

Youth Leadership, Circles and Trauma Awareness

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Abstract

This study focuses on the philosophy and theory of peacemaking circles ("Circles") - a restorative justice practice focused on addressing trauma among the disenfranchised young people participating in Roca, Inc's Youth Star program. As Roca's community service leadership project, Youth Star is made up of 25 young people from Chelsea, Massachusetts, who live and serve their own communities. Prior observations and interactions over the last two years demonstrate high levels of trauma among this population. For the purposes of this study, trauma includes both structural and individual experiences of poverty, displacement and dislocation (fear of deportation), and domestic violence. This study captures participant narratives and case studies that capture how trauma affects the brain, and simultaneously, how holistic strategies (such as Circles) and resilient environments can counteract some of the impacts of trauma, for the purposes of strengthening young people and their communities. And finally, this paper discusses the need for further research on trauma, youth leadership and the use of arts in Circle.

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Introduction

Roca

Roca is a non-profit organization in Chelsea, Massachusetts, dedicated to moving young people out of violence and poverty. Roca has a long history of serving youth who are truant, have dropped out of school, members of gangs, recent immigrants and young parents. Roca is a safe place for young people to heal, be challenged and grow. Youth Star, is Roca's high-risk^{1*} youth leadership project, that engages 25 young adults in a year of collaborative community service. Unlike other service programs that invest in bringing outside leaders into communities, the Youth Star program supports and cultivates leaders from within. The project works with some of the highest risk young adults in stepping up, engaging with their own communities, organizing, and finding solutions to some of the most critical social issues. Youth Star members have direct experience within the communities they serve. Youth Star members help other Roca participants become aware of their power and roles in effecting change while also engaged in their own change process.

¹ *Roca defines high-risk young people as young people and young parents in gangs, in and out of state systems, using drugs and alcohol, poor, hungry, often homeless and/or suffering from the trauma of war.

Target Population

According to the latest census data, there are 38,336 people living in Chelsea. Fifty percent of the overall population of Chelsea is Hispanic and 60% of Chelsea residents are foreign born. Roca serves a diverse population of young people and young parents that includes Cambodian, Bosnian, Sudanese, Guatemalan, Afghani, Salvadorian, and Honduran. All of these countries have been deeply affected by war, poverty, natural disasters, and civil unrest. Youth Star members reflect some of the population diversity of young people in Chelsea. Twenty of the 25 Youth Star members are Hispanic; 18 are women and seven are men. The majority of members in Roca's Youth Star program come from the communities they serve and have experienced an abnormal amount of trauma throughout their lives. Many of the Youth Star members carry intergenerational historical traumas in addition to their own personal experiences of trauma growing up in Chelsea.

Two brief examples of inter-generational trauma

Pablo is a 19-year-old Hispanic male. His mother is Puerto Rican and his dad is from El Salvador. Pablo's father's entire family fled El Salvador to Guatemala in the 1980s due to civil war. From there his father came to the U.S. Unfortunately, Pablo's father over stayed his tourist visa and stayed in the country illegally. His father also took part in crimes that took him in and out of jail. His father's crimes eventually got the attention of Immigration Customs Enforcement. Pablo's father is currently in an immigration detention center waiting for court hearings and deportation. But Pablo's experiences of violence don't end there. Pablo also witnessed domestic violence and, at school, was bullied for being overweight.

Pablo, personal communication, December 16, 2011

Meredith is a 23-year-old Hispanic female. Her parents were drug addicts growing up. Her parents too, had grown up in poverty in Puerto Rico and migrated to the U.S. for a better quality of life. Unfortunately, they both fell into alcohol and drug addiction. Meredith has been battling addiction since she was 12 years old. When she went to a local hospital to detoxify from the drugs she was on, the staff at the hospital recognized her because her father and mother had been there so many times.

Meredith, personal communication, December 13, 2011

I have served as the program coordinator for the Youth Star program for the last two years. During these two years I have supervised, coached, and trained 50 members in leadership. I hold a minimum of three Circles a week. Most, if not all, of the young people engaged in the program struggle to overcome and cope with traumatic experiences they have faced throughout their young lives. These traumas include: poverty, war, domestic violence, substance abuse, gangs, deportation, teen-age pregnancy and sexual abuse. Some Youth Star members have overcome their traumas and many of them will have to work on overcoming these traumas for the rest of their lives. I interviewed Youth Star members about some of these life experiences, asked them questions about their perspectives on healing and also asked them to evaluate if and how the Circle process has helped them become better leaders. While in Youth Star, members have access to resources like a health clinic managed by Massachusetts General Hospital, job developers, peacemaking Circles, General Education Development classes, and Community Health Worker trainings. These resources have become important tools for the members' healing and personal development.

In summary, the target population with whom I have worked and on whom I have focused are young people who have suffered high degrees of trauma, both personally and inter-generationally.

Personal Relevance/Narrative

My conviction that the restorative justice practice of peacemaking Circles can 1) raise trauma awareness and 2) promote healing among high-risk young people is rooted in my experience as a Circle keeper and community organizer at Roca. My convictions are also influenced by my own personal history of struggle to live and succeed in a world that has often told me that there is something wrong with whom I am as a person. I have spent the last 16 years of my life as an artist, activist, mentor and Circle keeper. These roles have facilitated my pursuit of self-acceptance, leadership, and social justice.

My parents are from the Dominican Republic but I was born in Puerto Rico. My father was exiled from Dominican Republic for 10 years for accepting a scholarship from the Romanian (Communist) government in the late 1960's, which is why I was born in Puerto Rico. At the age of seven, my parents, sister and I moved to Lynn, and then Salem, Massachusetts - where I grew up. Both my parents grew up during a dictatorship and revolution in the Dominican Republic. Their experiences of political and social repression in the context of dictatorship as well as exile is part of my family history that, alongside my own experiences as a gay, immigrant young person of color growing up in the United States, lie at the core of my current work. It has been through my practice of Circle where I became more aware of my own trauma and dissonance. I began to use the wisdom and skills drawn from my own life experiences to help young people who have struggled with experiences similar to mine.

In my role as the Youth Star Program Director, I continue to learn and grow in my own leadership. When I first came to Roca I was not a staff person but a 23 year-old community activist who led a double life. I experimented with drugs and alcohol during this time and my use went from being something recreational to becoming a problem. Within my social group, I would experience blackouts from heavy drinking and get into fights. At work and with my family, I would hide my weaknesses and insecurities under the guise of self-confidence. When I finally got myself together, I applied for a job at Roca and soon after I was hired I had my first Circle training. That first Circle training changed my life. I realized that I was not alone and had finally acquired a tool that could help me practice the values dearest to me while also helping others.

Circles

At a lecture presented in 1999, Molly Baldwin, the Founder and Executive Director of Roca, met Judge Barry Stuart, retired Chief Judge of the Yukon Territory. At this lecture Barry Stuart talked about restorative justice and the practice of Circles as an alternative to sentencing and as a tool for community healing. Barry Stuart, alongside Mark Wedge, Elder/Leader from the Tangleis Tinglit Nation, Harold Gatensby, First Nations leader from the Yukon, and Kay Pranis, national leader in restorative justice, have expanded the use of peacemaking Circles for public community healing processes in North America over the last 20 years. Barry, Mark and Kay have also used Circles as alternative to regular court proceedings – what are known as Sentencing Circles. Sentencing Circles involve the victim, victim supporters, the offender, offender supporters, judge and court personnel, prosecutor, defense counsel, police, and all interested community members (Coates, Umbreit, & Vos, 2000).

