now is to coach other youth workers. Modeling how to work with youth and pulling them aside to coach them when there is conflict between a youth and a youth worker. An example is the conversation he needed to have with a youth worker who showed favoritism to one group of girls, because she "liked these girls, but I don't like those girls." Bob had to explain to her that he did not always get along with the one group of girls, but they understand what I am going to do, they understand the repercussions, if they have an issue, "so I can pull them aside and talk to them". "Our development process is to treat all kids equal. Not all kids are the same, so you don't read them the same, but you give them fair treatment and that's a big difference." How

will this person develop into a good youth worker if they are not willing to work with a youth regardless of who the kid is? No matter how bad they can be, Bob will pull the youth aside and have a conversation, but he will not kick the youth out of the Rec center. He is trying to instill this in his staff.

What is it like to be Bob?

I asked Bob, What it like is to be you when you are a youth worker. Bob gives a big sigh and says, “Do you really want to know?” He tells me he is a “fun loving person, I love life, I really love it, I love having a good time.” When he is not doing youth work he loves to be around his friends and talking “shit”. He is always in the center of a group. He likes to compete and win but not at all costs. “I love to stir the pot”. He stirs the pot in his youth work too, in a different way, whether it is being playful and teasing the youth in a light hearted way or dealing with issues related to his job.

Now, he needs to balance youth work with being a manager so he has to negotiate how he will do both. He understands that there are meetings to attend and more paper work, so he tries to get the administrative work done early in the day so he can be a youth worker in the afternoon. “I am a youth worker by passion”. This means longer hours, but he makes it work for him. He wants to “be visible”. He also needs to be careful not to get in the way of the youth workers. “I go in the gym and play with them [the youth], I make it a point of making myself visible still not taking away from the other staff. I don’t go over there and step on toes... if you’ve got a problem talk to her [staff] I am here as one of you all”.

If Bob sees an issue with staff he pulls them aside to have a conversation, he does not call them out in front of everyone. “I think that is the respectable way”. He also

paces himself both mentally and physically so he does not get “worn down”. He moves around the building a lot, but never rushes in to impress. He moves around to keep an eye and an ear on the pulse of the building.

The job was wearing him down, because he was trying to do everything. He had to learn to pace himself. Advice came from a youth work professor at the local university who told him, “When you are doing effective work sometimes it wears you down. It is not how fast you move, but how effective you are. Some people are physically tired, yours is more mental because it is mental work and it wears you down.” He is learning from experience and advice from others that he can do the work, but not all at once. He also needs to use his staff effectively so he is not burning himself out.

Ben: Always on the Move

I met Ben through the youth work practice meetings that I was attending as part of my observation of the youth workers I wanted to interview. My first impression of him was that he was passionate about youth work, a fast talker and an intense guy. Howard and The Professor suggested I interview him for my study because he works at a youth center, a unique space in one of the rec centers in the city, and when I asked Ben about participating he signed on right away. He has been a youth worker in several countries working with youth living in urban areas. It took a few weeks to arrange a meeting because of his schedule and a trip he took to visit family in his home country. When we met at a local coffee shop to talk, he had just come back to the city and was recovering from a cold.

Right away he started talking about the cold and how he thinks that he gets sick when he goes on vacation because when he is here he is so focused “24 seven” that he is okay and then when he has down time he gives himself permission to be sick. Ben told me that he needed time away youth center because “there is tension there all the time and in a good way and it is that responsibility that I have to think you know. I am always intrigued by the teens; they make me laugh even when there is big trouble, fighting, whatever; but in the end of the day I am sitting somewhere and I laugh as I think it is funny”. He finds the humor in these tense experiences. He also knows when to take a break so he can unwind so he does not burn out. Ben also teaches a youth work class at State University where he was working on a master’s degree.

Getting Real

Ben has been working at The Teen Center for four months, which is as he says, “not a long time’, but he now can feel that he is forming bonds with the youth. “It is not at the depth that I think it could be, but I see the conversation that I have with them and I can see the things that they confide with me now that they wouldn’t two weeks ago or two months ago and it is getting real”. I asked him to tell me more about getting real. This is the story he told me.

I will tell you something; for me The Teen Center is a means to do something else. It is just a way to do something, to build relationships with them, to be maybe a positive role model for them; to show them some stuff, to help them to see their strengths, their talents, their awesomeness basically. It feels like when I came to the center; I don’t want to say anything bad about the person that was before me, but the place was more like a drop in center that had nothing really for the kids. The kids came because it was a safe place for them. You know I have four siblings (at The Teen Center), 17, 16, 15, and 14; all guys, okay? I love them. They are living in a really small place; they need the youth center; they need it because they don’t have enough space for so many hours. For them this is their home; so that is okay. With all the activities we have now it was a valid place for teens; because it was a place you could be. It was a valid place where you could have peace of mind maybe or have the advantages that other people have. You don’t have internet at home. Here at the youth center you have six laptops that you can use.

If the place was only for, you know, a safe space that's okay, but I think it should be more than that, okay? And seems that we have had three months of transition and suddenly the kids get it. You know I try to push for some things and they push back, you know, and suddenly they come and demand all. "We haven't had a party for a long time so what can we do". I said, okay, so let's talk about it and we had a meeting. It was better than the meeting that we (the adults) were having because they (youth) know more and, you know what, they can dream more, okay. Because in school and in the places they have to be they have narrow borders. That is what you can do. (The rules). Now when I say yes you can go with me to check the lights, we can do that; suddenly they take ownership completely for the party (Ben was going to take the youth to the rental store to get lights for the party). For example, there was the debate because some of these guys said we have a party every month and this month we did not have any. So there were eight people on the youth advisory board and six voted no and said we are not ready to have a party; let's wait until February So I was like "whoa" so that is why I think it is real. Now they are thinking about this stuff; this understanding about how things go. I was really impressed and the next day I came, yesterday, there were 16 posters that they made that we were going to have a party next month. At the bottom of the posters it said, "No fighting, if there's going to a fight, the party will be over; no refunds". I would never put these kinds of signs on the posters, but the youth did.

Then Ben talked about the party that the students had planned.

Okay, so first of all we had 70 teenagers come which is the lowest number we have had. Now one of the reasons is they don't really like the music. At the first party there were like 90 kids, but they didn't like the music. So I changed it the next time so someone else can and the music was better, but I don't allow them to do unclean versions of the music. You know the ones with bitch whore, etc. I don't mind cursing and swearing sometimes, but if the entire song is bitch, booty, then no, I am sorry. The party was okay, but for the first time there was tension; that there was a fight going to break any minute with the girls.

Now there was a girl that was here before and I didn't allow her into the party; she always fights. I like her, but as Ross said, "She goes from 1 to 60 in a nano second". Now he knows her because he's good friends of her brothers. So he came to me and said we should let Rochelle in. The kids wanted her to come in so I invited her in and said "let's talk" and she promised nothing was going to happen. The two girls that I didn't know walked in; Ross knows one of them. (I said, "Oh, Ross is at the party"). I have Ross there because he helps me a lot and is streetwise and he's a smart guy too. So it's the combination that he gets it and I think that both of us work together well, so we complement each other in some ways. So he was there and they came in and we had all those doors so I sent them away and I turned on the lights and said everyone come back and we will see who is here. Then I saw this Rochelle girl that I didn't allow in so I turned on the light and everyone came to talk and they almost had a fight with Rochelle. What I liked about it was the girls took care of Rochelle and put her in a corner and said "You don't do anything". Now Ross went to talk to the girls and one of them said, "I

going to kill you” you see and seriously he almost snapped. I sent him away and one of them (a girl), I was going to close the door, put her leg in the door and I said, “Excuse me, seriously”? Now it always amazed me when I say and I say it seriously, they are okay because they don’t expect me to be so assertive and when I am just there and I say “NO”, they know I am serious. Even though they don’t know me and I’m a white guy, they apologize.

So then the girls came in and they said, “Blah, blah and Ross let them in ...” and then we understood that those two parties were trouble. So Ross and I had a plan that at the end of the party he would escort Rochelle home and I would be outside and looking that everything was okay. The party was over and Rochelle didn’t want to go home. Ross was with her all the time and those two girls started to buildup. You should have seen it. They started running toward the other girls to fight, Ross was in another place and I saw that and “football tackled” Rochelle, seriously, running towards the other girls. I had Ross hold Rochelle back and I said I was calling the police. I did not call them, I just need to have this performance to say it was serious. It was desperate and I would have called them, but I talked to John from security to send me some security guys and so a car showed up. The police were there all the time because there was a girl missing and they came to talk to me before about it. I took Ross home and when I came back I saw four guys walking back down and I took them back home. One of the older guys said, “I don’t think we need to do a party anytime soon (laughter); man, the girls we can’t control them”.

This is part of the “getting real” in youth work. The youth workers have to expect the unexpected because when you have a party like this and it is open to all youth, the dynamic in the room can change quickly. Ben and Ross had to bring their whole game to this situation. They were doing the youth work dance.

The Youth Work Dance

I asked Ben to tell me more about the “dance” that he and Ross were doing and how he reflected afterwards. What I call the “youth work dance”. The idea that he and Ross were working in tandem and can look at each other and know they need to shift what they are doing. He also talks about Rochelle and how they worked with her after the party. This is one of those stories where there is not a resolution. Who know what will happen next.

This is what I like about working with Ross. That I think that it’s not enough for us to look at each other. Now I think I made a mistake that I shouldn’t have let it go. I shouldn’t have let those two girls in. I listened to Ross and I trust him and at the end of the day nothing serious happened, but I shouldn’t have let them in. Ross coming from the hood; he looks at things differently in some ways. Now I look at the same thing, but I don’t know how to say it, I think I shouldn’t have let them in and it should be a lesson for her (Rochelle) and for others. Now she hasn’t come back to the center until yesterday and when she came she knows. When she came she didn’t fight and she was okay.

For Rochelle, this is her third fight. Everyone knows she has anger issues.

Another youth worker, Angel, works with her. One day when I wasn’t there Rochelle had a fight and cursed in front of another staff, Carla. When Rochelle

came back she banned herself from the center. I said, okay, I really appreciate the fact that you banned yourself for a week and now I am going to ban you for another week and you need to apologize to Carla. But there was a girls group that day and I wanted her to go to that and Carla was not there. You know you can go to the girls group, but you come back before you apologize to Carla. The next day she went to apologize to Carla and then she was only allowed to the girls group. Angel was going to try to find her a boxing place and try to help her get her anger out. So we are trying, but I don't know the family. Her brother works with Howard and Ross told me how the family doesn't care I mean a lot of the time the mother is out and they don't have fathers around them. The mothers can say stuff and they just ignore her.

The Importance of Being Seen

Urban youth work is challenging and as you can see from Ben's story that there is never a dull moment. When I observed Ben working I noticed he was never quite still and had this way of letting youth know by a tap on the shoulder that he knew they were there. I asked him how this helped his work. Ben told me that he thinks it is important that the youth know that he sees them all the time. When he arrives at the center, even before he goes to the office, he walks through each area and shakes hands or says something to the youth. "It is important that they know I see them, but it is also important that they see me as the manager and after so long when no one saw them it was transparent to me that I needed to do this". When he started as director at the center he thought he would just observe the other director and not say anything, but after two days he had to start talking to the youth. "I said we have to say "Hi" to the kids when they

come in. I am sorry, but it is a deal breaker...it is really important for me to say I see you". Just by the simple act of saying hi the participation of youth in the center has doubled. There are two reasons for this. One is acknowledging the presence of the youth and the other is having activities for them. Ben said "for the first time since we were being there they had things to do and you know what there were 40 kids, double the amount and it was quieter in a way because they had things to do; quiet in a good way".

Coaching Youth Workers

Ben told me a story about a young emerging youth worker on his staff and how he encourages other staff to engage with youth.

Rudy is Hispanic; he is a good youth worker. He came to me and he said, "I love this and I miss it when it is not busy (during break it was not busy). He is a really good youth worker; the others are good, but they don't have a passion. Rudy is still struggling but he gets it. There was another family of three sibling and they are actually white and one of the guys, the older guy, is almost 18. So Rudy, me and him were sitting and talking about Christmas. And the guy said, "I didn't get anything for Christmas. We did have Christmas dinner". I said, "Well, you know people don't have that even and come from really poor families". Rudy only worked two hours that day and he came back and took the guy out and bought him a Christmas present; sweat pants and gloves. I said, "Rudy, welcome, know that as a youth worker 20% of our income goes back to the youth". And I don't say that others have to do this, but it would be nice if they did.

