

Embedded in My Heart

Catherine Hedlin

There are two major changes I've experienced which are inspired by the challenging, delightful, and personable kids I had the honour, and sometimes, the pleasure of working with. While I have attributed these changes to two youth, there are many more who also played a role in my growth.

Love

Sara came from a family where it is unlikely love was a regular topic of conversation. An only child of older parents, she came into care after being victimized in the community. With her history of trauma and neglect, Sara moved into residential treatment directly from home. I was her keyworker. All of 23 years old, I knew it all.

Sara's family had moved communities every couple of years. She didn't have a lot of friends and most of the kids in her new home frightened her. Her room became her safe place, but we (in our great wisdom) would not allow her to hide out there. Her goals always included one on building better peer relationship skills. But for Sara, companionship and support came from staff not her peers.

Where or how Sara learned about love, I don't know, but she had. Her capacity to give love and to inspire love in others was amazing. When she first saw me, she would get this happy look on her face and immediately came over for a hug. There was always a compliment, a question about how I was doing, and a sense that I mattered to her – a lot. She liked to



March 2019
ISSN 1605-7406

cuddle, to help staff and to get attention in return. Fairly quickly, I came to look forward to that hug and compliment. On a bad day, it added a little sunshine.

Sara remained in our program longer than she probably needed because it became her home. She blossomed surrounded by people who talked to her, cared about her and expected her to succeed. Staff all enjoyed her company. Anytime the word “discharge” was mentioned she became distraught. Finally, the decision was made that she had to move on. A wonderful foster home was found, and visits began. Sara’s response was to run away repeatedly to demonstrate that she was not ready to leave. Whenever she returned, she’d ask if she could stay with us now and we’d say no. Ultimately, discharged on the run, her belongings were moved to her new home. Next time she came back, we drove her to her new family who quickly became as loving as we had been.

Love was not an acceptable four-letter word in professional practice when I began in the field. Boundaries between youth and staff needed to be maintained. Love was part of your personal life, not your professional. You were always to remember that the youth would only be with us for a limited period. “You are not their families.”

Sara taught me that love in a group home is not a four-letter word. That every youth needs and deserves love – too many believe they are unlovable. While it is rare to build that level of relationship with each one you meet, this is a gift to both give and receive in this work. I am much more open to this possibility and no longer hesitate to mention love as one of the important components of child and youth care work. Every youth deserves hugs, compliments and interest in their life.



Success

As a nice, middle class white girl, personal success was easy to define. It included graduating from high school and then going to university – no trade schools allowed. Probably it meant marriage – to a man, as I had no inkling of the vast spectrum of sexual and gender identities – and having a couple of children who also graduated high school, university and got married. Owning a house, travelling the world and doing work that ‘mattered’ was also important. In my early years in Child and Youth Care, I assumed this was a ‘normal’ life course open to almost everyone. I was very young and naive. I had no idea the privileged life I led or how unlikely my definition of success was for many of the youth we serve, either because they would not or could not attain it, even if it was their dream. Context was not something we talked about in those days.

Early in my career, I was the keyworker for Jason. Bounced around many foster homes in his early years, his long-term foster home broke down in his middle adolescence. He was angry, hurt and confused. These feelings came out in violent outbursts, frequent running and generally superficial relationships. He was also smart, attractive, funny, and articulate.

One of the most powerful learning moments in my early career came on a day I took Jason to a court appearance. I don’t remember what for. It could have been related to his child welfare status or to a minor criminal charge. He looked well-groomed and presentable for his court appearance. On the way home, we stopped for a Slurpee. Courteously, he held the door for me to enter the market. Several youths, called ‘head-bangers’ at that time, were in the store. I turned around to talk to Jason and discovered he was no longer the youth from a microsecond earlier. He had run his hand through his hair, and his posture and facial expression were totally different. He became one of them. I had heard of chameleons prior to that but never experienced it. Back in my car, he returned to the Jason I knew



March 2019
ISSN 1605-7406

again. Trying to speak with him about it, naming this behaviour as unusual made no sense to him. It was a lesson in basic survival. I never forgot this lesson.

A few months later, I came into work and Jason was gone. Apparently, the police showed up, charged him with several violent crimes and moved him to the Young Offenders Centre pending trial. I never knew what happened to him. At the time, it felt like we had failed him. He certainly didn't resemble my narrative of a successful life. I assumed his life would become a cycle of incarceration with occasional bouts of freedom.

That could have been the end to this story but it isn't. About ten years later a friend of mine, Jennifer, who had also worked with Jason, was at the hospital with a pregnant teen. Two twenty-something year old men entered the hospital room, proceeding to tell Jennifer they were there to take the young woman away and there was nothing she could do about it. However, at that point, Jennifer and Jason recognized each other. Jason was excited to see her, asking after me, and generally catching up. After introducing her, he proceeded to convince his friend that if Jennifer was involved, leaving his girlfriend under her care was the right thing to do. He spoke of his time with us as being a 'good thing' and persuaded him that his girlfriend and baby would have better opportunities if he left her under Jennifer's care.

Jennifer called me that evening, sounding a little frantic as she relayed the story. Forced to re-evaluate my ideas of Jason, of the work we did with him, and of how successful that work was, I began to examine my ideas of success. Were we successful with Jason? Had he grown up to be the nice, middle class man that I previously defined as being successful? No. But had he been willing to stand up for someone else? Possibly put himself at risk? Yes. Had we been successful in our time with Jason? I still don't know. I have come to realize that success looks very different than what I



previously believed. Success will look different for each child, youth and family we work with, and I may never know what their definition of success is, never mind whether it is attained.

While I believe that love is an important component of Child and Youth Care practice and success is personal and unique to each individual, the most important learning I took from Sara and Jason, and the many other youth I worked with over the years, was the importance and power of relationships. Although occasionally I run into someone I worked with as a youth, for the most part, I never know what happens to them. I have learned to believe in the process, to trust that the relationships we build and the love we share, makes a difference. I have changed. I have faith in the components of Child and Youth Care practice: life-space, strength-based practice, relational, developmental, and activity based. I am neither young nor naïve anymore. I understand, and integrate into my practice, concepts like privilege, context, social justice and equity. While I embody a little bit of every youth encountered over the years, my learning from Sara and Jason is embedded in my heart. The person and the practitioner I am today came from the relationships developed with Sara, Jason and every other youth I worked with. I am thankful to each and every one of them.



Find us on:
facebook®



March 2019
ISSN 1605-7406