My first Circle training took place in Rocas' gym in 2000. There were 40 people in attendance including: gang members, police, clergy, the Department of Youth Services, the Department of Social Services and various community organizations and leaders. We spent four long days together learning about the process while getting to know each other on very deep levels. Everyone had a story I could relate to and learn from. "We are all related," stated Harold Gatensby, First Nations Leader of the Yukon at the training, "if you can't seem to find a circle anywhere, just look into the pupil of another person's eye, the Earth is a circle and is made up of 80% water and so are our bodies. People will always be 80% more alike than different" (H. Gatensby, personal communication, August 2000). This wisdom had a profound impact on the way that I worked with people. I began to practice the values in my daily life and, at work, I committed to using Circles to provide a sacred and gracious space where people could come together to share, heal, connect, grow, solve problems together and think creatively as a community.

Soon after my first training I began to use Circles with some of the young people I worked with. This took place almost a decade before I began using Circles with Youth Star. During the first year of using Circles with the young people at Roca I observed shifts in young peoples' behavior and in the culture of the organization. Young people began to understand the importance of values and guidelines not only in Circle but also in their own lives. Circles began to have an impact on the organization. Young people and adults began to hold each other accountable by requesting Circles to address issues. Young people also began to request and hold Circles when there was a loss in the community or when they thought they needed a safe space to talk about their challenges,

struggles, and traumatic experiences. Circles bring people together in a way that creates trust, respect, intimacy, good will, belonging, generosity, mutuality and reciprocity. The process is never about changing others, but rather is an invitation to change oneself and one's relationship with the community (Boyse-Watson, 2008).

Circles teach me about accountability and integrity. They teach me to listen and observe staff and young people with greater attention. Circles also allow me to see how my well-being affects how the young people from the Youth Star program function.

When I asked Pablo if healing was necessary to be a good leader he stated the following:

Yes, you have to be really strong to be a leader, because when you are a leader, people count on you. As a leader you can't show your weaknesses. You have to show you are the leader. When I see a leader I see someone like you, someone who works really hard and makes me want to work even harder, and I depend on you to be a hard worker and coolheaded. If something is wrong with the leader something is wrong with everybody.

(Pablo, personal communication, December 16, 2011).

As Pablo so poignantly states, he depends on the leader to be a model. The modeling is one of the reasons I sustained sobriety and balance in my life after I began practicing Circles. I remember a time last year when I was under a lot of stress and was not being my usual self. I was snappy, sarcastic, and even yelled at one point. During one of our weekly Circles the entire Youth Star team told me in Circle they were disappointed in my behavior. They told me a leader does not behave in that way. I apologized and let

them know that leaders are only human. We all received a reality check in that Circle. I learned to watch my behavior and they learned that I was not perfect.

Circles come from the oratory traditions that are part of the fabric of the daily lives of many Indigenous and Native American cultures. Though there are historical foundations, the Circle process I mention in this study has been adapted for contemporary times. Circles are simple but not easy, and must be experienced to be fully grasped and replicated. According to Pranis (2005), there is an intangible quality to Circles that must be experienced to be understood; however, there are some key structures that help define the Circle. The structure is as follows:

1. Participants are seated in a circle focusing on the center where symbolic objects may be placed to remind participants of values shared among those in the circle.
2. A talking piece is used as a way to ensure respect between speakers and listeners. The talking piece is passed from person to person within the circle and only the person holding the piece may speak.
3. Each Circle requires a keeper and/or a co-keeper. The keepers' role is to guide the Circle and to also model the values and principles of the Circle.
4. The keeper opens and closes the Circle using traditional Circle ritual (prayer, song, poem or quote).

5. Everyone contributes to stating guidelines (values) at the beginning of the Circle to create a respectful space for all participants. (p.10).

Circles have many applications and have been used for community building, healing, conflict resolution, democracy work (consensus building) and as an alternative to court sentencing. Circles tend to focus on reflection, support and healing—making them a powerful way for communities and individuals to come together to help identify issues and generate ideas for problem solving (Pranis, 2005).

I spent four years at Roca practicing Circles with young people, organizations, and community members. In 2003, I moved to Miami, Florida where I continued to practice and hold Circles in different communities in Miami-Dade County. In 2008, I returned to Massachusetts to work at Roca and once again began to use Circles with high-risk young people. I came back to Roca work as the coordinator of the Roca Immigrant and Refugee Initiative. After two years of leading Roca's Immigrant and Refugee Initiative I was offered the opportunity to work with Youth Star and further develop the project and leadership of the members. Part of their leadership development included collaborating on a national level with a network of other youth development organizations from across the country.

Arts and Circle

An area that I would like to further develop and research is the use of art in Circles. I believe that the combination of Circles with expressive art therapies can have a great impact on the healing of very high-risk young people. Marisol was a Roca participant I knew 10 years ago when I began incorporating arts in the Circle process. She

was very artistic and always looked forward to the dance classes and painting classes I taught at Roca. I knew from experience that Marisol had a difficult time sitting still and participating in talking Circles, but I knew that if I engaged her in some art activities in Circle it might help her in her self-discovery and reflection. I became concerned about Marisol when she stopped coming to dance classes and I began to hear about her instigating fights with other participants. I also noticed that Marisol was becoming more withdrawn so when I began to organize my first art Circle, I wanted to make sure that I invited her. To my surprise Marisol came to a three-day art Circle with 20 other Roca youth. I instinctually knew through my own experience that using art could increase her ability to express herself.

During one particular exercise I witnessed Marisol use art as a way to organize and express her thoughts. The art activity is called the *River of Life*. In this exercise participants draw a river with five points, at each of the five points participants draw or write about an event that has made them who they are today. When we began the exercise, I noticed Marisol looking around at the other young people in the Circle, then she put her head down, and began to draw. When it was time to go around the Circle and talk about the activity, Marisol clutched her drawing to her chest and chose not to share. After this Circle I noticed that Marisol took an interest in painting and began keeping a journal. About eight years later, Marisol confided in me that it was in that Circle that she learned she could use art as a way to deal with what was going on in her life. She told me that she was the victim of a sexual assault during the time of her first Circle. She told me she found solace, comfort, and a sense of empowerment when she created art and wrote in her journal. It is my hope that through further research the integration of arts in Circles

can provide high-risk young people with additional opportunities to find their voice and express themselves in a positive and creative way (Marisol, personal communication, January 2008).

Methodology Based in Heuristic Research

Heuristic Inquiry

In this paper I will be presenting case studies. I have collected information using the heuristic research method. Heuristic inquiry requires total presence, honesty, integrity and maturity. According to this method, the researcher must have a direct, personal encounter with the phenomenon being investigated. This method uses self-inquiry and requires a disciplined approach of remaining with a question relentlessly until it is illuminated or answered (Clark Moustakas, 1990).

At the beginning of a Circle, a question or questions are prompted in order to stimulate conversation about the principle issue that people are coming together for. For example, if a Circle has been planned to resolve an issue between two people I try to formulate a question that gets to a shared value between those in conflict. When I ask a question such as “What is your hope for the children in your community?” most people will have similar answers. Once I have established some common ground I can help participants of the Circle transition from discussing difficult and painful events to discussing what can be done to make things better. I learned that questions should never invite attacks on another person. I learned to encourage people in Circle to speak from their life experiences and that my own learning in Circle often came from the stories participants have shared.