Ben then talked about having staff meetings to help the staff start to see themselves as youth workers not just park and rec staff. This is another role that youth

workers take on; coaching the newer staff. He started having these meetings to talk about what is going on with the youth. Who hasn't been around for a while; what is going on with Jerome? What else can we offer for activities? After a couple of meetings he threw out the idea of the staff picking a few kids they have connections with and staying in touch with them. Ben said, "For example you know that Thao has a personal connection with the Hmong kids knowing the language and stuff. If you can pick five or six... and if you have to take them and have donuts with them, let me know and I will find the budget to pay for them. That is the kind of thing I do all the time, you know". Then he tells me why he does this.

I kind of took three guys (youth) that are leaders and there was a time I said you know we need to talk. Come on I will buy you dinner. So a half hour before we close I left with them and went to McDonalds and we sat together and we talked. I said, "Guys, people look up to you, you know. Come on we need you to step up; now they step up. And we should do that sometimes so they can see themselves in a different light. Sometimes I say come let's talk and call them into the office. They come right away and ask "what did we do?" Nothing. But they are not used to an adult wanting to talk to them unless they are in trouble. What I am trying to say is let's do something else. I talked to our director Joan and asked instead of paying an adult can I pick two teens (to work at the center). She said there was money in the grant to pay them so I picked four guys. I tried to out one of the girls working there, but none of them want to do it. So now there are four teens working in the youth center. That's the youth, they say, "Hey we need work" and I said, "Look at them they are working now". And yesterday for

example I had a staff meeting for the recording studio teen staff; just them and me. It was late after we close down so I ordered pizza. We sit and talk about what they do and they tell me they found some who used to work as a music producer and now he's giving a workshop. The guys could not stop talking about it. Now we can have two more teens working so now we have six. They came back and we talked. I told them, "Guys, you are youth workers now".

And that is how it starts.

Ben has been working with Ross, and they are working with youth who want to play basketball. They have two teams who play each other; one from a charter school and one from a rec center. They also started a leadership group at a junior high school. As a result they are connecting with more youth and learning from each other. Ross knows the streets of the city and Ari is the experienced youth worker.

Becoming a Youth Worker

After hearing these stories, I asked Ben how he got into youth work and why he stays in it. Here is Ben's history in youth work.

I will tell you the real story. I used to live in I think it was a good area, but there were a few, not like a project, but it was expensive to buy the apartment there. As a kid I used to organize the other teens. Do you know Sukkot for Jews? I used to be the one that organized it for all the kids. Running it was funny as a kid. And then in school I was really involved in youth work stuff and I started in my home town a youth council. I was 16 or 17 at the time. In the army I couldn't go to the fighter unit because I had allergies so they sent me to work in what were called the teen platoons I was in the unit that worked with detached youth to show them

that the army was the last chance for them to be part of a society. So now I had my own apartment and I was working with the detached unit over there. I was working in the streets with kids. It was not what we called gangs it was nothing like that it's more like working with the kids that I work with now, but more intense. So I did this for almost 3 years in the Army and when I left the Army I was doing some work as a tour guide for teens that came to Israel. Then I went to travel in Australia for more than a year and when I came back one of the women that used to work as a soldier; she moved to one of the worst places in Israel. She said they were looking for a youth director there and I said thank you but I've done that. 10 days after that I started working for her. I remember going to the interview taking the bus and arriving to the rec center. What we call community centers. There was great big graffiti outside saying the name of the director and "we are going to cut your balls off". I should have turned around to go but I didn't and I got the job and for the first few weeks I was scared of the kids because they were tough. That was September I think or maybe October so we came to the end of the school year in June. Six years after... I left to build a music club with the kids.

The Calling

Then Ben talked about why youth work is his calling. He describes it this way.

I guess it's my calling. It is my calling. You know there was a time that I saw those guys playing the best soccer or those people who play a really good instrument which I know how to play but I'm not really good. I am not an artist

for I have no talent for art. There was a time when I said you know my talent is really working with youth. It took me a long time to say this is a talent okay; that's my talent. And you know it is funny because that is one of the reasons why I want to work with kids at the youth center. I came with the idea that I was replacing Denise when she was on maternity leave. This is great; do it for three months and we will see what I will do. I think I've already done this kind of work so why do I want to run another youth center. But it was challenging. I never worked with African-American youth. I did work with the Ethiopian community but it's not the same and that culture is completely different. Every day I learn something new.

Working in Different Cultural Settings

I asked Ben, "What is it that you do that enables your to work within different cultural settings. Here is how he explained it.

It is something that I struggle with. I think it is funny that I am going to say this, but I think that I'm the one that's going to be humble. It means that I don't know anything or everything. I know a lot and I think that youth are youth, are youth in Palestine, Israel, white kids, and black kids whatever. But with the understanding I know I'm not going to save the kids I'm not the white guy that's going to save the kids and to understand that they can teach me something. This is a mutual process. I teach them, you teach and they teach me all the time. When I came in sometimes they (the youth) said to me you are the new boss and I said no I am not the new boss you are the boss and I think some of them just understand now what I was

trying to say and some people say you're the boss and I say well sometimes I'm the boss and sometimes you're the boss. I think that it's there somewhere and it's funny that you said that because I was talking with Howard and there was a point where I wasn't sure I knew what I was doing. It's so different from me culturally because I am not from here and I needed Howard to help me read some of the stuff that I was doing. I told Howard one of the things I'm really afraid of that I'll be the white guy and he said let me tell you a story. "When I was 13 and I was in the street corner with my guys trying to get girls and stuff like that there was a white guy that came to us two times and invited us to the center and we said no. Then we went to see what was going on and I never left and he changed my life so you won't be the white guy". But it bugs me because I do think it's important for the youth to have role models that are African-American. But when I think about my staff I tell them this in great and Rudy who is Latino and Thao is Hmong and I am white; that's okay. You know what guys that is the world. Probably your boss is going to be white, I am sorry to say.

One of the things that I would tell you that I am surprised they take my being white means being rich. One of the kids came to me and said do you have a dollar because I want to buy something and I said "No, do you have a dollar to lend me". The kid said no I have no money and I said do you think I have money to give you. Here is another story. When we went out I have an old car; Rudy has a new car. They were next to each other. They all wanted to ride in my car because they thought I had the new one and I had to tell them they were wrong. My car is the old one so they think if you are white you have more money; which is true most of

the time.

I have another story to tell you. A week ago when I came back from my trip; I almost never go to the Xbox. I never play it with them not because I don't want to, but it is just not my thing. But the other day I went to say hi and I was standing there looking and there was a game with Nazi flags and all that kind of stuff and it took me 30 seconds or 60 seconds to say anything I was so shocked. Then after a minute or so I said okay, you guys put it down and they did immediately. I couldn't articulate or explain to them why and I went to the office. Thao sat next to me and I said and I said, "How could you not say anything"? Thao said "I didn't know it was important; that you are sensitive about it". I said, "No I would have said the same thing if it was a Ku Klux Klan flag. I would have the same reaction. No I'm not saying I'm more sensitive but as a youth worker it was embarrassing". I was upset about his reaction; he could have said he was sorry, but to rationalize it when you didn't see it that was not good. I did make a discussion with the students and some of them came to Thao and asked if it was because I am Jewish and Thao said no it's not about that. Thao said, "I want to talk to you why I think it is okay and so I said all right. I don't care about the Nazi stuff to me it's just another flag". Okay but that is exactly why I objected because that Nazi flag is not like the American flag by putting that in the video game that's what you tell me is it is okay. We have to understand that the Nazi flag and the Ku Klux Klan flag are different. It was really important to talk about that kind of stuff and that videogame was there for six months and none of the workers said anything about it. It drove me nuts.

I think it is that I don't think it's controversial in their sight. It is like the music that they listen to all the time and I'm talking about the girls too; so much downgrading for the girls you know. One of the songs that they listen to all the time is one that is says, "All I want for my birthday is "Ho" with a big booty". I asked one of the girls about this. She said, "I don't care about the words of that song". I said, "You may be able to separate the message from the music, but think about some of the people you know that's how they start thinking about girls. Is that what you want the boys to think about you as only a booty? And now what I'm saying is they don't think it's wrong not because they've got it, but because that's the way the world around them feels. It's the same with Nazi symbol. They don't think about it. Once again it's not ignorance because no one challenges them at all; nobody comes and asks them to think critically about this. One of the things that is important to me to do with them is to try to have them think critically as a way of thinking. After the first party when they all were working I told them one of the gang came to me and I said "Why, Maria, do you understand what you do? If you understand what you do I'm good but if you don't understand what you do and you just do that because you want the boys to like you; I am not sure the boys like you to do that". And we were talking after the first party. The police came for some reason and sent them away. Even though they could've stayed out the police sent them away and I said," Maybe they felt some of the kids were intimidating" and Maria said "And yes also because we're black". You know I wanted to say, "Maybe you could do something about it". I really want these conversations. If Mariah starts to think should I try it or should I not or what does that mean me being black in a group in that world; if

she tried to think about it, that's a lot.

Helping Youth Solve Problems

Another role for youth workers is helping youth solve problems. It is not solving the problem for them, but asking the right questions that help them think about the choices they can make. Here is Ben's story about how he has worked with youth when they have problems.

One of the girls the other week came to me and said she is grounded from the zone and she's not even 14. "My friends found out that I am not a virgin anymore". My first reaction was okay. I need to say something. I need a few female workers and hopefully they will help me have someone. I said, "Joanie, let's talk. I know if that is your choice that's okay. I have a niece your age. I just want you to think about making choices; that any choice that you make I want you to make sure that it is your choice and that you understand if you choose to do whatever and it's because you understood everything you made the choice; do whatever. I don't want you to make that choice because the guy pushes you to do it". I couldn't say anything more than that because it's boy/girl; that kind of stuff. That is why I need a female youth worker for those discussions. That's what I'm trying to do with guys when they are making decisions. One of guys told me that he doesn't need to have A's and B's as long as he has a diploma he doesn't care if he gets A's and B's. I said, "Why"? Because I don't want to go to college. "What do you want to do"? "I might be a truck driver". "Great, but think about it. Ten years after you might be tired of driving trucks and they are looking for someone

to be a supervisor and it could be a truck driver that has a college degree". So we looked up colleges and there is a college in Alexandria that has a certificate in truck driving and you can incorporate it into a college degree and he was really happy about it. If at the end of the day he makes a different decision that's okay. There is a saying in Hebrew that kids dream at the height of their surroundings. In that neighborhood and that surrounding neighborhood it is very limited so that is how they dream. He has never seen anyone with a college degree so he thinks as long as I have my job as a truck driver I'm good. In a way I am kind of envious of him in that he doesn't care to be rich. But he needs to understand what it means, okay, and make your choices.

Greta (another youth worker) brought colleagues from the University. They ran a four week class on college and success in career planning and 15 to 20 kid showed up and learned about the importance of college; how to get scholarships and career plan and that was amazing. If I could do that again every two months or so it would be great. It is so important because they don't think that college is accessible for them.

I am going to take the kids on field trips to colleges. I want them to see the students sitting in the grass. I want them to see to see The Union. I want to go into one of the classes. I want to take the kids to the 1001 class to talk about what the youth center means to them. I remember when we used to bring up the YPQ kids like Ross and others. When they left they said, "We can do it". Now some of my kids will go to college for sure and some of them are excellent.

During our interviews I asked Ben if the youth asked him questions about who

and what he is. He said that they did, but what helps him is being a foreigner. I asked Ben if that was because he was “the other” rather than part of the mainstream. He replied, “I think that's it. I think it's something I hope they understand because I'm foreigner there are other white people who are foreigners. I think they are always surprised because I think that the main issues are in them. It's that we always have reasons; whatever happens I tell them why. We always negotiate. There is almost never a ‘because I say so or goals’. Let's talk about it I think they are kind of surprised. I'm going to tell you something about two successes in the last two weeks”.

