

Best of the NETWORKER

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Lesson from a Yahtzee game

By Jerry Fest

Life lessons appear in strange places sometimes ... like in a [Yahtzee](#) game I recently played.

Here was the situation. I needed my 4 of a kind. By my second roll I had five, five, five, five, and six. That's a pretty good 4 of a kind, but I had one more roll. I could throw the six and try for a Yahtzee in five's, but if I didn't get it I would risk reducing my 4 of a kind by up to 5 points. My gut instinct was to give up the 3rd roll and just take the 26 points.

However, as I went to take it, the person I was playing with challenged me saying that I was only risking a few points at most to try to get a Yahtzee. Against my instinct, I rolled the six trying to get that 5th five. What did I get? A one. As I feared, I didn't get the Yahtzee and reduced my 4 of a kind by the biggest hit it could have taken ... the full 5 points.

No big deal. It's only 5 points, right? Here's where the universe stepped in to teach me a lesson. The final score was 229 points for my opponent, 225 points for me. That's right. I would have won the game if I had *5 more points* ... the *exact* number of points I lost when I went against my instinct and tried for the Yahtzee.

I realize that going with my instinct doesn't always work out, as it would have in this situation. But even when it doesn't work out I still get two major benefits. First, I learn something. That's the way we grow and learn, by things *not* working out. Edison once commented that -- even though he conducted thousands of failed experiments before getting a light bulb to shine -- that he had *never* failed. Thousands of times he succeeded in discovering what *didn't* work. This is the theory behind youth participation in Positive Youth Development. We don't give young people the opportunity to be involved and make choices and decisions because we think they're always going to make *good* choices and decisions. We do it because young people need to take risks and make mistakes as part of their development.

But the second benefit is even better. If I follow my instinct and it doesn't work out, *I don't beat myself up for not following my instinct!* Follow my instinct and I feel like I gave it my best shot and learned something. Let people influence me against my instinct, and I feel like a schmuck who should have known better. I much prefer the former feeling to the latter.

Please don't get me wrong. I am not saying don't listen to or take counsel from people, and I am definitely not suggesting that you violate boundaries or break rules. All I'm saying is; *trust yourself*. Your "instinct" is just a feeling derived from your knowledge and experience. If you can't trust your own knowledge and experience, what can you trust? As I said above, if following your instinct doesn't work out, you still feel empowered and you have an opportunity to learn something. But the real argument for following your instinct is this; if you

know the limitations of your knowledge, and you have let your experience teach you ... most of the time following your instinct *will* work out. Besides, if you can't trust yourself, how are you ever going to trust the young people with whom you work?

'Tis the Season ...

By Jerry Fest



The holiday season, that is. A time of joy, gift giving, and friends and family. Except, of course, in the world of homeless youth services. Oh, you can find such things even here, but they're usually enmeshed in a pile of depressed kids and stressed-out workers. Much of the stress is real, as we attempt to deal with maintaining service levels with employees who have lives and need time off during a period where the young people we serve have greater needs due to severe weather and increased psycho-emotional needs triggered by the holidays. Some of it, however, may be self-imposed as we strive to normalize that which is not normal.

The Thanksgiving turkey dinners, the shopping and seeking donations to ensure that our kids receive Christmas gifts ... all in an effort to give our kids what all kids deserve this time of year; a traditional holiday season that lets them know that someone cares.

Unfortunately, we can only be so successful. Our attempts to normalize this season have to contend with a major contradiction ... their lives are *not* normal. We can pull off the dinners and the gift giving, but none of that changes the fact that they are homeless, estranged from a sense of family, and surviving on their own in a hostile and violent sub-culture of our society. Despite our best efforts and intentions, our dinners sometimes explode with triggered emotions. Instead of replacing what they deserve to have, we remind them of what they don't have. Our gift giving sometimes seems empty and pointless as kids gather up piles of stuff from different agencies ... sometimes two or three of the same backpack/sleeping bag/hygiene kit stuff that agencies receive as donations this time of year ... much if not most of which is bartered, lost, or abandoned within days of its receipt. And the routine of it all takes its toll -- I can't tell you how many youth workers I talk to who see this season as something to "pull off" and "get through" with little joy in their description of the events.

I'm not trying to be a street Grinch here, but I would like to contribute to your holiday season planning a little reminder of what homeless youth *really* need this time of year. It's not shelter, it's not food, it's not gifts ... those are simply the tools we use to engage with them. What they need more than any physical need is an emotional one ... they need *hope*. They need to know not just that they are cared about, but that they are *valued*; that being on the streets is *where* they are, it is not *who* they are. It's a much harder gift to give than turkey dinners and donated gifts ... but the good news is that you can give it, and it is needed, year-round.

So plan on *servicing* them a holiday meal, but spend some time talking about how they may be able to *be of service*. Make sure you have gifts *to give*, but equally ensure that they have opportunities *to give back*. We know that it is far better to give than it is to receive, and the greatest gift we can give to homeless youth this season is the hope that next season they could be on the other side of that equation.