Circles gave me the opportunity to reflect on who I wanted to be in the world and I began to practice the philosophy of Circle outside of Circle. I remember going out with a couple of friends in downtown Boston on a cold winter night and a car with three men drove up to me and my friends as we were about to cross the street. One of the men in the

back seat called us a gay slur and spit on me. As I got ready to punch the guy in the back through the window, I reached down in my pocket where I had a talking piece. I held on to the talking piece and told my friends to let it go. We all avoided what could have been a very bad fight that night and I felt as if my change process had truly begun. Circles taught me to be more loving and patient with others and myself. No one ever fights about what they think they are fighting about. Letting go and trusting this process made me a better researcher and Circle keeper.

Heuristic inquiry uses qualitative methodology by arriving at themes and exploring the essence of experiences. Initially, the first four interviews focused on asking participants to define healing in their own terms. What emerged throughout the interviews was that what they were healing from stemmed from traumatic experiences. Once I began to see the subject of trauma repeatedly begin to emerge, I investigated further and adapted questions in the moment. This is the nature of heuristics. You look for pieces of information that connect to the larger story of what you are investigating in order to determine the direction of your research. Unlike research methods like phenomenological inquiry, where detachment from the phenomenon is encouraged, heuristic inquiry emphasizes connectedness and relationship. All heuristic inquiry begins with the internal search to discover. My own process aligns with the heuristic method because my inquiries began with some internal questions for example: Who am I? How can my experiences help others with similar experiences?

The first interview I conducted was in the late spring of 2011. I was canoeing with three youth leaders from the Roca Youth Star project. The interview took place during a Youth Star retreat in New Hampshire. I had formulated some questions specific to

healing and thought that asking them in the middle of the lake would be a relaxing and fun way to conduct the interview. Within the first two minutes of the interview the subject of trauma had come up. I documented the interview using my videophone. Because of the confidential nature of some of the interviews I asked participants permission to use their interviews in my research. All interviewees signed a written consent form and gave me permission to publish their interviews but I did not use their real names.

I followed the Moustakas (1990) heuristic guidelines for procedures and analysis of data, which I have listed below:

1. Organizing, handling, and synthesizing data. Gather information from one participant (recording, transcript, notes, journal, personal documents, poems, artwork, etc.).
2. The researcher enters into the material in timeless immersion until it is understood.
3. The data is set aside a while, encouraging an interval of rest and return to the data, procedures which facilitate the awakening of fresh energy and perspective.
4. Return to original data of the individual co-researcher.
5. When the above steps have been completed for one research participant, the investigator undertakes the same course of action and organization and analysis of the data for each of the other research participants until individual depiction of co-researcher's experience of the phenomenon has been constructed.

6. At a timely point in knowledge and readiness, the researcher develops a composite depiction that represents the common qualities and themes that embrace the experience of the co-researcher.
7. Select two or three participants that exemplify the group as a whole.
8. Development of the creative synthesis of the experience. The researcher taps into imaginative and contemplative sources of knowledge and insight that supports the researchers, knowledge, passion and presence. (p.51).

I reviewed the first video multiple times in order to draw out the themes that kept coming up in Circles. After reviewing the material covered in the video, I took some notes and set everything aside for a couple of weeks. I returned to the video in hopes of gaining a fresh perspective on the material. The information that I gathered from the first interview informed the way I conducted the rest of the interviews. After the first interview I began to ask more open-ended questions. I let the interviewees elaborate a little more on their personal stories but I always ended with the same questions which was “Do you think that healing is necessary to be a good leader?” This question emerged because I began to witness that the more time Youth Star members spent in Circle the better their behavior and leadership. I had originally thought I would be spending more time exploring how using art in Circles is an effective tool to working with high-risk young people. However I found myself instead, in staying true to heuristic inquiry, following the continuous emerging themes of poverty and trauma.

Connected Knowing

Connected knowing (Belenky et al, 1986/97) is an epistemological orientation, where connection rather than justification carries more importance. I began with an interest and gradually shifted my focus to what was more important to the person I was interviewing and then linking it my main research question. As a connected knower (Belenky et al, 1986/97) my approach to this research is not completely unbiased. I interviewed the Youth Star members empathetically. I also related and identified with many of the stories that I heard during some of the interviews, for example when I heard Alex express his fear of coming out to his mother. I also related to Kelly's, Edward's and Sandra's responses as to how Circles supported their healing and leadership process.

Aligning with Circle Philosophy

The heuristic research method aligns with Circle philosophy. Circles are an alternative communication process that Roca has been using for 12 years. Circles draw heavily upon aboriginal concepts of peacemaking and the restorative justice practices found in mediation and consensus-building processes. Kay Pranis has written multiple articles and books on the peacemaking circle process and has years of experience as a Circle keeper and trainer. In Kay Pranis's article, *Peacemaking Circles: Restorative Justice in practice Allows Victims and Offenders to Begin Repairing the Harm*, she states, "The Circle Process is a story telling process. Every person has a story, and every story has a lesson to offer. In the Circle, people touch one another's lives by sharing stories that have meaning to them."

In the book *Peacemaking Circles: From Crime to Community* (2003), the authors, Pranis, Stuart, and Wedge outline both the structure and spirit that constitute the Circle

process as it is used in communities— ranging from schools to correctional settings. The stories captured in this book demonstrate the healing power of Circles and explores how some communities have responded to crimes in ways that address the needs of victims, offenders, families, and communities. In this way, Circle philosophy directly aligns with heuristic inquiry. Circles, like heuristic inquiry start with an idea, interest or concern. As dialog occurs in Circle, the Circle follows the themes that emerge. The themes can be unexpected at times and since Circles do not follow a fixed plan – like heuristic inquiry they are an emergent process. Another important parallel between Circle and heuristic inquiry is that in Circle, the participation of the facilitator in the dialog is not as an objective observer but as an engaged party in the process.

Trauma Poverty and Violence

Risk Factors/International Perspective

A report by the World Health Organization (World Report on Violence and Health, World Health Organization 2002) listed three global risk factors for youth violence as the following: (1) unemployment and low income, (2) Social isolation with racism and ghetto-ization of neighborhoods, (3) Lack of social services and social supports. The report also states how these risk factors significantly contribute to gang culture both in the world and in the U.S. According to the World Health Organization violence is a leading worldwide public health problem.

International Statistics on Violence

When I was 13, I tried to join a gang in middle school. I was being bullied and felt that the best way to protect myself was to join a gang. The first gang I tried to join rejected me, so I went to a rival gang. I was accepted into the rival gang but was fortunate that my father and mother bought a house in the suburbs of Lynn, Massachusetts, making it impossible for me to keep ties with the gang. Part of the reason I believe I survived not getting into trouble during this period in my life was that I had a stable home and my father worked very hard to keep us out of poverty and violence. My parents and home life were instrumental to my safety and health.

The WHO report (2002) also states,

The death and disability caused by violence make it one of the leading public health issues of our time. Violence is among the leading causes of death for people aged 15-44 years of age, accounting for 14% of deaths among males and 7% of deaths among females. On an

average day, 1424 people are killed in acts of homicide almost one person every minute. Roughly one person commits suicide every 40 seconds. About 35 people are killed every hour as a direct result of armed conflict. In the 20th century, an estimated 191 million people lost their lives directly or indirectly as a result of conflict, and well over half of them were civilians. Studies have shown that in some countries, health care expenditures due to violence account for up to 5% of GDP. (p.25)

This statement is an example that not only is violence a worldwide problem but it also has economic impact on societies that are already lacking adequate health and social services.