Last Wednesday; I have one kid that his dad died. His mom is... his mom is a lunatic. I think she is on medication or something and she comes here from time to time. One day she wants to ban him from the place and the way she was talking to him it is like she hates him. So many times I spoke with her and got her to relax. The last time she came to the youth center was when she accused him of biting her; that he stole her car keys. “I want him to go away. Tell him not to come back to the house”. Honestly he's a cool kid. All the time, all the time, all the time, she is accusing him. The last time she came to the Teen Zone I was in the restroom. She starts yelling at him; yelling at my workers. She shouted and screamed at my staff so I came out and I went to her and I said “I'm sorry you need to leave okay”. I was kind of surprised. She jumped in the air and cried and almost pulled her hair and said he stole the keys. I said, “You need to calm down, you please go out and when you are ready you can come back and talk to me but now you have to go” I almost pushed her as I walked with her and she left. Oh, I thought there was going to be trouble, but I said no you have sometimes just to

say it. Half an hour later she came back and was relaxed and said she found the keys in the house. We help him. It is difficult; but try to grow up with a mother like that. She always has to confront. So he picks on the little kids sometimes the younger ones; which makes sense, but the older kids they don't like it. So the last time he picked on one of the younger kids another guy who when we closed the center came to me and he is mad. He was going to fight him. I was in the car, but I could see it. One of the guys knocked on my door and said he was running there and another worker was running there and when I got there I saw that kid I was talking about his name is Mike standing up. Apparently the other guy just punched him and knocked him down to the ground and he stood up and started to walk away. So there is the football field and this is the youth center here. I was here and I saw him walking here (Ben is drawing the picture of where everyone was) and one of my workers so I saw a guy and girl walking towards him and ran quickly to see if everything was okay. I just came to check okay. The other girl was there and another younger guy said, "Don't worry I get it, I got the guy". The guy protects him. It was funny how he said it and I said do you want a ride home. He didn't say; he was really upset. "Do I look like I was knocked out"? And then another big guy ran towards him because he was going to hit him and fight. The big guy is the girl's brother that stood there. So she ran to him and said you don't touch him and he was going to punch her and then he saw me so he stopped. So he and another guy who were going to beat Mike were standing there. So I said, "Let's all go" So they split up to go. I followed Mike and he was walking around knocking down trash cans and then he crossed the street and he lives not that far

away. I walked behind him and then they came and I said you stay here. No, we just want to cross the street. No you don't. We swear seriously. Look me in the eye. Okay go to the store. It was 8:30 or 9:30 maybe. The guy that actually punched him called to me. "Hey Ben come here I want to tell you why I punched him. Everything happened after we closed. Now I was like I think that a change has happened recently in the youth center that even though there could always be some fight and they fight, they kind of understand what's going on. And the fact that two guys wanted to protect and the other two guys wanted to punch and when I said no they didn't and the guy that actually punched called me over and wanted to explain...that is a change.

The next day the mother called our supervisor and she complained about Jean and the director and about me and about everything. Yes, I was going to give them a ride and I didn't. She sees I am playing on both sides of the fence. Sometimes I do. So sometimes you want me to do something that I won't. Sometimes I say you're okay and I will; I'm fine with it. But I almost got into trouble because I was going to give him a ride home. You don't take kids in your car. And I said to Jean if I need to go to the Mayor and explain why I took the kid because he was threatened by other kids and it is okay for me to take him in my car I will. Seriously.

Ben and I talked about how Mike is picked on by his mother who perhaps is mentally ill and he takes out his frustration by picking on younger kids. The youth center is a refuge for him. Ben said the mother is not allowed in the youth center anymore unless there is a parent meeting. The question may be how Ben can and the other staff

support Mike as he figures out how to move forward.

Ben has many stories about the Teen Center. He tells me he loves the teenagers, but he is also willing to say that there is one student at the Teen Center he can't stand. Yet he will continue to work with him, because, "You know I try my best; I don't think there are bad kids. There are kids who have a bad time. Jake is a bad kid (laughter), but probably because he has a bad time". These are the ongoing struggles that youth workers face and Ben is not an exception, but because he recognizes how he feels he is able to continue doing the work. He is always looking for ways to engage youth based on their interests and the youth trust him to be honest and are willing to try out the new ideas he brings to the table. There will always be challenges, but there are also successes and Ben learns from both.

Portrait of Jazmin

Jazmin works with Howard at the center called Oakridge. I first met her at another agency located in a nearby city. She works two jobs to make ends meet. I was surprised to find her working at Oakridge, but this is the reality of youth work that you often work two jobs part time. Jazmin is also working on her master's degree at a State University and has been mentored by Howard. I observed Jazmin over a two month period in the summer and we met for interviews in a private area at a coffee shop. Our first conversation was about what it was like at center the night before.

A Night at our World

Jazmin said "It is always interesting at Oakridge, it's been a lot, a lot of kids there and it's been exceptionally hot all summer long; it just creates recipes for disaster".

Jazmin starts working the minute she arrives. This is how she tells the story.

When I got there was a conflict outside and one of the kids came in crying and Bob was dealing with that and I didn't really know what was going on. And about 10 minutes later the police came and apparently it was a fight; little kids, and it ended up in the neighbor's yard or something and then the neighbors called the police so the police came and talked to Bob. I am not sure what ended up happening but Bob was pretty frazzled. As soon as I got into the building I was on the computer checking my e-mails and checking in with staff and Bob was kind of like getting up and moving around, getting up and moving around and he came back in and said, "Everybody move around, there are kids everywhere". So at that point I got up and went outside and there wasn't any kids outside. The kids were in the gym for summer camp so I spent a lot of time in the gym and there were

balls flying everywhere basketballs, footballs but for the most part the kids were safe; surprisingly.

There were balls almost hitting them in the head but not quite. So I was playing basketball with the kids and this boy; he was very little about 4 or 5 and he was playing basketball in these flip flops that were three sizes too big and they were broken and they were coming apart. He was bringing them to me every two minutes. He brought them to me three different times to fix and I just kind of looked around and was so sad about this because half those kids don't have clean clothes or proper shoes or half of them haven't changed their outfits. You see them in the same clothes every day and it stinks. I hate to say it but a lot don't have baths and who knows if they've been adequately fed if they don't have those basic things. But they seem to be resilient; to still do what makes them happy. They come to the park and have opportunities to be kids and play and interact with each other which is pretty incredible. I was in the gym for about an hour and then went outside and there was an issue with the girls. It was a very large group of girls; probably like 10. It was two different groups; one that doesn't come to the park often and then another group that comes, but not the typical girls. Somebody had talked about somebody's little sister saying inappropriate things. It was very inappropriate and it ended up like they were going to fight each other about it and one of the older girls stepped in and kind of took charge and told them like you're not going to fight. "We know this is just talk; you shouldn't be talking about people and making things up, making up hurtful things to say about them". She was pretty aggressive about breaking it up. It kind of worked for a

while.

(I asked Jazmin, “Did you stay back for a while”.)

I thought she was doing a good job and she ended up cussing and I said next time do it without the cussing. Then it defused and then it escalated again and she tried and then Howard ended up coming outside and told them without much discussion: This group go this way; and this group go that way. And he didn't want to hear about for the rest of the night and then that worked for the most part. I don't know if it was resolved permanently but it was resolved for that night and one of the girls later; like 20 minutes later came back outside and to talked to me. She was very bothered about the whole situation just how people can talk about other people like that and just looking for a fight and it's just exhausting drama. The drama is just constant. She kind of decided to remove herself from it and go outside on her own and she and I talked for a while. She ended up walking home by herself and at that point it was pretty much time to go.

The drama gets played out in many ways at Oakridge and Bob as the director moves about constantly taking the temperature of the environment and when he asks Jazmin and the others to move around it is because he knows the temperature has gone up.

Jazmin’s Role at The Bluff

Jazmin is fairly new to the Bluff. She started at the beginning of the summer and spent time observing to get a sense of the community context and what her role was as a female youth worker. She sees that the teens don’t have anywhere to go and they are not allowed in the gym from 3 to 6 pm because of summer camp. Jazmin describes the situation

like this.

There is no other place for them and they are not using all the rooms. There is something they can do for them even if it is just a room with a table and a TV. It's hot outside and they tell them to go outside and they go outside for a while, but they end up coming back in and just congregating in the hallway outside the gym; outside the bathrooms and then they sneak into the gym and then we kick them out. So I told Bob and Howard we should really have a place for them where they don't have to be outside. Even just the classroom; something. Bob really liked the idea, but somebody needed to be there to supervise and I said "Of course, and I wouldn't mind doing it so I might check that out". Now I am doing the girls group. It started out twice a week and Jackie wanted to change it to one night a week. And then we do the youth work practice meetings. Other than that I think my role, the most basic role is to make sure that kids are safe and if they need somebody to talk to or I don't know somebody to look up to; I try to provide relationship as well.

I just don't think you can force anything with kids. Young people have different needs or comfort levels with adults in their eyes. Some are more responsive than others. I mean I always go back to what The Professor taught me like years and years in my undergrad. Like you just stand you stand as an open invitation and like if they want to come in, that's so corny, but if they want to come through that door you keep the door open.

Jazmin's role was not defined at first because she had to observe and learn what the environment at the center was like. She and her fellow youth workers will shape her

role to meet the current needs of the youth who were there. But she also knows her limits and knows when another youth worker is better equipped to deal with a conflict. For example:

I don't feel all the conflicts are necessarily... I may not be the best equipped physically to deal with some of them. A lot of them are involving physical conflict. I don't get in the middle of you know. I try not to put myself in that situation I don't think that's my job, I'm saying, and think that's a difference a male figure has. Maybe being more dominant or, I don't know what the right word is but kids respond differently and I am aware of that. I don't want to be with that, especially with young boys. but I do feel like I stand on the side because there's always situations that look to me like they are trying to figure this out and conflicts are ... a lot of times you know it takes a lot of strategy to work through. Like last night there was another situation right before I left one of the boys had a mountain bike and it was blue and silver and it fit the description of bike that was stolen from one of the staff like a week or two prior. And Bob, you know he's going to say something, and now he's going back and forth with the kid. Where did you get this bike; asking all these questions. Did you steal this bike; where did you get it? He asked me to call the staff to see if it matched the description but they didn't answer. He ended up taking a picture of it and then he was trying to figure out is he going to give the bike back or does he keep the bike and he didn't quite know. He was deliberating over it for a while and he asked me and I said, "Well I think at this point it is the principle more than anything and you have the picture and he's going to be back". So he was like you're right, you're right. So he

ended up giving the bike back. Letting the boy leave with the bike, but promising him he would get to the bottom of it eventually whether it was or wasn't stolen. So it was interesting.

(I asked Jazmin, “When he confronted the boy how did he do that?”)

Bob got on the bike. Actually he grabbed the bike because me and Howard was walking towards Bob in the front. He says, “Howard, did you just say something about what leaves the center always comes back to the center and Howard said “It was a joke about bad things that get stolen, but they always come back”. And then Howard says, “Like every time it always come back, they always come back to the center”. Howard and I kept walking, but then I stopped to see how it goes and then ended up giving my little two cents and then went home.

Jazmin was describing the dance that youth workers do when faced with a dilemma. Bob thought about what to do asked for input from Jazmin and then made a decision. She also knows her limits. In potentially physical conflicts she steps back and defers to Bob and Howard. Jazmin is physically very small so she know she may not be able to handle a teen age boy in a conflict. This is where team work really comes into play in working with youth. Knowing when to lead or let others lead the way. The youth workers at the center are always observing the landscape; where are the youth, what is the energy level, is it positive or negative.

Jazmin’s view of the Center

I asked Jazmin the same question I asked Howard. What is it about the center? I don't know. I am not super savvy with the neighborhood yet, but I think from what I can tell a lot of the kids come from the neighborhood and I think that's

great and I think that's is how it should be and I don't know if there are many other places near enough. I know that Plymouth is not close; at least not walking distance. I know Williams is about a 10 minute walk. I mean clearly it's a neighborhood that's well populated with children and they have permission; I don't know technically they have permission but they do get themselves there either by walking or biking. I don't see many parents coming in to get their kids. I am sure a lot of the kids are coming from like Chicago. I know that the neighborhood in general has gone through a lot of transitions so I don't know if there is a lot of kids moving in or not. To me it seems like they're all very well acquainted with each other at least have grown-up to some extent with each other. I won't say they have known each other for years and years and years. I don't see any kids that are necessarily isolated in extreme ways from other kids. I don't know, I think there is a sense of community, but I think it's very, it's rough.

I can't make the call that parents feel a sense of community. I think the kids do. I don't see a lot of the parents nor do I see a lot of parental influence. What I see is a lot of kids raising each other and themselves. I don't think that it's ideal. I feel like they need a lot of guidance and I don't know where else they're getting it from then the staff at the center. I can't make assumptions. I don't think it is fair to make a lot of assumptions, but this is based on what I see.

Jazmin wears multiple hats as a youth worker. How does she see this in her work?

