

# Best of the NETWORKER

## Feature Articles from Past Issues

The Northwest Youth Networker; newsletter of the [Northwest Network for Youth](#), edited by [Jerry Fest](#) of the [InterNetwork for Youth](#)

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### Rosie O'Donnell's "America"

My thoughts on the show ...

By Jerry Fest

What were you doing last Saturday night? Me? I was watching the show the Networker featured in the Foster Care section last Friday; "America," a story of youth in foster care by Rosie O'Donnell.

I actually had high hopes for the show, as I know Rosie O'Donnell to be a strong advocate for homeless, at-risk, and foster youth. To say I

was disappointed is an understatement.

First, let me give Rosie her due. Major props for making a show that calls attention to the issue of youth in foster care, and the overall messages from the show were really good. The show itself, however, had such a major flaw that it left me sitting with my jaw on the floor.

The story is about a foster youth named "America" who is troubled by some deep dark secret in his past. Rosie plays the counselor who breaks through and gets him to talk about it. As it turns out, America was sexually abused by his step-father (or foster father ... I was never really clear). This is not the big secret, however. The big secret is that his abuser did not die in a fire due to smoking in bed, as everyone believed. He died in a fire due to America *dousing him with alcohol* and intentionally *setting him on fire*.

Earlier in the show there is a scene where Rosie first meets America and discusses confidentiality. She makes it clear that if he talks about hurting himself or other people, she cannot keep that a secret. So far, so good ... except that after America confesses to *murder*, she holds him weeping in her arms as America sobs "are you going to tell?" Rosie/the counselor's astounding answer? "No, I'm not going to tell." The show ends there with everyone apparently living happily ever after.

What? Are you kidding me? After making clear what can and cannot be kept confidential, a youth confesses to his counselor that he is responsible for *murdering* his abuser through a *premeditated* act of *burning him to death*, and his counselor isn't going to "tell?" This is helping the youth?

Look, I'm a huge believer in maintaining confidentiality, and it is one of the reasons why I believe that the limits of confidentiality need to be clear and repeated so that any youth you work with knows in advance what you will be doing with the information they give. But if you state upfront that certain information needs to be reported, and they give you the information anyway, then you are betraying their trust by not reporting as they gave you the information knowing in advance that you'd have to "tell." Besides, how has a single confession to a counselor who now shares this secret going to help the youth? He still is going through life riddled with guilt, and his pain is still a secret. Nothing has changed, except that his counselor changed the rules of confidentiality and became an accomplice. She also created a relationship where they have power over each other. She lives with the knowledge that he may someday "tell" what he told her, and she could suffer repercussions for keeping

the secret. He lives with the knowledge that she “knows” and could potentially use that information against him if their relationship sours. This is not exactly healthy progress in the young man’s life.

I know it’s a TV show, which is why I’m overlooking things like the facility they were in apparently had no supervision, as the kids seemed to be on their own most of the time. Things like that can be justified to create scenes that move the story forward. But a counselor saying that they won’t “tell,” after explicitly stating that they would *have* to “tell” -- well, that kind of ruined the whole show for me.

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## Confidentiality Controversy

From you, the readers ...

By Jerry Fest



The good news is that my article in the last *Networker* on Rosie O’Donnell’s “America,” a show about foster youth, got people thinking. I received several responses from readers, which leads me to the bad news ... I may have confused people regarding confidentiality. Such is the problem when fiction is used to represent fact.

My complaint about the show was that Rosie’s character, a counselor of some sort in a large center for foster youth, made a big deal about needing to report acts of violence early in the show. A young man named America later confesses to murdering his abuser, and asks Rosie/the counselor if she is “going to tell.” He did this because he *believed* she would have to, based on the stink she made about reporting. I had two major problems with this. First, the counselor was not doing something she said she’s have to do (Rosie/the counselor replied “no, I’m not going to tell”), and second, the implication was that the counselor wasn’t going to do *anything* ... she was just going to be a keeper of his secret.

In making those criticisms, however, I didn’t do what several readers did, which was look at whether this was an accurate depiction of reporting laws, which it may not have been. For example, I received these comments from a State of Washington social worker:

*“There are very clear laws about disclosure. Counselors are not required to report crimes that have been committed in the past. The duty to warn is in regards to threats a client makes to harm themselves or others before the crime occurs. If she had told law enforcement about the crime he committed it would be a breach of confidentiality. This editor did not understand what she said in the beginning of the movie. She is obligated to report if he tells her he is going to hurt himself or others. This law is about protecting the individual and community not acting as a branch of law enforcement. His point is a misunderstanding of what she says and what the law allows for counselors.”*

Point taken, except for the fiction/fact confusion. Again, the young man thought, based on what she had told him, that she would have to “tell” (as did I). It’s not so much the reality of the laws I was questioning, it was the depiction of a counselor not doing something she said she’d have to do that was the basis for my complaint ... as well as the insinuation that a foster youth could confess to a murder and the only thing a counselor would do is give him a hug and promise to keep his secret (as an aside, if we are trying to raise public awareness about the plight of foster youth, is highlighting one who secretly murdered someone our best choice?). However, I am pleased to pass on this clarification of the real limits of confidentiality, with the caution that your reporting responsibilities may vary from State to State, or be different based on your position. In any case, regardless of any reporting obligations, I hope that if a youth ever confesses to a murder we would help them deal with the consequences of their action as opposed to simply sharing in their secret. My thanks to all the readers who gave feedback on this issue.