Local Statistics on Violence

The level of violence has increasingly become problematic in Chelsea, Massachusetts. Last year there were eight murders in Chelsea within a six-month period. Two of the murder victims were former Roca participants. One of the victims, Michael, was a former Youth Star member whose sister Carla is currently in the program. Carla's brother was one out of eight homicides in 2010 within a six-month period in Chelsea. In the early 1990s, trends in homicide rates were at their highest. The rates significantly dropped in 1997 but have been on a steady rise since 2003 (*see Figure 1 below*).

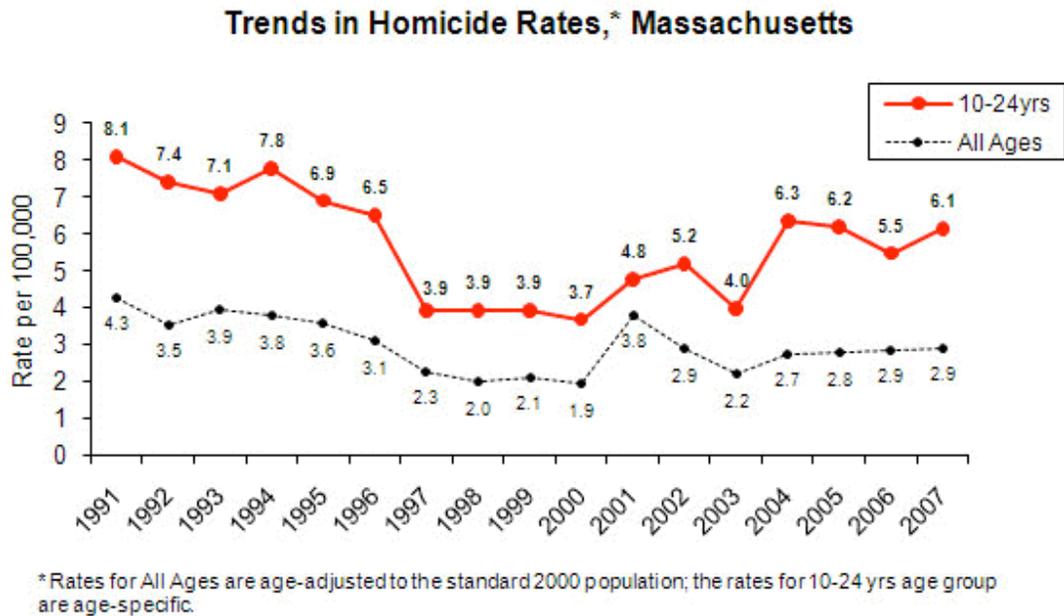


Figure 1. Trends in Homicide Rates, Massachusetts

Carla’s Transformation

At the time of her brother’s death, Carla had been involved in Roca for more than three years and had made significant changes in her personal life and behavior. Her brother was murdered a month before she was to start the Youth Star program. Carla had transformed herself from an angry, volatile, young woman to a person that was able to control her anger and sustain employment. Her brother’s death threatened these changes, and Roca staff immediately organized a Circle to support and help her through the grieving process. In Circle, Carla was able to process and talk about her feelings. She was able to articulate what she was going through. The Circle and the people that came together to support her helped Carla continue to practice sustaining her changes and create a safe environment where she could grieve. Once Carla began her process of healing she was adamant about going out to the high school to lead violence prevention

workshops in Circle. At the first workshop Carla and the Youth Star violence prevention team taught middle and high school students about the different types of violence: domestic, physical, emotional, verbal and economic. However, it was Carla's story about her brother that inspired the participants of the workshop to become engaged so that they started to ask questions.

“That first workshop was healing for me,” Carla said when I interviewed her.

“I never thought that doing this [workshop] was going to make me feel so good. Doing this makes me feel like I didn't lose my brother in vain.” Carla's statement is an example of how she took all of her hurt and pain and transformed it into something positive and healing for her. Carla continues to lead workshops at the high school and continues to talk to other Roca youth about the impact of violence on the community and how to prevent it (Carla, personal communication, May 2010).

According to Katz (1982), “healing is a process of transition toward meaning, balance, wholeness, and connectedness, both within individuals and between individuals and their environments”(p.3). Katz came to this philosophy via his research and study of the healing dance rituals of the !Kung people of Botswana, Africa. In this paper I will be using Katz's definition of healing. In my experience, young people desperately want to share their story in order to give their lives meaning and feel connected to a community.

Lisa's Tears

“Pain that is not transformed is transferred.”

-Father Richard Rohr

This quote from author and trauma expert, Father Richard Rohr, is an example of the cycle of violence. The victim can often become the aggressor, and if we don't

transform violence we've encountered, we can pass it along to others. Part of the cycle of violence is unhealed trauma that can lead one to cause harm to oneself and others. It is important that young people who are angry and acting out, make the connection of where the anger stems from and transform it into something positive. According to Carolyn Yoder (2005),

Not all trauma is induced by single dramatic events that are outside the normal range of human experience, such as tornado or an accident or even the death of Marie's brother in the World Trade Center. Trauma can be caused by living under abusive or unsafe conditions that are long term and continuous (p.12).

In Peter Levine's (1997) book, "Waking the Tiger" the author makes a similar statement to Yoder (2005),

Many events can cause traumatic reactions later in life, depending on how the person experienced them at the time.

Some examples of common traumatic antecedents are:

- Fetal trauma (intra-uterine)
- Birth trauma
- Loss of a parent or close family member
- Illness, high fevers, accidental poisoning
- Physical injuries, including falls and accidents
- Sexual, physical, and emotional abuse, including severe abandonment, or beatings
- Witnessing violence

- Natural disasters such as earthquakes, fires, and floods
- Certain medical and dental procedures
- Surgery, particularly tonsillectomies with ether; operations for ear problems and for so-called “lazy eye”
- Anesthesia
- Prolonged immobilization; the casting and splinting of young children’s leg’s torsos for various reasons (turned-in feet, scoliosis). (p.54)

During my interview with Lisa, I asked her about what she thought caused her the most harm when she was younger, and the first thing she said was being poor. Lisa said, “When I was in elementary school, I didn’t have anything, I felt as if everyone around me had everything and me and my two sisters and brother never had enough of anything. We never had enough to eat or a lot of clothes,” Lisa emphasized that the worrying about food and clothes made her very anxious and stressed. This distress continued in her life during her childhood and continued into her adolescent years.

As the interview progressed, Lisa began to open up and disclosed some of the additional events she had experienced as a child.

“I witnessed my stepfather molesting my older sister when I was 14. We both tried to tell my mother; she never believed us. I wanted to hate her but I couldn’t because she is my mother.” Her statement helped me understand why she was hanging out in the streets at such a young age: nothing could be worse than being home. Lisa continued to share that she had witnessed her biological father throwing her twin sister across the room when she was four.

When I first met Lisa, she had come into Roca looking to fight another young woman who had repeatedly threatened her sister, Marta. Lisa was often described by program coordinators as one of their favorite people in the building. In contrast to her smart and charming personality, Lisa had a hard time controlling her anger. She had a short temper and found it difficult trusting anyone. Most Roca staff wanted to help her and see her succeed. On this particular day, I saw and heard her through the window of my office door.

“Where is she? I am gonna f...k her up!” Lisa said in the hallway right outside my office.

Her sister tried to calm her down. Her eyes were red, welled up with tears, and her face was very red and sweaty. I opened the door, looked at Lisa and Marta, and invited them into my office.

”Lisa, it’s not worth it. Come into my office, please?”

Lisa and I did not know each other, so it took me several tries before she actually came in and sat in my office. As Lisa and her sister sat in my office, I asked them what was going on. Lisa began to tell me that another girl was threatening her sister and she was going to confront her. It was obvious that Lisa was extremely protective of her sister. But it was not until my interview with her years later that I understood why (Lisa, Personal communication, October 2009).