I see it a lot in my work in general even with other staff not just me, but observing the young people with Bob and Howard, Jackie and Thao and myself. It's just that

attention that they're craving from adults. It's pretty significant and they respond. They are respectful to the staff over all.

I mean there is something to be aware of in the work too. I don't want to be confused as the mother or parent. You know what I mean? Like I have to be careful about the extent that I do extend myself and I think I've learned over the past 12 or 13 years that I've been doing this the importance of knowing the limits. I have to know. I haven't always been that way. The bottom line that comes down to it is I don't want to enable them to be dependent on me as an adult that is not always going to be there. And I can't break myself down over the fact that like one time I wasn't there you know ;you feel guilty cause that's too heavy a burden, especially if I'm going to do this work forever. I have to draw that line between this is my profession; this is not my life.

Challenges in maintaining boundaries

Jazmin has learned over time that you need to have limits and boundaries as a youth worker. This is not only for the safety of the youth, but also for the mental and physical health of the youth worker. She has struggled with this issue over the years. I asked how she stays mentally and physically healthy. Here is how she described herself.

I don't know if there is ever an easy method to doing that. I think the work in order to be successful and maintain trust and engagement that you have to kind of give a lot. I think it's something you have to be conscious of about every day; about what are you really willing to give today and what you would be willing to give in this situation. I don't know if there's ever necessarily a perfect answer to that question but it's very hard and I think it's a matter of kind of being very in

tune with yourself and your own health and wellness and mentally and spiritually and sometimes physically. There are times where I know that I am needed and it's late at night and if I'm not there then I worry so much that I won't sleep anyways so I'll make the call, I'll make the run (I have had that happen many times) and not have that happen. Not so many where I think I'm being taken advantage of but enough to where I know that a lot of the kids don't have any other option they don't have anyone else to ask or go to because they have tried. I just that I think it's always so dependent on the time and the situation and how I'm doing like I guess health wise and knowing when it's okay to say no. Because that's big too and knowing that no doesn't mean like; it's not a fatal thing.

Sometimes saying no is what young people need. When you are there every time that something comes up then they are not able to grow and become responsible and accountable for themselves. You enable them to depend on you. So I think it is very situational. I think it's very much about understanding your role and their role and your relationship with each individual young person and knowing the context of that and their realities and life and family situations and just really making decisions weighing all of those things. (Laughter) It is kind of complicated.

It is complicated and hard work. Jazmin has to be very aware and intentional when working with these struggling youth. The situations she described above come from her second job where she works with teens. Her realization and her shift to figuring out how to keep her balance came from a mid-youth worker life crisis. I asked her to describe it for me.

A Mid-Career Crisis

It took a long time, a very long time. I think I'm just now making healthier decisions about boundaries and I know that I am very proud of my work am proud of my relationships and I'm proud of the impact that I had but as I look back there are some things that I know I am I'm on the fence with today. I know that it hurt me and I don't know, as far as; it hurt me in the sense where I've put so much pressure on myself and I put the work before myself and I did make it my life. I know people who love me and they showed concern and said I was practically killing myself. I was very stubborn for a long time and I didn't care what people said because I felt they didn't understand. I felt like they couldn't understand and the more I talked about it the more I felt I couldn't talk about it and it was like I cared so much that it was too much. I ended up actually meeting somebody who became a huge crutch for me. Someone I could talk to and I felt I could listen to and that I felt was objective enough to trust and I really started learning. It was having someone to talk to that wasn't invested in a very personal way like it wasn't a family member; it wasn't a friend. It was somebody who was very intelligent and wise and also very hard and stern and objective enough for me to feel like okay you're not telling me this because you want me to be more involved in the family, no vested interested. It's objective and real and it makes sense and for whatever reason I ended up listening to him and I started really seeing the reality of ... I don't necessarily feel like I was doing bad work. I just was not taking care of myself and this and was just give, give, give but it is never enough and I was really going through a lot of hurt... because I have been mentoring a lot

of teenagers in my other job for a number of years. It was hard because they felt like I was trying to abandon them. The two cities I am working in are like two different worlds. There was some... I think it was a big switch. I'm not available all the time where I used to be and no matter how much of a warning or like how much I prepared them for it things didn't go so well. They didn't even necessarily blame me because they understand my need for a job and that is important and in an adult's life. I don't think they necessarily felt like I was choosing that over them. They understood the reality of the situation but at the end of the day it was like I need you and you're not there. It was hard and that created some conflict and also in time, after time, after time, my relationships with them were tested in ways where they ended up hurting me intentionally as a response. It got so bad that I ended up the day after Christmas; four days after Christmas I got a ticket to Puerto Rico and I didn't tell anyone I went to see my sister and I was gone for 16 days at and really ended up having to do some soul-searching. It was so serious that I was asking myself whether I was going to walk away or not and when I got back from my trip 16 days felt like zero. Like I didn't feel any closer to finding my peace and my decision and my passion. And that's when I met and started talking to this other person who kind of helped me save my career really so...

Jazmin needed a mentor who was not invested in saving her or telling her what to think. Youth workers need other people who understand the work to talk to when they are struggling. Jazmin was lucky to find one on her own. In the public organization where Oakridge is located a plan is being put into place to have experienced youth workers like Jazmin act as mentors to new young youth workers. She felt her mentor

helped save her career and now she has an opportunity to guide someone entering this field. So what does this feel like for Jazmin and will she still be a youth worker in her new role?

Next Steps

I'm really ready for my next steps whether it's training or us supervising or something. I always liked the direct service stuff. But I do like the opportunity that this is for me. I will be getting a different level of experience in the field and knowing that I'm fully capable and I have the necessary skills to support and teach what I've learned and advise. It's new; like I'm trying to figure it out still because it's a different role for me. As far as still being a youth worker goes, it is similar and I can. I am very personable and I can take that and use it to make it work. I can talk to just about anybody and hopefully I'll offer something to the conversation, but I am looking forward to it. I just I hope that it doesn't become stagnated and that the mentees are as open as I would like them to be to learn so I will see. It's still very much at the beginning, but I am definitely excited about the opportunity and the experience. But it will be new for me and this being a career lifelong path for me, I need the experience because you could only do direct service for so long. I see this as a transition to doing youth work in a different way even though it is a small step; but it's more than I had before so...

Here is a chance for Jazmin to use the skills she has learned and support others. She feels confidence in herself and her knowledge, and sees this as opportunity to gain a new kind of expertise, supervising others. She is very close to receiving her Master's degree in youth work leadership so it is a good time to be taking next steps. She also is

still very much a direct line youth worker. When I observed Jazmin and the other workers at the center, I noticed that they often looked like they were just hanging out; being in the youth work zone. I asked Jazmin what are you really doing and why do you do it the way you do it.

Being in the youth work zone.

I'm very observant and ... if I see a group of young people and they're looking fine and they're having a good time I don't necessarily see a need to step in. What I notice though is when I start something then they like to join. Like yesterday they were out playing basketball and there was a football on the floor. I just grabbed it and I started throwing it up catching it and then a boy came over and wanted me to pass it to him and then two more kids join and pretty soon they were doing it without me, but I stayed there so I could say, "You can throw, that was a nice catch, throw the ball, throw the ball". They wanted me to watch and see that pass through or the catch they made. I notice when they look at me they want me to acknowledge what they are doing, they want praise and I think it's very simple ... on the other hand when I'm outside and there are 60 kids out there or whatever you can't necessarily be too distracted because you have to make sure your supervising overall and you need to be aware of things happening and you are ensuring safety. So I think in situations like that I intentionally try to interact minimally so that I can be aware and notice if something looks funny, I can investigate and step in. If I see somebody's sitting by themselves I will go over and sit by them and start talking if they want to talk or if they don't. If you are too abrasive or always in the middle, it doesn't go over so well. They don't like it;

especially the teens like you can tell if they want you there.

This is where the expertise in youth work really shows. They look so casual, but they are all the time working intentionally and to the outsider they are just hanging out. I asked Jazmin if she had any last thoughts. This is what she had to say.

I don't know if everybody necessarily agrees with me on this. I have so much going on in my personal life and I am exhausted half the time and to be able to be patient, to be peaceful, loving and compassionate despite where you're at I think it's just necessary to be able to turn that switch when you need to. Because I see a lot of times not so much at the center but when I'm at my other job, it's just constant bickering and yelling; it's almost abusive for the kids you know. And no matter what kind of activities you are doing, with that tone it's not going to be taken well or received well. So I think I figured it is also an aspect of the work that can be exhausting but I think it's very necessary to have that skill and put your own challenges and struggles to the side. I think to me it is a professional way of being, like it is a career, it is a job, you are getting paid; so do it with respect in the fact it's a service to others. There is a lot of integrity that I think needs to be there. Otherwise people do it for the wrong reasons. There are a lot of people that don't understand good youth work and they think that it's so easy that it's an easy paycheck or an easy job. But it's really not easy and it requires a lot of investment. I always say it is love and compassion because in the demographics I am in that is the missing ingredient.

Jazmin is passionate about her work and whether she does direct youth work or supervision of youth workers, she will bring an expertise to the work that she can pass on to

others. She told me this story about how she worked with one youth who was on the streets. This all took place at her other job.

Outreach on the streets

How I engaged with him I think; well first of all a young person like he is in my mind, is very receptive to any kind of opportunity that could be of benefit to him. I watch him at the end of the night calling on his phone seeing who he can ask to hang out with when he's really trying to find a place to sleep. And what I noticed with him was that our relationship was really like somewhere for him to go during the day. I think he wanted the idea of doing something positive but was also conflicted with the reality of his life and the world he was living in. That he was on the streets and it was survival mode and a lot of times that meant selling drugs, robbing, stealing getting high or drunk. He really tried to keep that separate from his time with me. It wasn't like he was being secretive about it; just that it was a separate reality of his. It was this notion of being on the fence and preaching one thing and doing another that I've seen as a conflict in my work with young people like him who are marginalized. I don't have a lot of options or opportunities for him to be successful, healthy and positive. For me in engaging him I was okay that he was safe for the day because the bigness of the issue was too great for him to solve in one day I looked at it like it was this kind of progressive effort. If I could get him engaged in positive options and give him opportunities to give back it would create a different pathway for him; like baby steps toward college or getting an apartment or employment; making healthier choices instead of smoking and drinking; so those are my efforts. But a lot of times it doesn't really work out

that way because unfortunately I can't take him home and I would never do so. What that means is at a certain time of the day or night he is on his own and I can do only so much to make sure that he is not on the streets. So a lot of times I would be with him in my car late at night as he's making these calls and I'm getting frustrated because I want to go home and I'm hungry to and I'm trying to live my life. At the same time I know that if I just let it go I wouldn't be able to relax or sleep.

I asked, "How do you deal with that part of it?"

It's hard; it takes a lot of patience. Because he is 18. It doesn't matter if he's 18 or 19 or 20. In my education you're still a young person in your 20s. So a lot of people who don't understand that argue with me that he is a grown man. In his case in my mind he is so much a child still. He's helpless he can't take care of himself. After these experiences in my work you have to evaluate yourself and the choices you make and that's the anguishing part. Am I doing this service; am I really in making the urgency of the situation, creating that buffer with a car to be in so...

The alternative is to let him go and figure it out. I don't know that is something I have to think about. I'm afraid he's in jail. I don't know. He has a warrant out for his arrest. The last time I spoke to him he was pretty much running from the law and I tried calling him yesterday and his phone was off so I am thinking... I'm going to find out where he is but when it comes to the whole issue of Maple Park he found out not, through me, but found out through a volunteer who had been working with me at Maple Park and some of my youth that the director said "you

are not allowed back”. The way I left it with him was when she first told me right after that incident... (The youth had been running from someone trying to shoot him and he ran for safety into the park building). My plan was to wait it out and let things settle and see if there was an option/opening that he could still come there. The way I would've handled it is I would've met him somewhere else taking him out to lunch to talk to him about what is going on in his life and bring up the issue with the director and fight it that way. I also probably before doing that would have gone to the president. That is my ultimate say, and she understands his situation; knows he is homeless. She seems to be a little bit more understanding of the reality because she has teenagers and they have grown up in the neighborhood... The director has children, teenagers, but they live in the suburbs. I probably would have worked with her to get him back in. I'm always going to be partial towards what is best for the kids rather than the center. The way I saw it was that Maple Park saved his life because if he didn't have those doors to run into that day then he will probably would have been killed or shot. He didn't tell me tell me for months after it happened that he knew what the director said... I went to meet him where he was staying and he said so I heard I'm not allowed back into Maple Park. I said, “You didn't hear that from me so it didn't happen. If you want to come up there let me know and we will work it out.” That was where it was left but he was kind of used to having the door slam and it is very unfortunate because he hasn't been back since.