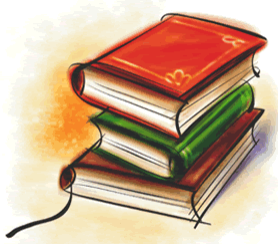
the **InterNetwork for Youth**
supporting those who support runaway & street-dependent youth

JERRY'S WEBSITE – in4y.com

As I was making some revisions in the website for Northwest Network for Youth, (www.nwny.org) I reaffirmed a link to the website hosted by our editor, Jerry Fest. In re-visiting his site, I was reminded of the great resources and references he has accumulated. These include professional papers, guidelines, links to helpful sites and much wisdom gained through time on the streets. He has also logged past issues of the Networker and other publications.

Jerry is too modest to feature his own site, but youth work professionals and young people across all interests should make a special effort to check his site and to give him feedback as to its on-going development.

Gary Hammons
Executive Director



Gary's Recent Readings

By Gary Hammons

HOMELESS: When the Trip to School Starts at the Shelter. NEA Today, The Journal of the National Education Association, Jan/Feb 2010. (available soon at www.nea.org/neatoday).

ADDRESS UNKNOWN: Citing data from the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Act, this article covers a range of geographic and programmatic concerns. A dramatic increase in the number of homeless students has had a wide spread impact on schools. The article has a variety of suggestions for spotting kids who are homeless (and often do not want to be identified). In addition, a number of strategies and vignettes are reported as ways to address homelessness by schools. These include working closely with social services, making the school setting as stable as possible, being aware that nutrition, hygiene and sleep are often affected and concerns such as homework may need modification or adaptation.

Hopefully, the majority of teachers and other school personnel will read this article, and they will be more aware of the impact of homelessness among their students. It was also noted that McKinney-Vento is a poorly funded mandate and that collective efforts are needed to increase its allocation from \$70 million to at least \$210 million. The [NEA website](http://www.nea.org) also provides a number of resources to address the issue. Youth work professionals can/should make sure the educators they interact with are aware of this article and the resources therein.

FIREARMS SAFETY by Jerry Fest (Available via his website www.in4y.com in the online library)

Noting that many, if not most schools and shelters face the prospect of encountering firearms in their work with young people, this article provides practical (and proven) procedures for how to respond and how to safely handle both the situation and firearms. In a stepwise description of safe treatment of firearms, Jerry provides specifics from the way they work to how to render them inoperable. He further urges the development of policies and procedures (rarely in place at present) with frequent review and practice. This should be a must read article for all youth work professionals.

For Christmas: A Gift of Humor

I suspect that there aren't a ton of Libertarians among the Networker readership, but hey ... humor crosses political lines. For this Christmas edition, here's a humorous view on Santa's status, courtesy of the Libertarian Party. Enjoy.

WASHINGTON, D.C. - When Santa Claus comes to town this week, he'd better watch out -- because the federal government may be making a list of his crimes (and checking it twice), the Libertarian Party warned today.

"Hark the federal agents sing, Santa is guilty of nearly everything," said Libertarian Party press secretary George Getz. "The feds know when Santa's been bad or good -- and he's been bad, for goodness sakes."

Does Santa belong in the slammer? Instead of stuffing stockings, should he be making license plates?

Yes, said Getz, if he's held to the same standards as a typical American. For example:



- Every December 25, the illegal immigrant known as Santa Claus crosses the border into the United States without a passport. He carries concealed contraband, which he sneaks into the country in order to avoid inspection by the U.S. Customs Service. And just what's in all those brightly colored packages tied up with ribbons, anyway? The Drug Czar and Homeland Security want to know.
- Look at how this international fugitive gets around: Santa flies in a custom-built sleigh that hasn't been approved by the FAA. He never files a flight plan. He has no pilot's license. In the dark of night, he rides the skies with just a tiny bioluminescent red light to guide him -- a clear violation of traffic safety regulations.

• Pulling Santa's sleigh: Eight tiny reindeer, a federally protected species being put to hard labor. None of these reindeer have their required shots, and Santa's never bothered to get these genetically- engineered animals registered and licensed. It's no wonder: He keeps them penned outside his workplace in a clear violation of zoning laws.

- But Crooked Claus the Conniving Capitalist harms more than just animals -- he's hurting hard-working American laborers, too. Isn't Santa's Workshop really Santa's Sweatshop, where his non-union employees don't make minimum wage and get no holiday pay? Add the fact that OSHA has never inspected the place, and you have a Third-World elf-exploitation operation that only Kathy Lee Gifford could love.
- No wonder Santa is able to maintain his monopoly over the toy distribution industry: He's cornered the Christmas gift market. Santa dares to give away his products for free in a sinister attempt to crush all competition -- just like Microsoft's Internet Explorer. Antitrust Lawsuit Memo to the feds: Is Santa Claus the Bill Gates of Christmas?

The bottom line, said Getz: "It might be tough sledding for Jolly St. Nick this Christmas if the government decides to prosecute him."

FROM ALL OF US AT THE NORTHWEST NETWORK

MERRY CHRISTMAS