After this incident I began to engage and build trust with Lisa by asking her to come to events and having her volunteer a couple of days out of the week. Eventually I was able to hire her for a summer, alongside nine other young people working on an arts and social justice initiative funded by the Kellogg Foundation. Lisa was a natural at

organizing events. She flourished and everyone noticed it. After the summer job she applied for Youth Star and is currently serving her second year as a member. I interviewed Lisa on October 13, 2011, and received her permission to share parts of her interview in this research paper.

During my interview with Lisa I asked her about what she thought caused her the most harm when she was younger and the first thing she said was being poor. Lisa said, “When I was in elementary school I didn’t have anything, I felt as if everyone around me had everything and me and my two sisters and brother never had enough of anything. We never had enough to eat or a lot of clothes”. Lisa emphasized that the worrying about food and clothes made her very anxious and stressed. This distress continued in her life during her childhood and continued into her adolescent years.

As the interview progressed, Lisa began to open up and disclosed some of the additional events she had experienced as a child.

“I witnessed my stepfather molesting my older sister when I was fourteen. We both tried to tell my mother, she never believed us. I wanted to hate her but I couldn’t because she is my mother.” Her story helped me understand why she was hanging out in the streets at such a young age: nothing could be worse than being home.

Lisa dropped out of school her senior year of high school, but had been getting into trouble a year before she dropped out. Lisa hung out with a group of young women with whom she felt she identified and connected. She began to smoke marijuana with this group of girls and then progressed to using harder drugs, such as cocaine and ecstasy pills. Lisa and her friends would get drunk and high and go to the street specifically looking to fight people. It was during this time that Lisa picked up multiple trespassing

and assault charges which eventually lead to her violating probation and going to jail for three months (Lisa personal communication November 3, 2011).

Lisa's cumulative traumatic experiences had a direct impact on her life.

Interviewing Lisa was an excellent reminder of the young people Roca works with. It also helped me get a better understanding of where Lisa's anger stemmed from. The kind of anger Lisa is carrying is not easily transformed and she will carry it her entire life. For a little over a year, Lisa had mentioned in various Circles that she wanted to say something but wasn't ready and a year later, during a Circle training Lisa told her story. I witnessed Lisa make some significant changes in her behavior but it wasn't until she told her story that her leadership went to another level. Lisa became less reactive. She didn't hold on to things like before and was able to lead projects and work with others in a much more professional manner. It was an amazing thing to witness.

Throughout my 12 years of experience of working with very high-risk young people I have observed how hard it is for young people to forgive and overcome traumas brought on by a parent or close family member. According to conflict transformation expert John Paul Lederach (2003), it takes longer for people to heal from human-caused trauma than trauma brought on by an accident or natural disaster. This is not surprising to me as confirmed by what I have discovered in working with Roca youth both inside and outside of the Youth Star Program. Levine (1997) notes, "If not released, it stays trapped in our bodies in the form of stress or trauma reaction" (p.77).

During the interview I wondered about Lisa's current healing and coping. When I asked her how she defined healing she said, "forgetting and forgiving, forgiving being the main thing, "she told me as tears welled up in her eyes. "Healing is hard for me, I am still

going through it”. When I asked her what she felt she needed the most healing from, the first thing she said was being poor. Then Lisa mentioned her not receiving attention from her mother.

“My mom wasn’t around she was working but I never understood why, back then I thought ‘if she was working so hard then why didn’t we have enough’ now I understand, we were four kids, but I never had the attention that I wanted and needed” (Lisa, Personal communication, October 2009).

Lisa and I have been working together for the last three years and this was the first time she had told me her story in such detail. “I have always thought about writing all this down,” she said near the end of the interview. “I just wouldn’t feel safe keeping it in my house.” After she told me how being poor had an impact about how she felt about herself and her mother, she started to talk about what she had been through in her life and the situation she continues to live in.

“When did you make the decision to change?” I asked Lisa.

“After I got out of jail I said never again. I wanted to do good, I came straight to Roca” she responded. “When I was in jail I felt like everything was taken from me especially my family and freedom, it was so hard”.

Lisa’s story serves as an example of the ways in which poverty can further complicate and produce varying levels of trauma. Unfortunately most young people growing up in poverty in Chelsea will probably be exposed to numerous acts of violence. Rawles states (2006),

Economically disadvantaged youth living in urban areas

experience a disproportionate number of inequities, and suboptimal physical, environmental, familial and social conditions in comparison to children with sufficient financial resources (Evans and English 2002). One of the greatest travesties of poverty, for inner city youth is the increased exposure to violence, as a result of these negative consequences of poverty on the various ecological levels of urban communities. (p.2).

Lisa's story demonstrates how poverty and violence are linked to her trauma. The most significant part of Lisa's story is her resilient spirit. She continues to show up for herself in the midst of adversity.

Trauma and the Brain

Everyone experiences traumatic events differently, and chronically experiencing traumatic events has different physiological effects on different people. All of the literature I have read on the subject of trauma talks about the biological mechanisms or symptoms of trauma in your body and your brain. At the core of this process is the flight or fight response. It is impossible to simply move into or out of these responses because of what happens to our neocortex.

Siegel (1997) notes, our neocortex is associated with our rational brain. The rational brain has a sense of linear time. It knows yesterday, today, and tomorrow. It is conscious, alert, and responsible for helping us make logical decisions. It is associated with our thinking and ability to pay attention. When the cerebral cortex shuts down, our instinctual and emotional brain kicks into high gear. The part of the brain referred to as the "emotional brain" is directly below the cerebral cortex. In medical terms it is known

as the limbic system, which stores our emotions and memory. In times of stress or crisis, it is where our automatic reactions come from.

This disruption in linear thinking, the stress response, was made apparent in numerous interviews. In an interview with eighteen-year-old Alex – an artist who has a passion for technology – he stated, “I black out when I fight. I just don’t remember what happens. It’s like I go into auto mode when I am in that state” (Alex, personal communication, October 2011).

This “blackout” is a part of the brain’s self defense mechanism. During bouts of uncontrollable anger, adrenaline is released into the bloodstream. This increases the heart and breathing rate, which can have an effect on how much oxygen is getting to your brain. Lack of oxygen is often the reason people experience blackouts or dizziness.

The hippocampus is a part of a group of brain structures in the limbic system. Our hippocampus is associated with our ability to recall memories and overcome fear responses. There are studies that suggest (as cited in Tull, 2009) that constant stressful experiences may damage the hippocampus. The hormone cortisol, which is released in response to a stressful event, has been known to damage or destroy hippocampus cells. Researchers have looked at the size of the hippocampus in people who have and have not experienced Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and have found that in cases where the trauma has been constant the hippocampi are smaller.

Not every person who experiences a traumatic event develops PTSD. Some say that a small hippocampus can be a sign that one is more vulnerable to PTSD following a traumatic event. In Peter Levine’s book “Waking the Tiger,” the author writes about a kidnapping case that took place in Chowchilla, California. In 1976, 26 children ages five

to 15 years old were kidnapped. They were shoved in two vans and taken to an abandoned quarry. A 14-year-old boy by the name of Bob Barklay was able to respond to the crisis and remain actively mobilized. Bob organized a couple of the boys to dig a tunnel through the ceiling and escape. Bob emerged without the same debilitating after-effects as the other 25 children. Nearly all of the children showed severe long-term effects on their health and social functioning. Could the ability to keep in motion during crisis help us overcome our traumas and change behavior?