These are the kind of stories you hear from experienced youth workers who try to engage youth who are disengaged. The barriers are great because these youth have been

excluded time after time because of their ongoing issues. In this case Jasmin's work was not a success or failure, it is an unfinished story. I asked her about times when relationships did not work or she misread the situation. Here is her response.

Sometime relationships are not forged

I have had times like that where that's happened. I am either extreme if it happens.

My boundaries were too close or.... And I looked back and I wonder was I helping that I was getting a youth up every morning to go to school or was I helping you know like getting him home and making sure he was eating and getting him out of his problems that he got into like bailing him out when he got into situations in school. Sometimes it's like I have been too attached in the sense and had to let them go.

My work keeps me constantly busy so it's like there have been times where I've let go because I have five other or 20 other kids that I am working with that are in crisis and I am not going to drop everything to be with you and I realize that I need to tell them this and then they say "you stay out of my life". If the relationship is authentic enough they will come back and respect the fact that you've drawn a line. Sometimes they don't come back. It is sad them because a lot of these relationships you imagine staying forever because they are so close.

In some cases you hear about them later where they've done good or a situation I'm thinking about where a young person who was really lost to begin with struggling in a lot of ways. The struggle became bigger over the time and the reality of the world that he lived in was that it wasn't going to get easier until he was able to make choices for himself. I don't think he was ever ready to do that

and I'm talking about depression and anger and rage. There is no help in my mind that he could've got because he wasn't willing to internalize it and let himself heal and be humbled

But there's relationships where you know students graduate high school and go on to college and we get separated by those transitions and like just yesterday I took one of my students to lunch who started her first year of college and you know like last year we were spending two or three days a week with each other and now she's doing wonderful.

Transitions happen in relationships but they also happen with youth workers as they gain experience and reflect on their work and feel competent to try new things.

Youth worker in transition

I feel like I'm still in that space of my work where I'm in a transition myself I spent those past six years learning a lot and in very intense involved small ways and I think I had to because now I understand so much more about boundaries and expectations and ways of interacting with young people that are going to be more effective.

Like yesterday I was with a girl at Williams who is 12 and she comes from one of the most notorious families in the city. She is one of I would say probably six or seven kids in her family. She is like the only hope out of all of those kids to do anything positive with her life. I shouldn't be saying that I know it sounds harsh but it is a non-judgmental reality for her. Her little brothers and a sister are smoking and drinking and her mom is seven months pregnant with another baby on the way and there is a cycle that is never-ending. She and I were very close

over the first year and then this summer when we went to Oakridge we kind of lost touch and I heard about some things that were not so great about her fighting, not respecting and some stuff that I know and I feel like right now it's really now or never with her. I am figuring this out in my mind that like it is so much a coincidence that the day that I'm going to Williams, which is her neighborhood, she called me when I was about to get off the highway and go past her house it was like a sliding door moment; so I thought how I'm I going to do this. How am I going to respond to her and take this challenge on you know? I called her back and said I'm about to pass your house. I will come by and pick you up. So we had this really serious talk like, "Okay what you are doing? I hear these things that are going on, you know your family" and I am not really sugarcoating everything. She's old enough to know; she's not stupid. "You are making choices right now that's going to get you out of this hood and this situation or it's going to keep you in. I told her I was going to give her a job and these are all the things I have in mind for you. "Are you open to it? You don't have to answer right now but think about it. I don't have a lot of money to pay you right now, but I can make sure you have a few dollars in your pocket at the end of the week and you have a little something to eat now and then. You are positive and stay out of trouble and you have me and Howard and George to take care of you." I told her I am not going to make you do this and I'm not going to give you this opportunity for you to mess up because I've seen it happen so many times. People have been given this opportunity and they've messed up I gave to her very raw and ugly and true and we'll see what happens with it.

My initial response was I don't want to deal with this right now, but know you have to respond in that moment or you won't ever have this chance again. You never know when they're going to like lose that faith in you and kind of give up on you. Maybe that would be a reflection of you giving up on them. So I put my brain to work and I try to figure out a way for it to work for me and a way that will benefit her so that it's not just like hanging out but you're part of this project and we need your help and that gives her a kind of power. I'm not going to have you do this without our support. We are going to have your back the whole way through. Once she starts other kids can step in and help her with that; so we'll see how that goes. She goes to Williams now and it is crazy and it's not safe because it is on a really busy street. Teenagers have no place to go so they hang out in the tot lot in the playground area and fights occur. The idea is that this girl will help them do activities with younger kids at the park.

I am excited because nobody can get in the way of what I'm trying to do (laughter). It is the first time that I've had this same sense I started working with park and rec. It's me and Howard.

I asked Jasmin about her and Howard having similar ways of thinking. The story you just told me is the kind of story I hear from Howard. "You know I saw this kid and..."

You know from the time me and Howard met, I know I never had a partner in my work before where I feel like it is totally balanced. I think "The Professor" knew what he was doing when he was thinking it was very important for me to have this partnership. I am going to speak for me. Howard and the partnership we have

really saved my work because it was at a time where I was feeling very overwhelmed about a lot of things. I don't know, poor Howard everybody called him and asked for advice like he is a therapist. I was careful about not being overbearing on him because I wanted to protect our relationship and so Howard and I are like kindred spirits I don't want to be over overbearing on him because I want to protect that relationship and so like I know I never call him with my burdens. He gets mad at me when I am dealing with things and don't call him and then he calls me up, puts me down and insults me and calls me names, (this is her way of saying he teases her about not calling him) but I really want to protect the relationship because I see it as a once-in-a-lifetime deal. I will never have another Howard in my life, but I'm very fortunate because Howard is in my life right now. I am feeling really excited about being there I am pumped up about this I love challenges. I have ideas and plans and the support and am really excited. I don't know how long I'll be there, but probably just a few months. I am excited about this because it is an extreme challenge for me. I think it will be the one thing to that will I feel like; you haven't had a chance to shine yet and this is my opportunity to show everybody that you made the best decision you could putting me in this work out here. It has been really hard to get things going here because of the culture and the politics and I feel there a lot of still questions about me and about my capabilities and strengths and Howard has been defending and advocating for me because he really has seen for himself. I feel like things have been getting in the way of the things I have been doing to be like that's Jazmin so I think it's a chance for me to like actually prove myself; not that I feel like I have

to but I do. I have been waiting for this; part of my frustration has been what is it you want me to do. What is the vision where do you want me to go?

There is a challenge to doing the kind of youth work that Jazmin and Howard do. They are both observers of the climate and the youth where they work. Looking to see where they need to be and it often looks like they are just standing around. I asked Jazmin if that created any difficulties.

I think it comes mostly from supervisors that don't understand youth development and that has been the case in the last year and a half at my other job because the only ally I had was my manager and she left. . If you don't do youth work and you don't have a good understanding of youth development work you not going to know what to look for. You're going to want to see really strong programmatic things and you know sometimes that works for kids. It usually works for the little kids more than the teenagers and so that's not what a lot of my work looks like because I specifically work with teenagers and so it's one of those things my manager would tell me. It is a sophisticated set of skills. I can't really explain what those skills are; like pinpoint exactly, but it's this finesse you have to have about approaching and engaging and building relationships. It's really the component of my work. If I can't do that I'm not going to get any young people into programs and I understand programs are necessary to the work.

I asked Jazmine, “What comes first the relationship or the program?”

I don't know I think because of the relationship the programs' reputation builds. Because what young people go and share with parents; parents share. “Oh yeah, Jazmin works with this program.” They don't know it's the relationship that I have

with their children that makes their experience rich. And so I will have kids come for me and they stay for the program so the relationship comes first and then they stay in the program. But the people who come for the program first it is an indirect relationship rather than direct.

If the relationships don't click, the programs don't work and the kids stop coming and I cannot click with everybody. I think a lot of boys are in athletics and other things who are really kind of caught up in like what is cool and what's not cool. I have a lot of girls in my program and I think that's hard.

The key right now is there is some value in knowing which young people to target, knowing what to look for because like there's really young people I can reach and I can spend all my time and energy on agonizing. Because you have this idea of, my God, if I can reach them, I can essentially help them create a pathway to help them get out of their lifestyle.

What I try to do is to bring as many adults into what I'm doing as possible, in particular black men and black women and it's pretty amazing when I'm able to do that. I feel really good about it because I know it's bigger than me and I have had a lot of success doing that. It is still tedious because it is this brand-new person and building a relationship takes a lot of time and then they are not getting compensated for it.

Jazmin understands that she needs to support her volunteers as they build relationships with the youth. She knows that the youth need a lot of support and having these other adults in the mix helps her meet youth needs. Another conversation was how you approach a youth that you have not worked with and that youth comes with a

reputation that is negative. Jazmin explained her style.

The Approach

I think it's about, this is going to sound new age, but I try to sense the energy and meet them based off that and I don't do that in a judgmental way. But I think we are all in our own places and I don't even know how I do it; I don't know how to explain it. But I don't in my life in general, I don't judge because I believe in karma and I believe judging brings negative energy and karma. I try to keep myself centered. Yesterday, I was beside myself because of things that are going on in my life. I was feeling really sad about it and I try not to think that either and I understood than that I'm not going to unpack my problems. But I'm not going to come to you like the world is a perfect place either and understanding where you and are at and where your energy is I can know and not let it affect where your energy is at. So I can tell right away if a young person is feeling uncomfortable in talking to me and I like that. Because I see it as a challenge and I'm going to find a way to make them comfortable. I am going to find a way to ask the right questions and get to the right place where you are. So depending on where your energy is that I will try to get to you in a different place. If you are standoffish, I will be gradual, but if you're really high-energy I'm going to keep pace with you. I'm going to try to make it a positive experience for you. I am a kind of lame crazy person. I will throw a crazy statement to make you laugh and I think that breaks the ice a little bit. I'll see Howard do this sometimes; make a joke. The first thing he says is like, "Where my money at"? You know a lot of these kids have these guards up, but they have to protect themselves; they don't trust you. If they

come, if you come at them in a certain way it will crumble all that. Then you have a playing field. You know what I'm saying. I think I do that in my own way. It doesn't look the same way as Howard because Howard is so blatant about it. I have a little charm first then I throw my little shot gun in there. I'm going to make you laugh; make my crazy statement you know. "What are you being so cool for?" Or you know, you have to see it for me to explain.

What I am coming to understand in the beliefs about the work that I'm doing is the reasoning behind it. It is kind of like a global spiritual issue. What are we fighting against? What I am seeing is it's kind of like spiritual work. It is about our values, our beliefs, our compassion and love for each other and trying to really start over completely. Because it is not healthy in these communities we are in. You can look at the neighborhood and look at the garbage on the grass and there's drugs, drinking and smoking, junk food like what we are putting into our body. It is very much a reflection of our spiritual health. You can see the violence. I was dropping this girls off and I had to go through all the tape and there was a shooting on her block. Kids are shooting each other, but that's what they're growing up and learning, what they're learning seeing on TV. The problem is so big. You have to start there and if only to put it in perspective or yourself. It is very much a spiritual way of working without being religious, but being healthy and in tune with that energy in the world.

It's so easy to get distracted by where the kids getting the guns. If it wasn't the guns it would be something else. If it wasn't the drugs it would be something else. But the truth is they're angry and full of rage and they're going to find a way to

lash out and that is a spiritual condition based off their environment and families and friends and the media and oppression.

There are organization that use 360 approaches around the whole being and you know the discipline that they need and the respect the peace and all that other stuff. I believe it is one answer. There are many answers. There are many kids that it would work for it and many kids that it would not work for. You need a variety of alternatives.

These are the portraits of the five expert youth workers in a particular time and a particular context. They are supporting youth as they make their way along the path to adulthood. There are similar themes running through every story even though the youth workers have different ways of talking about the work. The youth learn much from their youth workers and the youth workers learn a great deal about these particular youth, but they also learn about themselves and understand more about how and why they do this particular work.

In the next chapter I will tease out the themes and analyze the data to see why people say these five youth worker are experts in their work.

Chapter 5: The Thematic Analysis

You have read the portraits and now have a sense of how these five youth workers stand in the world with youth. The observations and interviews were a snapshot in time, a slice of lived experience in the daily lives of five experienced urban youth workers. Now it is time to look at the overarching themes that cut across these five portraits. I used the “selective or highlighting approach” (Van Manen, 1998, p. 93) to show the lived experience of these particular youth workers as they moved and worked with youth. Looking at these themes also gives us a sense of what youth worker expertise looks like in practice. We begin with the Youth work Stance.