I was always proactive in overcoming my own traumas as a young person. I kept a journal, liked to draw, and sang very loudly in my room if I was upset. When I became a young adult, artistic expression and activism was crucial to my well-being. When I was in college I was harassed for being gay at my dormitory. I was going to my room one night and found that someone had written in the elevator that all homos should die, and when I got to my room there was porn splattered all over my door. The Resident Assistant held a meeting on my floor to discuss the incident but I was the only one that showed up. The following year I applied for a Resident Assistant position at the college and became the President of the Gay/Straight Alliance at my college. I discovered that being proactive helped me overcome my fears and traumas. It helped me build self-confidence and build a community of support.

One can assume that consistent traumatic experiences from early childhood to adolescence can keep the logical and rational parts of the brain under-utilized and possibly underdeveloped. Many Roca young people are focused on their daily survival without much hope for a future. An example of this is a time when I was leading a Circle and used an exercise around story telling, beginning with creating an imaginary person.

In this particular Circle we used the name K, purposely not choosing to give the name a gender, leaving it open-ended so the participants of the Circle could begin to create a story about K. I started a sentence by saying “K” was a 16-year-old person living in Chelsea and was walking down the street. I then passed the talking piece to the person to my left, so they could add another sentence to K’s story. To my astonishment, by the fifth person in the Circle, K had been a survivor of violent acts, consumed drugs, and was dead at the age of twenty-one. K’s story is an example of how violence is present in the minds of the young people at Roca. I believe that their stories or the stories of people they know were manifested in K’s story.

Alex has been involved with Roca for four years. Two Roca youth workers identified him as a high-risk young person. Alex had been skipping school, experimenting with drugs, trespassing, and vandalizing (graffiti). The trespassing and vandalizing behavior led to multiple arrests by the age of 16. When the youth workers finally convinced Alex to come to Roca, he was on the verge of dropping out and struggling with coming out to his mom as bi-sexual.

Like Alex, Lisa made similar statements: “I was so angry I would just go out with my friends and fight people.”

This statement was often the most difficult to hear because, from my experience, the most violent young people are often the most hurt. If these young people are in constant high gear because of their anger and worrying about money and food all the time, the brain shifts into low gear. This means that under high anxiety situations your rational brain is the last to know. Under normal conditions, the thinking brain can usually influence our responses from our emotional and instinctual brains. But in highly

stressful situations, individuals will simply react without the ability to think things through logically.

Resilient Communities: Creating a Context for Healing

Resilient Relationships and Individuals

Angie Rodriguez, a former Roca youth worker, found Lisa hanging out in the street and brought her to Roca to her dance class where she then connected to another youth worker Chianta. Chianta helped Lisa get into Roca's transitional employment program called the Key Project. She worked in Key project for a year and then I was able to hire her as a youth staff during the summer of 2009. Lisa flourished in this new position. She worked alongside ten other young people from Roca coordinating Circles, events and Community Learning Exchanges as a Kellogg for Leadership and Community Change fellow.

Lisa's resiliency and determination for self and community change is admirable. She committed to change her life while still living in the home and community environments that led to her arrests. Dr. W. Thomas Boyce director of the Division of Behavioral and Developmental Pediatrics at the University of California (as cited in Gelman, 1991) found that, "There are kids in families from adverse situations who really do beautifully, and seem to rise to the top of their potential, even with everything else working against them." Of course, this is not the situation for all young people however it is amazing to see how Lisa and Alex, among other Youth Star members are able overcome adversity while living in the midst of it.

The word resilient implies not only surviving, but also coping and thriving in times of adversity. In addition to the Circles, Roca provides a resilient environment. It is the place where young people make social connections and build strong networks and relationships. Youth Workers at Roca are trained to be relentless about building relationships with the young people on their caseloads. They build strong relationships

with participants over a period of two years. During these two years the youth worker and the young person engage in a transformational relationship. The model that Roca uses for transformational relationships has two phases. The first phase is entirely focused on building trust and engaging the young person in intentional conversations about change.

After the young person begins to trust the youth worker and begins to attend programming the relationship evolves into the second phase of the transformational relationship. The second phase focuses on sustaining the young person's change process. At this stage, the young people have identified some of their challenges and are working on self-sufficiency by showing up to Roca programming. At Roca, young people can engage in programming and activities like arts, sports and professional development workshops but it is the transformational relationship that gets them there. Many times the relationship continues years after the young person has graduated from Roca.

Another aspect that demonstrates resiliency is the Roca building itself. The building was originally a two-story taxi station. Roca youth helped raise the money to purchase the building and was completely remodeled with young peoples' input. There is a gym, music lab, open, and private community space, industrial kitchen, woodshop room, weight room, cosmetology room, offices, professional dance studio, and music studio. The physical space feels very open and welcoming, however it is the youth and adult leaders at Roca that promote a culture that inspires courage, hope and creative peacebuilding. Roca has a cultural identity, which promotes such resilience that has developed over time. According to Flach (1998) inspiring hope and creative peacebuilding are just a few elements that demonstrate a resilient environment.

Linquanti (1992) defines resiliency as “that quality in children who, though exposed to significant stress and adversity in their lives, do not succumb to the failure, substance abuse, mental health, and juvenile delinquency problems they are at greater risk of experiencing.”

Resilient attributes in children and young people help them avoid, minimize, or overcome risk factors. Research by Bernard (1991) identifies five major categories of traits within individuals that help make them resilient:

Social Competencies or the Exhibition of Pro-Social Behaviors: These traits increase children’s ability to find and keep healthy relationships with others.

- Personal responsiveness, and the ability to generate positive responses from others
- Flexibility
- Empathy and caring
- Good communication skills
- Sense of Humor

Well-Developed Problem Solving Skills: This category should not be confused with high achievement in school. Instead, it refers to the ability to recognize social influences in the environment and make choices about those influences.

- Planning
- Critical consciousness
- Imagination

- Resourcefulness and initiative

Autonomy:

- A strong sense of identity and worth; self esteem and self-efficacy
- Self-discipline
- The ability to act independently
- The ability to separate, or engage in “creative distancing” from dysfunctional environments and situations
- Resistance

Religious/Spiritual Commitment:

- Stable belief system
- Sense of usefulness belonging to a community

Sense of Purpose and Future:

- Special interest
- Goal directness
- Achievement motivation
- Educational aspirations
- Healthy expectations
- Persistence
- Hopefulness
- Belief in a compelling, attainable future (p. 85)

Roca provides its young leaders and participants with opportunities that help them build all of the above-mentioned qualities of resilience. The word resilience comes from the physics and engineering fields. It refers to elasticity, the ability to bend and stretch

without breaking. In mental health and psychology it refers to the ability to return to equilibrium and a level of functioning the same as or greater than before a crisis, tragedy or trauma. Resilience implies to survive and cope and also to thrive in times of adversity. It means maintaining one's ability to live life with hope and joy (Boss, 2006).

A National Network of Support

In addition to Roca's local impact, Roca has built a strong network of national partners. On February 26, 2011 Lisa and two other members from Roca's Youth Star program were invited by Llano Grande, a non-profit organization located in Edcouch, Texas to attend President Obama's Youth Summit ("Voices in Action") in Washington D.C. Llano Grande helps young people access higher education through a series of alliances and activities between students and residents. Their values are rooted in local history and culture. Roca had trained Llano Grande young people and staff in the Circle process. Roca youth were invited to the Youth Summit to hold Circle and present at the summit. The purpose for the collaboration was to address some of the barriers to higher education faced by young people. For me, this collaboration demonstrated the expansive impact of Circles on inter-regional youth development and national policy.