The Youth Work Stance

The Literal Stance

When I observed these five experienced youth workers for my research study, I noticed that they often positioned themselves in certain ways on the playground or in the gym. The first day I was at the rec center the whole staff was positioning themselves in various locations, outside, inside in the hallway or the gym. I asked Howard about it and he told me that he was a “watcher” and he put his self in places where he could see multiple spots. This was his way of “reading the crowd” looking for the “out of the ordinary”. It is also a way of touching base with the youth. He lets them know he sees them. This is called “embodied know how” where “thinking in action is lodged in the body, the hands, the eyes and practiced habitual responses to situations” (Benner, Tanner and Chelsa, 1996, p. 152). This is the literal stance that these youth workers take when they are in the world with youth and it is intentional.

The Philosophical Stance

There are two ways of looking at The Stance. One is the literal stance of being on the move, reading the crowd, looking for the “odd sock”⁵(Castle, 2012). The other youth work stance is their own philosophy of what it means to be and work in the world of youth. The youth workers talked about their passion for the work, and the “call” to youth work. Bob used this term several times, “that was another calling for me to go back” and “it is God’s calling”. He said it was like God was putting him where he needed to be. Bob also talked about the passion for youth work. He would tell aspiring youth workers, “You can’t be here for the money... you have to have a passion for it, you have to have a passion to help... to teach...to still learn”. Ben said, “I guess it is my calling, it is my calling”. He also said that other people had a talent for sports or music, but his talent was working with youth. Youth work is what they do and who they are.

The youth workers talked about understanding the language of youth, seeing each youth as an individual, the understanding of the common traits of “youthness” which goes beyond race and culture. They believe in “teachable moments” that you cannot predict they just appear. The issue of respect and trust is huge and these experienced youth workers know that if you “give respect, you get respect” and that leads to trust. Another aspect of this theme is the understanding that you need to wear many hats and

⁵ Richard Castle in his detective novel, *Heat Rises*, uses the term “odd sock” to refer to the piece of evidence in a case that does not fit the pattern of the crime. (2012) Youth workers often look for what doesn’t fit in the picture of youth that they are forming.

have cultural intelligence so you can step into a different youth context and know how to read that context. They are willing to take themselves out of their comfort zone and work with youth in any context. The youth workers see the youth who screw up not as someone to kick out but someone who is crying out for help. They work with them to keep them coming back rather than to push them away.

The youth workers in this study have a way of connecting with youth that sometimes involves “teasing” a kind of playfulness that gets their attention. In the right context it is a way of letting a youth know that you see them. In the work that I do which involves getting youth involved in programs, teasing is looked at as a negative aspect, but there is another side to teasing which these youth workers use to connect with youth. Bob told me that he learned to tease in certain ways, “I am teasing you to playfully mess with you”. The youth worker says something silly like “What’s up duffle bag?” and the youth might respond with their own teasing comment. Now a connection has been made and they can start a conversation or it might just be that “I see you and you see me and it is all good”. While observing at the center one night I noticed that Tim and Steve are like big brothers to all the youth; boys and girls. The youth need a certain kind of attention that they will accept because they trust the adults they are around. This playfulness has a certain kind of intentionality about it. The youth workers glean information, and find out where the youth are sensitive about a topic. Bob sees a boy who is quiet and mopey and checks in to see where he is at. He might do this several times, but never force the boy to talk. Bob then figures out what might be going on and refers to it in a teasing way and the boy smiles. The boy has a crush on someone who is not responding. Bob has taken the right read on the situation.

Sometimes as with Ben the connection is merely a tap on the shoulder. . Ben said, “It is important that they know I see them. I am sorry, but that is a deal breaker...it is really important for me to say I see you”. In some way the youth workers let the youth know they are visible and acknowledged. Bob talked about being “approachable”, making the first move to connect. He said, “Take your attention off of yourself and put it on someone else”.

The youth workers used the phrases, being there, being visible, seeing youth, and just showing up. Jazmin said, “I always go back to what the Professor taught me...you just stand as an open invitation and like if they want to come in, thats so corny, but if they want to come through the door, you keep the door open”. That is both the literal and figurative stance of the expert youth worker. The Stance is both philosophical and hands on. Next we look at the theme of youth work referred to as The Youth Work Dance.

The Youth Work Dance

A Youth worker’s expertise is gained through “hands on practice”. The youth workers that I interviewed have learned to wear “multiple hats” (Walker, 2011) developed negotiation skills and mental tool kits. They became experts in doing the youth work dance or as some people call it the jazz, art or improvisational nature of youth work (Krueger, 2005). Pete Harris (2014) in his article *The Youth Worker as Jazz Improviser: Foregrounding Education in the Moment Within the Professional Development of Youth Workers* states, “Improvisation is itself a generic creative activity that in [drama] youth work requires [young people] the youth worker to imagine and respond to the immediate in ways that are authentic and existential. It is a crucible for the creative exploration of the centrality of the social context in determining human agency and capacity ... It

provides the direct lived experience of the tension between social and cultural structures and the capacity for human action. (Neelands cited in Sefton-Green et al. 2011, p. 171; emphasis added). This conceptualization hints at how improvisation can carry an intrinsic value in terms of greater authenticity and a stress on emancipatory human agency – two themes within the existentialist, Freirian practice favored by youth workers.” He also discussed an aspect of youth workers’ professional development – “the ability to think critically and improvise action spontaneously ‘in the moment’. This has been identified as a key feature of all professional expertise (Fook et al. 2000).”

This is the nature of the youth work dance. The youth work dance is hard to express in words because it is improvisational. The youth worker may not know how they will work with a situation until they are in it. If you are standing on the outside of youth work, you may not see it. It is best described through stories the youth workers tell. There are various aspects in the overarching theme of the youth work dance. I will start with negotiation.

Negotiation

Negotiation is a skill learned through experience. Youth workers rely on skill to solve problems and prevent escalation of minor problems. This is how Howard describes it. “It is a give and take and you always have your trump cards and you only pull them when you need to; you know you don’t pull them every time. I mean if I got two families that are trying to fight and I know I have a trump card for this group here, I will pull it. But I’m not going to pull it for two little kids”. This is knowing what action is appropriate for the situation. There is not always time to make a plan, you have to go with what works in the moment. When Bob is willing to be the first to say, “I was wrong

about putting my hand on you, I am sorry”. He is negotiating a problem by being willing to start the reconciliation process.

However, this is not as spontaneous as it sounds, because the experienced or expert youth worker has been building his/her tool kit for years and has learned to trust the “gut”. The jazz musician Bobby McFerrin explains it this way, “I played over and over so much I don’t have to think about it. This is the way I sing now. I don’t have to think about it”. (Interview with Bobby McFerrin on MPR’s On Being podcast, February 27th, 2014). The experienced youth workers don’t have to think about what they need to do, it has become the way they move in the world of youth. Bob listens for cues. He listens to the sounds in the building where he is working and told me, “How the noise is bouncing off the walls, you know this echo is getting a little high I better go check it or maybe it is a little too quiet”. He moves in and out of situations in an intentional way, but it is always in the moment.

Stepping In and Stepping Out

Knowing when to step in and out of situations is another aspect that shows itself in the stories. It is like double Dutch jump rope. You watch the rope and listen to the rhythm of the chant and suddenly you jump in because the timing is right. Youth workers do this when working with youth. They are in the youth work zone in a particular context and they are watching and listening and suddenly they know here is where I “jump” into the situation. Another way of talking about it is looking for the “out of the ordinary”. This looks different or who is not there that should be. Then you check on what is going on. It is also important to know when to stay back as Howard said, “Number one not everything is a 911 emergency”. He has been doing this work for years

and knows that the youth can often solve their own problems or there is not a problem and the youth are just negotiating among themselves.

Ben works at a Teen Center and his stories are examples of the youth work dance. His story about the youth led party at the teen center shows us the complexity of the youth work dance and the challenges even experienced youth workers have in getting it right. A group of youth at the center wanted to plan a party and he and the youth needed to negotiate about what it would look like; what kind of music, who cannot be there because of previous fights, etc. The youth were in charge, but he needed to be intentional and in the moment with them and suggest possibilities that they might not have thought about. The evening of the party Ben had another youth worker (Ross) with him and they were responsible for 70 youth. A girl who is a fighter attended and the question is “Should we let her in”. They decided to let her stay and then there was trouble. The girls started fighting and threats were made. Ben and Ross needed act in the moment to shut down the party and make sure the youth were safe. In hind sight, the decision to let the girl in was a mistake and yet everything turned out ok. (Krueger, 2005) tells us this struggle is part of the dance, “Struggle and conflict are instrumental parts of the process. Competent workers learn from their mistakes and constantly seek moments of success and resolution, moments when they are with youth, learning and growing together. As they dance, they move in and out of sync with youth, trying to create moments when they are connected, discovering, and empowered.”

Patterns

Seeing patterns is an aspect of the youth work dance that shows itself inside the work. What an outsider might see is a kid “screwing up”. Let’s kick him out of the center. These youth workers see this same kid as someone who is “crying for help” and they see their job as answering that cry. Here is Jazmin’s story about the 12 year old girl that was developing a set of behaviors that she recognized were sending this girl on the wrong path.

She comes from one of the most notorious families in the city. She is one of I would say probably six or seven kids in her family. She is the like the only hope out of all of those kids to do anything positive with her life. I shouldn't be saying that I know it sounds harsh but it is a non-judgmental reality for her. Her little brothers and a sister are smoking and drinking and her mom is seven months pregnant with another baby on the way and there is a cycle that is never-ending. I heard about some things that were not so great about her fighting, not respecting and some stuff that I know and I feel like right now it's really now or never with her. I am figuring this out in my mind that like it is so much a coincidence that the day that I'm going to Williams, which is her neighborhood, she called me when I was about to get off the highway and go past her house it was like a sliding door moment; so I thought how I'm I going to do this. How am I going to respond to her and take this challenge on you know? So we had

this really serious talk like, “Okay what you are doing? I hear these things that are going on, you know your family” and I am not really sugarcoating everything. She’s old enough to know; she's not stupid. “You are making choices right now that’s going to get you out of this hood and this situation or it's going to keep you in. I told her I was going to give her a job and these are all the things I have in mind for you. “Are you open to it? I told her I am not going to make you do this and I'm not going to give you this opportunity for you to mess up because I've seen it happen so many times. My initial response was I don't want to deal with this right now, but know you have to respond in that moment or you won't ever have this chance again. You never know when they're going to like lose that faith in you and kind of give up on you. Maybe that would be a reflection of you giving up on them.

Jazzmin could see the pattern in what the youth was experiencing. She felt the need to step in and give her other opportunities that could change the course of events. Time will tell about whether or not she was successful, but by recognizing the pattern she has given this youth a new path to walk on. She could read this youth because she was in relationship with her and knew the background story. Pattern recognition is learned over time and through many experiences.

Another way of talking about patterns is “What is out of the ordinary about this situation?” Howard said, “ you just pay attention for something different” In the book, *How Doctors Think*, Jerome Groopman, M.D.(2007) talks about pattern recognition and the idea that if the pattern you think you recognize is not apparent, you need to find what

is missing. “Everything has to add up... It has to come together and form a coherent picture”. (p. 167) if it does not you need to step back and find the missing piece of information. “Don’t just do something, stand there” (P. 169). When looking for the missing piece it is like detective work, you are searching clues that will solve the case. In the fictional novel, *Heat Rises* by Richard Castle (2012). His detective described reading a murder scene as “slowly walking the room; eyeing the situation from all angles. This was not a ritual; it was fundamental procedure to clear her head of all conclusion and projections. The idea was to open her mind to impression, to just let in whatever comes in and most simply to note what she was not seeing” (p. 9-10). This is what youth workers are doing when they are in “the stance”. They are looking for what is missing.

In nursing practice they call it response patterns; recognizing familiar patterns, but also acting on the responses of a patient they are caring for. As they get to know the patient, the patterns may change based on what the patient is experiencing at the moment. (Benner, Tanner and Chelsa, 1996). Benner, Tanner and Chelsa also call this good detective work, “ Identifying injuries in trauma patients takes good detective work and is aided by being familiar with patterns and signs” (P. 155). This is also true for youth workers, they may have “seen this movie before”, but the dialogue has changed or the picture looks wrong. It is time to step in and take action. This is called also using practical wisdom based on experience and knowledge.

Bob talked about practical wisdom as life lessons, “I have a degree in life. If you make a mistake and learn from it and move on then you can say, I learned some valuable lessons, some good, some bad; you know I learned”. With his new position as a director he is doing a different kind of dance. He has to split his time between supervising and

direct youth work. He knows to be a good supervisor he also needs to “be visible” to the youth and the youth workers he is supervising. By being where the youth are he can also coach his staff if necessary, pulling them aside to have a conversation. He moves around the building to keep an eye and an ear on the pulse of the building.

The theme of the youth work dance manifests itself in these sub themes of negotiation, stepping in and stepping out, and using the understanding of the youth through relationship to sense when the pattern is not right or is changing.

The Relational Nature of Youth Work

The quote from Jazmin about keeping the door open is not just about the stance. It is also the first step toward a potential relationship with a youth. The aspects that make up The Stance are the pieces of the puzzle that help youth workers get to the relationships. The Youth Work Dance is how you keep relationships going. In an informal conversation with a group of youth workers in 2012 about the notion of relationship they put it this way “The way you build relationship may work 90% of the time, but not with 10% of the youth”. This is true. Each time you begin to create a relationship with a youth is like starting over. Over time you learn to look for cues that will create an opening for the conversation to start and then you have the possibility for relationship. Or as Jazmin said, “you leave the door open for the youth to come in”. Then the dance can begin. The aspects that make up the relational nature of youth work are simple and complex at the same time. I will start with the simple theme of knowing a name.

Knowing the Name

Howard stands at that open door and observes the youth and listens to what they are saying and what they are interested in doing. He says, “Sometimes that might be your inroad into getting a conversation started and then possibly into some kind of relationship”. For Howard the important opening is when the youth know his name. It means they are seeing and hearing him. “I was telling Bob the other day that when I was dealing with some issues outside one of the kids said, ‘Who’s that?’. The other kids said ‘Oh, that’s Howard, that’s Howard.’ I told Bob, ‘Now I’ve got them, they know who I am’.” Not only is it important for the youth to know Howard’s name, he needs to know theirs. Van Manen (2002) in his essay *Researching the Experience of Pedagogy* states, “All teachers know the importance of being able to call students by their names. Not only does naming literally bring that person into being and confirm his or her existence, the act of addressing a child by names also has the effect of singling out, selecting and recognizing the uniqueness of the child”. A relationship can begin when both parties are visible. When Howard knows their name, he can begin the conversation and when the youth know his name he knows they respect him.

Howard usually does not ask a youth directly for a name, he might play a little game like this. “I don’t know you and I want to make some kind of connection with you, call you a different name. Then you say ‘That is not my name’ and I say ‘Well, what is your name?’ And now I will get the name”. This is the first dance step. Bob said to Howard, “When you come into the center and when the kids come into the center, I want them to say, ‘Where’s Bob, Where is Jazmine, Where is Howard’. Because when they

know your name you are doing good work; otherwise they would not come looking for you”. The relationship can begin to move forward.

An example of what this looks like is Ross’s story about how he got involved with park and rec when he was about 12 years old and was a “rec rat”. He was hanging around the park and started to volunteer. He credits Howard for taking an interest in him and getting him involved with activities at the park. The first thing Howard did was to get Ross’s name and then the connection was made. At first when Howard and Bob would say, “Look at all this trash around the park”, Ross would say, “Give me a quarter and I will pick it up”. After a while when they would say, “We got trash in the park”, Ross would say “I got it”. This was another step in the process of creating the relationship. They have the name and Ross’s attention. Then as Ross said Howard started throwing “birdseed” to see if he would keep coming back. The “birdseed” was opportunities for Ross to develop his leadership skills which eventually led to a job as a youth worker. Howard was always there for Ross and for the youth that Ross hung out with, even when the park was shut down for a time. Howard made Ross and the youth feel like he was really with them and that he really cared. The other part of this story is that other youth noticed what Ross was doing and wanted to be with Howard too. Ross said that is why he says, “When you get a relationship with youth and you get the one who can be a leader, it is always good.” When youth workers create a solid trusting relationship with a youth, they are also influencing other youth to walk through the “open door” as you can see through Ross’ story.

Ross said that Howard saw the leadership in him before he did. This kind of relationship work happens over a long period of time. Ross is 26 now and he still looks

to Howard as a mentor as he is beginning to throw out his own “birdseed”. It all started with knowing a name.

The Youth Workers Attitude in Forming Relationship

There are times when the youth worker is working with a youth that they really struggle to like, but they can put that aside for the good of the youth. Ben told me that there is one student at the center that he can't stand; yet he will continue to work with him because, “You know I try my best; I don't think there are bad kids. There are kids who have a bad time. Jake is a bad kid (laughter), but probably because he has a bad time”. This is the challenge to look beyond the bad behavior to the heart of the matter. This is a challenge for both Ben and the youth and how Ben sees his role in changing his outlook will determine the strength of any relationship they have. Harris (2014) states “Solutions, if they are to be found, are to be found not outside problems but from within them. Youth workers therefore need be encouraged to reflexively see how their own inter- actions are also shaping the situation. In this sense, youth workers need to recognize that to change the worker is, in effect, to change the problem. They need to learn to live on the edge of surprise and uncertainty”.

Youth Worker Relationships in the Community

The youth workers in my study all developed relationships with people who were present in the social context of the youth they were working with. When I was observing the youth workers at the rec center, I noticed that they would try to connect with the parents that came to the center. Ross put it this way, “That is how you find out what the environment is like. You are involved with the whole family of brothers and sisters and you start to see what kind of circumstances there have been”. Bob was particularly

interested in creating relationships with the parents because of his new position as a director. He approaches the parents first; not waiting for them to come to him. He has a ready hand shake and a friendly manner. He wants to make sure parents feel welcome to stop in at any time. In some cases the relationships can be strained when the youth are fighting with each other and the parents get involved, such as, the time a parent called to apologize for getting angry, but he would not let his child go back to the rec center. Bob said, "I am sorry to hear that, but if he does come back he will be treated like he is ours". Bob leaves the door open. He sees all the youth at rec center as belonging there. He will be the first one to make the first move toward reconciliation and that helps to relieve the tension.

These youth workers also establish working relationships with the nearby school, the police and other community partners. Then when there are problems to be solved communication has already been established and there is the potential for a good outcome for the youth and the community. Jazmin said she tried to bring in as many community people as possible because she knows "it is bigger than me". She also knows she needs to support these volunteers as they build their relationships with the youth. Dana Fusco (2012) in her article *Use of Self in Youth Work* tells us, "The youth worker connects to the young people (and the young people connect to the worker and each other) and helps young people connect to any number of other possibilities...youth workers seem to recognize that they can impact youth development through their relationships". A circle of support is developed in the community to help young people as they grow. There is a reciprocal nature to these relationships. "The youth and the youth worker share their

interests learn and grow through each other” and the network of relationships that are developed (Ezaki, 2012).

Relationships among Youth Workers

Youth workers are also in relationship with each other. I was able to see this clearly because I observed and interviewed five youth workers at a particular point in time and in a particular context; a youth serving organization. In this context I was able to see the importance of relationship between youth workers and how it affects their work with youth.

Throughout the portraits of the five youth workers they often referred to each other or other youth workers in their stories. The stories might be about working as team, asking for advice or mentoring of youth workers who are new to the field, but it was all about the relationship they had with other youth workers. This could be seen in how Bob and Howard double teamed Tyrone when he was banned from the rec center for a time. Howard was able to talk to Tyrone about his behavior and help him see a way back. Then Howard could support Bob as he solved the problem of how to talk to Tyrone. The solution allowed everyone to keep their respect. This relational aspect concerning youth workers leads to the notion of team work.

Team Work

Howard and Bob are a good example of how youth workers can operate as a team when they are working at the same center. They are like the two cops you see on TV who have been partners for so many years that they can just play off of each other when dealing with a situation. They talk to each other about the youth that they are working with and create strategies to help the youth find what they need and want. Howard said

that Bob really gets the idea of how to do youth work and that makes it easy because “you can just go with the flow and you don’t have to explain why you did it, you just see it and do it and it is taken care of”. Howard is talking about how you learn to read situations, “You have seen that movie before; what is the pattern I am seeing now.

Ross teamed up with Ben (who is also Ross’s mentor) and they were working together to get youth from a local school to come to teen nights at a rec center. They started offering gym time for basketball games. Ben worked at a local teen center and had Ross work with him as they supported the youth who were taking on leadership roles. They bring different skills into their team work. Ben is the more experienced youth worker, but Ross is the expert on the streets of the city. They learn from each other and are able to handle the tough situations that occur with the youth they work with.

Teams are also made up of one female and one male youth worker. Girls were asking the male youth workers about personal issues and the guys realized that there needed to be a female youth worker brought on board. This is important not only because the girls needed female support, but it was to keep good boundaries too. It is also a way for youth workers to model how men and women can work together in relationship that is about the work not personal.

Howard and Jazmin were teamed up for this reason. They worked well together because their styles were similar; yet different. They are both “watchers” and know when to leave a group alone and when to intervene. Sarah is more likely to take a youth aside and have a private conversation. Howard will wait for the right moment to step in. They accomplish the same goals; just in different ways. Jazmin said her way “doesn’t look the same as Howard’s because Howard is so blatant about it”.

Youth Workers Supporting Each Other

This group of youth workers also works in relationship with other youth workers depending on who is working that day or if they are asked to help out at other centers. I also observed them in weekly youth work practice meetings that were facilitated by The Professor. Here is where you could see how they reflected on their work each week.

This group was made up of about 10 to 15 youth workers from several organizations and was facilitated by a youth work professor from a nearby University. They would tell stories, bring up community issues concerning their youth and talk about the challenges of the work. They could listen, give advice or bring in some new knowledge. The agenda would be decided at the table and usually a topic would arise to the surface to get the conversation going. Howard described it this way. “When we talk it is cool because it is like minded people and people who like to learn. Sometimes it is the best part of my week, however the super best part of my week is teaching young youth workers how to see. And then like I say, ‘being the old guy’. Now I am the old guy that used to tell me stuff. So now I am him and telling kids stuff.” This is the value of a support network for youth workers. It is a safe space where people can learn from each other and continue to build their relationships around the work they love to do. And the “old guy” is also learning from the new generation because Howard said he loves talking about the work, learning from others and teaching others because he loves doing youth work. Everyone around the table at meetings feels the same way. We are seeing the relational nature of a community of practice. Harris (2014) tell us, “In line with professional development models in related fields such as social work and teaching, youth work training regimes in the United Kingdom have traditionally embraced a ‘community of practice’ model (Lave

and Wenger 1991). This emphasizes students learning experientially in the field under practice supervisors (Hawkins and Shohet 2007) who enable students to make links from practice to theory. The Youth work practice meetings that the five youth workers attended provided this experiential way of learning.

The Importance of Mentoring

Throughout the portraits the theme of mentoring has been a common thread. The youth workers mentor the youth, but they are also talking about how they mentor other youth workers. Because the organization they are working for is trying to change the culture of youth work in the centers to be more youth centered, they are hiring youth work staff and pairing them with a mentor so the new staff will use the youth centered approach from the beginning. Howard as the elder of the group is looked to by the other youth workers as a mentor. In some cases he mentored them when they were youth and now he mentors them as youth workers. This is one of the ways that youth workers learn their craft. They find someone to talk to when they need advice or a listening ear. The Professor mentors Howard by meeting with him regularly, having him read books about youth workers and then write reviews. He also asks probing questions. When the Professor asked him how he saw himself, Howard said, "I see myself as a teacher". He has been doing this work for 30 years and can share his stories and experience with the new generation of youth workers and with the five youth workers in the study. For example when Bob had a conflict with one of his youth, he could call on Howard to help him sort it out. Howard let Bob talk it out; "I let him get it off his chest and listened to

what he had to say”. Then when Bob had finished explaining the situation Howard could ask some probing questions and Bob was able to see what he needed to do to resolve the issue. Howard did not tell him what to do, he let Bob figure it out, but he was there to support him. Howard also did a little mentoring with the youth involved in the conflict so he could decide how to resolve the issue from his point of view. Howard helped both the youth and the youth worker to resume their relationship. Howard learned to talk about how he works by meeting and learning from The Professor.

Ben is working with new staff so he meets with them on a regular basis to guide them in their work. He is mentoring them and asks them to pick out a couple of youth that they are connecting with and become a mentor too.