The Kellogg Leadership for Community Change (KLCC) was a leadership development program designed to strengthen community leaders as they addressed their own local issues. The KLCC initiative focused on cultivating a group of community leaders on specific issues over a two-year period, which was then extended to six years. Roca and Llano Grande were two out of six sites. Llano Grande was invited to present and run a break out session at the summit. Llano Grande invited Roca and four other KLCC sites with them to the summit. In addition the KLCC youth members organized a

Community Learning Exchange that took place pre- and post-summit.

The CLE is a network born out of the KLCC initiative. The CLE network consists of resilient local and national communities comprised of social justice organizations and intergenerational change agents engaged in collective leadership through youth and adult partnerships. It is through this very special network that Roca, some of its staff, and young people have been addressing national issues important to young people and replicating its work with Circles. In the last three years the CLE has become more than a network, it has adopted Circles as its main meeting process, and what has emerged is a group of young people and adults that are able to address and talk about some of the most challenging social justice issues facing our communities.

This network has also been the place where Lisa began to build her own network of support outside of Roca. It was at one of the CLE's that Lisa felt comfortable enough to speak in public and eventually present a workshop. "The people here make me feel like I am part of a family," Lisa stated during the summit, "I never liked to be hugged before I attended a CLE and now I like them." Lisa's statement is a testament of the power of this network's ability to promote a safe and resilient environment (Lisa, personal communication, February 2011).

The night before the Youth Summit we sat in Circle with all of the sites to talk and prepare for the following day. Juan Ozuna, who was the lead organizer for this CLE and a teacher at the Llano Grande Center in Texas, met with some of the national Youth Summit organizers and presenters at Howard University, before our Circle with the partner sites. When Juan returned with his students to join our Circle, he said that the young people they had just met with were very polished and rehearsed and not

representative of out of school or out of the mainstream youth. He also stated that he was glad we were all there to represent those young people who are struggling the most with staying in school and accessing post secondary education (J. Ozuna, personal communication, February 2011).

I felt that all the young people at the summit were very well composed throughout the entire day, even though many seemed frustrated. I heard many grumbles during the plenary sessions. The summit opened up with a lot of energy. Russell Simmons, a famous and very wealthy hip-hop mogul and philanthropist, helped host the event. Russell was not present but his policy director, Mikael Skolnik lead the adults break out sessions. There was a lot of music, visual performances, spoken word, and rapping. It did get the crowd in a great energy, however it was not enough to hold the tension in the air after some of the plenary and break out sessions. The young people that were with us were separated from the adults they traveled with during the sessions. The adults were kept in the auditorium and discussed some of the issues around education they were facing in their respective communities. The young people from Roca that attended the session told me that although they were separated from the adults there were adults from the Obama administration present in their sessions. The young people told me they felt as if they were not being listened to and the adults present from the Obama administration were dominating the conversations.

In contrast, the CLEs were rich with young people's stories. Francisco Guajardo, PhD, said it best when comparing the Youth Summit to the Circle process, "I am not sure what we saw today in terms of government works, because they didn't know how to create this, a space where people can listen graciously" (F. Guajardo, personal

communication, February 27, 2010). Because of their experiences with the Circle process, Youth Star members had an expectation that the adults hosting the summit would listen to them more attentively and let them lead some of the dialogue. Although they were a little disappointed about the outcome of the summit they were very pleased with the Circles that took place before and after. This proves that Circles continue to grow beyond Youth Star's local community and are a crucial component to building a resilient environment.

Conclusion and Implications

The young people in the Youth Star Program are a reflection of the communities they serve. These young people have grown up in poverty and violence, yet they have made a conscious effort to become leaders in their communities to make changes in their lives. What has made this program successful has been the resilient environment that Roca has created with Circles, raising their awareness around trauma, and providing opportunities for leadership development.

Youth Star members that are taught via Circles begin to embody and live Circle philosophy outside of Roca as well as inside. Youth Star members' own resiliency—which has developed in being supported by Roca's use of Circles—makes it possible for young people to begin the healing process in relation to their own traumatic experiences which otherwise might get in the way of their own success.

Understanding how trauma affects the brain has provided useful information that has helped me be more mindful about how I work and manage Youth Star members. Working with young people who have experienced or are experiencing traumatic events in their lives can be a complex issue. The responses to these experiences often manifest in negative behaviors that can damage interpersonal relationships, place Roca youth in harm's way, or prevent them from sustaining employment. As seen in some of the case studies I have provided, violence and traumatic experiences that occur early in life can also have long term effects on young people's social functioning. Constant reprimands or punishment as a consequence of harmful behavior does not provide an opportunity for growth or repairing any harm done to themselves or their community (Boyse-Watson & Pranis, 2010).

Circles help develop ongoing habits that contribute to a young person's personal growth and help young people develop an internal dialogue that engages them in their ongoing inner work. An area that deserves further research is the use of art activities in Circles. The use of art in Circle helps further develop an inner dialogue and can be a great way for young people to organize their thoughts and address important issues in their lives.

As poverty and violence continue to grow locally and globally there is a greater need for restorative justice practices like Circles. We can no longer sit by the sidelines and think that what is going on in different communities across the world has no effect on us personally. In response to these growing global problems I offer the Circle as a model of healing and democracy.

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APPENDICES

I. Consent Form.....

II. Interview Questions

III. Transcription of the Interviews.....

Appendix I. Sample consent form. Actual signed forms are in possession of author.**CONSENT FORM**

By signing this consent form, you are not waiving your legal rights or releasing the investigator(s) or involved institution(s) from their legal and professional responsibilities. This Consent Form will remain in the possession of Victor José Santana.

I have read the information presented in the information letter about a study being conducted by Victor José Santana, a Master's student in Lesley University Graduate School of Arts & Science, Self Designed Masters Program. I have had the opportunity to ask any questions related to this study, to receive satisfactory answers to my questions, and any additional details I wanted.

I am aware that I have the option of allowing my interview to be recorded by audio and digital video to ensure an accurate recording of my responses. The recordings will be used only for accurate transcription of the interview and will remain in the possession of Victor José Santana.

I am also aware that excerpts from the interview may be included in the thesis and/or publications to come from this research, with the understanding that the quotations will be anonymous by changing my surname in any citation.

I was informed that I may withdraw my consent at any time without penalty by advising the researcher.

With full knowledge of all foregoing, I agreed, of my own free will, to participate in this study, and to keep in confidence information that could identify specific participants and/or the information they provided.

YES NO

I agreed to have my interview audio and/or video recorded.

YES NO

I agree to the use of anonymous quotations in any thesis or publication that comes of this research.

YES NO

Participant Name: _____ (Please print)

Participant Signature: _____

Witness Name: _____ (Please print)

Witness Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix II.

Interview Questions

1. What does healing mean to you?
2. Do you think Circles have played a part in your healing?
3. What do you find challenging about healing?
4. What do you think are some of the biggest traumas youth leaders at Roca face?
5. Do you think healing is necessary in order to be a good leader?

Appendix III. Transcriptions of Personal Interviews with Roca Youth Leaders,
Conducted by Victor José, May–Oct. 2011

“Kelly”

“Eddie”

“Sandra”

Group Interview May 13, 2011

Female. Age 22.