Ross is being mentored by Ben in his new position, but he was mentored by Bob and Howard as he was growing up. They were as Ross called it throwing “birdseed” in his path to see what he would pick up.

The Professor also is a mentor to the youth workers in this study. He listens to their stories, often meets with them separately and suggests readings that might interest them.

This thread of mentoring weaves itself in and around the youth and the youth workers and creates this web that helps to strengthen the relational aspect of the youth work itself.

Summary

In this chapter I looked at three major themes, The Stance, The Youth Work Dance and The Relational Nature of Youth Work. Within these three broad themes are

sub themes showing what the major themes look like in practice. The major themes are also interrelated. The stance weaves into the youth work dance and both are part of creating the relationships with the youth and the other people within the realm of these particular youth. The themes and sub themes could be interpreted in different ways depending on perspective. However all the parts are interrelated and can be woven together to give us a picture of whole; what the “lived experience” is for our five youth workers and how they engage with youth.

In the final chapter I will discuss what I have learned, what the implications are for practice, further research and the limitations of this study.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The purpose of this research study was to begin to understand how experienced urban youth workers created trusting relationships with the youth they worked with. In my 25 plus years of youth work practice doing direct youth work and supervising youth workers, I kept returning to the notion that relationship is the key to good youth work practice. In order to do this relationship creating work, youth workers need to learn a set of skills through education and or experience. This led to the idea that youth workers become expert practitioners through years of experience and work in a particular way that is hard to describe but can be seen through the stories of experienced youth workers.

My research study involved observing and interviewing experienced urban youth workers in a large Midwestern city to gather the stories that would give me insight into what creating relationship looks like. While being in a yearlong youth worker fellowship with 16 youth workers I was able to connect with a manager in a public organization who told me her youth workers were “rock stars” and would be ideal for my study. I was able to connect with and follow five experienced urban youth workers who are considered to be experts in their practice. I observed and interviewed them over a nine month period and from their stories created portraits of each youth worker using their own words. The interviews were unstructured and conversational in style. These youth workers had many stories to tell and the richness of the stories allowed me to gain a better understanding of

what the experiences of this particular group of youth workers was like. When these youth workers are called “wizards” (McLaughlin, Irby and Langman, 2001), it is because what they do is so much a part of who they are that it is not easily seen from the outside. Creating portraits allows us to get a glimpse of what they do and how they do it. The portraits were the basis for a thematic analysis using a highlighting and selective approach (Van Manen, 1998, p. 93) found in hermeneutical phenomenological research. The portraits are a snapshot in time set in the context of an urban recreation center during the summer, winter and spring of one year.

After transcribing, reading through the texts, creating portraits and thinking about what the youth workers were telling me, I began my analysis. Cutting across these portraits I found three overarching themes and within each theme were sub themes or aspects of their work that revealed how they formed relationships and why these relationships grew over time. Here is a summary of the overarching themes and the sub themes:

The Youth Work Stance

The literal stance is the physical presence of the youth worker; “lived body”. Where does he/she physically stand in the presence of youth; how close or how far away? What is their posture and are they standing still or moving around. The philosophical stance is the youth worker’s own view of the world and what it means to be and work in the world of youth. Youth work is what they do and who they are.

The Youth Work Dance

The youth work dance is the improvisational nature of the practice. Experienced youth workers know when to negotiate, when to take action and when to just observe

what is going on. They can recognize patterns; they have seen this pattern before and how is it playing out this time.

The Relational Nature of Youth Work

There are several aspects to the relational nature of the work. There is the importance of knowing the name; letting youth know that you know who they are and that they are visible to you and the attitude of the youth worker in forming relationships (they need to recognize their own feelings and how their feelings influence their outlook). Youth workers form relationships with all the people in a particular youth social context. This way they can see all sides of the issues facing the youth. Youth workers need to form relationships. The importance of mentoring was a common thread that appeared in all the stories. Youth workers are mentored, they mentor youth and each other. Mentoring helps to strengthen the relational aspect of the youth work itself.

From the stories of the youth workers you can see a pattern that develops; a web of confluence. It is not linear, but for this group of youth workers most of these aspects are present in their creation of relationship. It starts with the stance; and the youth work dance and the relational nature of the work is interwoven with the stance to make it all come alive. The data supports the theory that relationship is the cornerstone of good youth work practice.

The youth workers I interviewed are not program driven they are youth centered. Their passion is to connect with youth, create relationships with them in their particular context and throw opportunities in their path and help youth see themselves as capable and contributing member of their community.

Youth workers need to pay attention, be approachable and be engaged with the youth and the people in the youth's community. They need to be reliable, to be there and to understand what youth are looking for and offer opportunities or as Ross said, "Throw bird seed in their paths to see what the youth gravitate to". This work is not easy and takes time, but above all it takes passion and a willingness to start where the youth are and build from there. The youth workers role is not to fix youth, but to "walk with them" through their journey to adulthood. Youth must be able to trust that the youth worker is listening to them and will be there for them. Being there is a central quality of good practice and good practice means walking with youth. I always go back to Tito's statement in *Urban Sanctuaries*, "Kids can walk around trouble, if there is some place to walk to and someone to walk with" (2001, p.219).

Implications for Policy

Through the stories youth workers expressed their need for recognition and support. The urban youth workers I interviewed are seasoned practitioners and need support in several areas. They need the support of their organization through recognition of the work that they do and opportunities for quality professional development. Urban youth workers need training and education to develop their skills in working with diverse audiences, including, race, gender and other cultural issues. Youth workers often have part-time positions and work more than one job to make ends meet. Organizations need to look at how to provide stable full time positions for youth workers with a livable wage.

Implications for Training

Who should be leading the training for youth workers? I would suggest that experienced youth work practitioners can be recruited to share their expertise and provide

quality training for emerging youth workers. The youth workers I interviewed are leading the way in showing that a “youth worker teaching youth worker” model can work. Another suggestion would be to develop apprentice or practicum programs where emerging youth workers would work side by side with experienced youth workers who can share their knowledge. This would be similar to what nurses and doctors must do; serving under the eye of the experienced professional where they can do the work, learn from their mistakes and have regular meetings where they can reflect and improve their practice. This would give the new youth worker the hands on experience they need to learn the craft and how to enter the world of youth and begin to create respectful, trusting relationships.

Implications for Practice

This study shows us that youth workers need a particular kind of expertise in practice. The everyday work in youth work practice requires practitioners to be attentive, observant and engaging. They need to see youth as capable and resourceful. This particular expertise is knowing how to read youth and the context they are in. This expertise is intuitive in nature; knowing when to step in to a situation and when to stay back. It is about negotiation and listening to youth. If there were programs in place to help emerging youth workers learn this expertise through hands on experience and shadowing of expert youth workers in a practicum style setting, the stage would be set for a higher quality of youth work practice in general. There have been discussions concerning the professionalization/credentialing of the youth work field, but there is resistance to this effort. Youth workers are concerned that this effort might interfere with

their abilities to work closely with youth. Here is a possible research study; looking at how professionalizing a field changes the work.

Implications for Future Research

The youth work practitioners interviewed for this research study provided me with a glimpse in how youth workers do their day to day work. They represent a particular approach that is youth centered and intuitive in nature. It is also a small sample with only five participants. Future research would be valuable using a larger sample of youth workers. A Study involving a youth workers from suburban, rural and faith based organizations would allow us to see if the themes I found in my study carry across a variety of settings.

Future research asking youth what they think makes a good youth worker would be valuable. There was only one female youth worker in this study. Research on women in youth work needs more exploration, as well as, youth workers identifying as GLBT. I would also recommend more research on the issue of spirituality in youth work. This was touched on in the portraits in discussing the notion of youth work being a calling; however it was not the focus of this study. There is more to be learned about this aspect of the work.

A study looking at how potential youth workers find out if this if the field for them before they actually become youth workers. This might include how organizations invite people into the practice of youth work.

Another suggestion would be to do an ethnographic study where a researcher could be immersed in the world of youth work for a year observing and interviewing youth workers, their supervisors, youth and the community people. It would allow for a 360 view of what this world of youth work and youth is all about.

Limitations in this study include the small number of youth workers interviewed, and the fact that it is more of a descriptive narrative study rather than pure phenomenology.

Final Words

This research study has been a long journey. Along the way I have worked with and followed great youth workers. I have learned from each of them and I have also followed my own path to understanding what it means to be a youth worker. At this stage I am no longer practicing direct youth work except with my granddaughters and their friends. Being with them helps me continue to understand what it means to be a youth in this current world we live in.

I will never forget Howard, Bob, Ross, Ben and Jazmin. They were always ready to talk to me, let me walk with them and tell me their stories. They are working to bring an authentic youth centered style of youth work to their organization and it is ongoing work. As I write these final words, I know that youth workers are gathering together in sharing meetings around the city and they are sharing their wisdom with each other and the community.

As all youth need to be seen as individuals (Ben's words) so should youth workers. They each bring a stance and their individual perspective to the work. You can see from the stories that they tell, there is a greater need for support, recognition and

freedom to do the youth work they do. Hanging out with these five experienced urban youth workers has been a rare privilege and it made me remember how important their work is and will be. They are the other side of the educational coin.

It has been a long and winding road and has been worth every moment. Thanks to all the people that made it possible.

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APPENDIX A

CONSENT FORM

What is the lived experience of being in relationship with youth in the urban context?

You are invited to be in a research study concerning how youth workers come to be in relationship with youth. You were selected as a possible participant because of your experience and your ability to work successfully with youth. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by: Jerilyn M. Ezaki, a doctoral student in the department of Organizational Leadership, Policy and Development at the University of Minnesota

Background Information

The purpose of this study is: to gain an understanding how effective youth workers create positive relationships with the youth they work with and how that information might inform how we support and educate youth workers entering the field. I am particularly interested in how this is done in urban environments.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, we would ask you to do the following things: Allow me to observe you as you work and then have conversational interviews with you about how you do your work and how I saw you interacting with youth. I expect to observe and interview at least three times.

Risks and Benefits of being in the Study

There are no anticipated risks to being in this study..

The benefit of participation in this study is a chance for you to talk about your work and be able to name your effective methods.

Confidentiality:

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report we might publish, we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely and only researchers will have access to the records. Study data will be encrypted according to current University policy for protection of confidentiality.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University of Minnesota or the agency you work with. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

Contacts and Questions:

Jerilyn Ezaki, maybe contacted at any time at: 612-310-0108 or jerilyn.ezaki@gmail.com. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact me at the above numbers. You may also contact my advisor Rosemarie Park at: 612-625-6267 or parkx002@umn.edu

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), **you are encouraged** to contact the Research Subjects' Advocate Line, D528 Mayo, 420 Delaware St. Southeast, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455; (612) 625-1650.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

APPENDIX B

1206E16403 - PI Ezaki - IRB - Exempt Study Notification

The IRB: Human Subjects Committee determined that the referenced study is exempt from review under federal guidelines 45 CFR Part 46.101(b) category #2 SURVEYS/INTERVIEWS; STANDARDIZED EDUCATIONAL TESTS; OBSERVATION OF PUBLIC BEHAVIOR.

Study Number: 1206E16403

Principal Investigator: Jerilyn Ezaki

Title(s):

What is the ?lived experience? of being in relationship with youth in the urban context?

This e-mail confirmation is your official University of Minnesota HRPP notification of exemption from full committee review. You will not receive a hard copy or letter.

This secure electronic notification between password protected authentications has been deemed by the University of Minnesota to constitute a legal signature.

The study number above is assigned to your research. That number and the title of your study must be used in all communication with the IRB office.

Research that involves observation can be approved under this category without obtaining consent.

SURVEY OR INTERVIEW RESEARCH APPROVED AS EXEMPT UNDER THIS CATEGORY IS LIMITED TO ADULT SUBJECTS.

This exemption is valid for five years from the date of this correspondence and will be filed inactive at that time. You will receive a notification prior to

inactivation. If this research will extend beyond five years, you must submit a new application to the IRB before the study's expiration date.

Upon receipt of this email, you may begin your research. If you have questions, please call the IRB office at [\(612\) 626-5654](tel:6126265654).

You may go to the View Completed section of eResearch Central at <http://eresearch.umn.edu/> to view further details on your study.

The IRB wishes you success with this research.

We have created a short survey that will only take a couple of minutes to complete. The questions are basic but will give us guidance on what areas are showing improvement and what areas we need to focus on:

<https://umsurvey.umn.edu/index.php?sid=94693&lang=um>



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