Male. Age 22

S. Rosa 23

Youth Leaders, Roca

1. *What does healing mean to you?*

K: I think healing for me is to know that regardless of what traumas you have gone through, you are not fully affected by it. Like you're not totally going to be in shock if something you've experienced before it's going to get to you again. It's like you know it's gonna be ok, like you know you can handle it, you know that you have gotten over it

E: Yes, as long as you are aware of the situation, because a lot of people focus too much on their problems so they really don't know how to recover from whatever it is they are going through. You can't help somebody to heal if you haven't really healed yourself because if you're still in the process, you don't know what the next step is to being able to get over that trauma.

S: I think healing is a process and you have to work a lot on yourself in order to help others and work with others. Meditation and Circles can help. I feel sometimes your healing others and not yourself and that's when the problem begins when you heal others and not yourself you can drown yourself.

2. *Do you think Circles have played a part in your healing process as a youth leader?*

All: Yes.

K: I feel like Circles gives you more of a chance to express yourself. Healing is a part of letting go too and if you don't have a chance to let go, you hold all that in and a Circle gives you that chance to express that and give you that chance, knowing that you have somebody who is also listening and not knowing if there is a person in the Circle that is also experiencing the same thing as you are. You never know if your words out loud might be able to heal you or help heal someone else.

E: The Circle isn't only just trying to heal, Circles help more with support, trust, and being more confident with yourself because you learn to open up to other people.

Circle is not about judging someone. You have to support other people, not everyone is perfect and you never know if the person right next to you can be going through the same things you are. You never know unless they open up, how you are suppose to help somebody, so it helps in more ways than one. Yes, Circles are definitely important in order to heal.

S: They said it all basically. Circles are very important, they help you find your inner self and it helps you communicate with others. It also helps you be more expressive about things, you can just talk and you're not scared to be judged because there are others that have gone through worse.

3. *What do you find challenging about healing?*

K: Your feelings might hold you back. If you are scared about something, being scared is like stopping yourself or being afraid to move forward from it. I don't know every time you have a feeling against something or you go through a traumatic experience obviously your feelings are the main aspect of your healing. I mean if you're feeling down it feels like it's much harder for you to heal and do things. It's easier to heal from things when you are happy.

E: I can go along with that. Feelings always cloud your judgment. You don't always think clearly, that's why its important to have that mentality where you to stay calm, like think about what it is your going through and what your next step to overcome it.

S: there's no way you are going to become a leader if you're not in the process of healing yourself and changing. You have to actually change and know that you're going to change in order to do the right thing before you get to anyone else. You definitely have to help yourself before you can help anybody else.

4. *What do you think are some of the major traumas youth leaders at Roca face?*

E: Domestic violence, having a abusive parent, whether they are just angry at the world, or going through something themselves, their probably either on drugs or alcohol. It happens everywhere.

S: But in that case I feel someone shouldn't be a leader. If you're having all those problems. I think a lot of people confuse leadership with power and its two very different things. I feel that most of the problems with leadership in Roca are not being able to control your self, your temper and your mouth. You need to learn to get along with others, even if you don't like them, and that's one of the biggest problems.

K: But I feel like what people struggle with, also causes them not to be up to where everyone else is. Like when you are dealing with poverty and you don't have money it's harder to do things. When you are stuck in a place where you're so mad at the fact that you can't afford a couple of things I feel like that's when violence gets through. That's when you also take drugs so you can slip away from being mad and escape.

It's a lot of things, like not having the basic necessities that will get you to do a lot more negative things.

5. *Do you think leadership is necessary in order to be a good leader?*

K: I think I'm still in the healing process from growing up with a single mom and her having to a lot of hours. I was an only child and always felt alone. Being at Roca gave me a chance to know other people who have had the same problems as me. Being able to dance helped me let out a lot of frustration and it gave me a chance to have fun too and it let me know that I'm not alone. As a leader this program has helped me heal. I have all these people around me and have all this support. Now its time to give back and that's where I think the leadership comes into play. You feel like you want to teach people you can do good even if it's hard. So I feel like I'm still in that.

S: Yes, I think it's important, that's why I said what I said earlier. You can't be a good leader if you're not in a healing process.

E: I agree with Sulai. It is important.

“Alex”

Interviewed – October 21, 2011

Male. Age 19

Youth Leader, Roca

1. *What does healing mean to you?*

To me healing is about the ability to verbalize my problems and not feel anxious about it.

VS: Before we go on to the other questions could you tell me how you got involved in Roca?

A: It happened when I came back from Dominican Republic. I was in my freshman year. I didn't really care much for school so I didn't really go. I stayed home most of the time and that's when I got into graffiti. Graffiti led me to getting arrested and getting involved with the court system. Midway thru my court stuff I found a job at the Peaches & Cream bakery. That is when T.C. and Christine (Youth Workers) found me and asked me to come to Roca.

VS: Did you disclose to them that you had been arrested?

A: No, not until I went to my other court case when and I was told I had to pay an \$800 fee and do a lot of community service hours. They said I could go to Roca. I was like, wait weren't these people just talking to me about Roca. They told me I could do my community service either at school or at Roca. Pardon my language I was like 'f...k now I have to go to Roca and I don't even know what this place is.'

VS: Once you started coming here is that when you were first introduced to Circles?

A: Yes.

2. *Do you think Circles have played a part in your healing process as a youth leader?*

Yes, Circles helped me come out to my mom. I had a problem coming out to my mom and I was able to open up. I practiced by telling people in Circle, so it made it a little easier to tell her. It was long process though. It helped me open up to my family and after that our relationship was better. It helped me let all those emotions and it was a slow process but by junior year I learned to live with it

3. *What do you find challenging about healing?*

Doing it. It took me a while before I could even talk about what was bothering.

4. *What do you think are some of the major traumas youth leaders at Roca face?*

Violence, drugs and not having money.

5. *Do you think leadership is necessary in order to be a good leader?*

Of course because if you still have those troubles inside you its going to stop you from doing bigger and better things. You are going keep going to the past, reliving it and then relapsing and you are just going to keep doing it over again. Healing crying yelling helps you relieve that stress and it also helps you become a better person inside and if it happens again you know how to get up from it.

“Lisa”

Interviewed – November 03, 2011

Female. Age 19

Youth Leader, Roca

6. *What does healing mean to you?*

Forgetting and forgiving, forgiving being the main thing. Healing is hard for me. I am still going through it.

VS: What are you still healing from?

L: Being poor. I didn't have any friends and my mother wasn't around. She was always working. I didn't have the attention I wanted and needed. When I was in elementary school, I didn't have anything. I felt as if everyone around me had everything and me and my two sisters and brother never had enough of anything. We never had enough to eat or a lot of clothes. We are still struggling about money. My mom puts us down instead of telling us good things.

VS: That must be hard.

L: I also witnessed my stepfather molesting my older sister when I was fourteen, we both tried to tell my mother but she never believed us. I wanted to hate her but I couldn't because she is my mother you know. I have always thought about writing all this down.

7. *Do you think Circles have played a part in your healing process as a youth leader?*

Yes, especially the Circle training with Molly and Tun. Circles helped me feel comfortable. I don't trust younger people. I feel more comfortable with older people. I told my story in that Circle. It impacted me so much that we all have something in common. Everyone has their story.

I think it helped me practice good listening. I learned how to be strong, let my anger out. Before I couldn't trust anyone. I know who to trust now. I observe and take my time. If people are into gossip I stay away. I really look up to Kim and Tania. They are not into all that.

8. *What do you find challenging about healing?*

My anger. I always think about the past and blame myself for not doing well.

9. *What do you think are some of the major traumas youth leaders at Roca face?*

Poverty.

10. Do you think leadership is necessary in order to be a good leader?

Yes, because it helps you speak with respect and you learn patience. Now that I know how to control my anger I can work better.