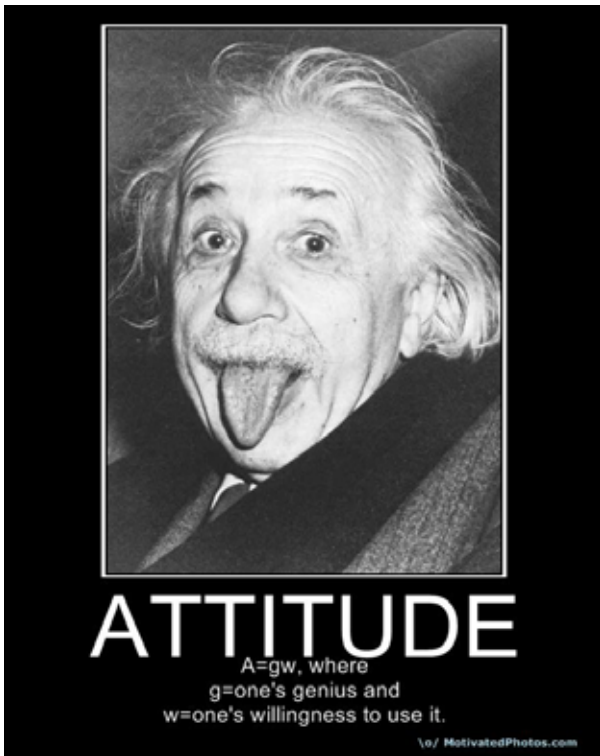
## Your Attitude is Their Experience

By Jerry Fest

I'm traveling this week, which means more airline headaches ...

This time I'm laying over in Houston on my way to Baton Rouge. I'm in the terminal where there are several gates for the same airline, and most of the flights are backed up and delayed. My flight wasn't in on time and ... I kid you not ... the announcement said *they didn't know where the plane was*, so they couldn't give us a delay time. I felt bad for the people on that plane, and settled in for a long wait.

From where I was sitting I could see and hear the gate on either side of the terminal. There were lines of people talking to the flight attendants trying to figure out when they were going to get out of there. The woman servicing passengers on one side of the terminal had a great attitude. She was smiling, joking and commiserating with people, and -- while she really couldn't do anything -- she was making people feel heard and understood.



On the other side was a woman who looked like she'd rather be chewing glass than dealing with all of those idiot passengers. She was copping a "not my fault, what do you want me to do about it" attitude and treating people like *she* was the one being inconvenienced. The difference between the two attendants was like night and day ... but what really struck me was the reaction of the passengers.

As people walked away from Miss Smiley, they themselves were smiling and making light of the situation. I heard comments like "this is a great airline," and "at least this airline cares." On the other side, Miss Surly's people were leaving making comments unsuitable for printing in this newsletter. They were angry and tense, and their comments were "\*@#^ this airline," and "I'm never flying them again."

Note that both groups of people were flying the same airline and experiencing the same inconvenience, yet their impression of the *entire airline* was determined by the attitude of an *individual* employee. They weren't leaving believing that "Sally" was good or bad ... they were leaving believing the *organization* was good or bad.

This is how our programs get reputations among young people; from the individual experience young people have with individual program staff. Whether or not an agency is known among youth as a "good" or "bad" agency comes from the way each young person experiences their treatment. Just like with the airline, where the people who were happy didn't get any better service or results than the people who were mad, it's not *what* we do for young people that counts -- it's the *way* that we do it, and whether or not young people feel respected and heard. The single most important skill you bring to work is your attitude. It's your choice to come to work as Miss Smiley or Miss Surly -- and the reputation of your agency depends on which choice you make.

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## A Tip of the Hat to Creativity

By Jerry Fest

I love creativity. I actually think it's beautiful. That's why a news report I heard on the way to work today brought a smile to my face.

It seems that Kentucky Fried Chicken has come up with a very clever [publicity campaign](#). Full confession, I'm



more of a Popeye's kinda' guy, but I'll give full props to KFC for coming up with an idea that not only promotes their business, but actually helps people in the process. The idea? KFC is asking mayors across the nation to describe the state of disrepair of their city's streets with the intent of picking 5 cities and paying to repair all of the potholes. The only catch is that the repaired pothole will be stenciled with a "Re-freshed by KFC" sign in temporary chalk that lasts about a week. This is all part of their new message about the freshness of their product.

But this article is not about KFC. It's about creativity and how beautiful it can be, and how it can lead to win/win solutions. I will happily drive over a temporary stencil for a week if it means my car isn't hitting potholes. I may even consider pulling into KFC instead of Popeye's sometime, just out of gratitude that my streets are repaired. That's the impact that creativity can have, and it makes me happy to see such creativity. Unfortunately, the opposite is also true. Lack of creativity often makes me sad.

Also unfortunately, a lack of creativity sometimes shows in youth services, particularly as "grassroots" organizations grow into large youth-serving agencies. Please don't misunderstand, I am not condemning all such agencies as uniformly non-creative, and when I see creativity in youth services it brings the same smile to my face as did the KFC campaign. But more often than I would hope, real issues are responded to in a way that both lacks creativity and impacts our ability to meet the needs of young people. For example, I have encountered many program policies that forbid things such as taking youth swimming, or recreating with youth (the youth can play basketball, but staff can't play with them, for example), or driving youth in personal vehicles ... usually for very legitimate insurance and liability reasons. But here's the problem. Providing youth with recreation activities and enabling staff to recreate with youth is developmentally and relationally important. It shouldn't be acceptable to say "we can't do it." Instead, we should be asking "how *can* we do it?" If an agency doesn't have sufficient vehicles to transport youth, and insurance won't cover use of personal vehicles, then we should find creative ways to make transportation *possible*, rather than just passing "don't transport youth" policies.

My challenge is to our creativity, and not just on the agency level. When young people come to us with requests, far too often we spend our time trying to get them to understand why something can't be done. It may be that there are requests that actually can't be done, but over the years I've trained myself to ask a question anytime a young person brings me a request. It involves ignoring my gut reaction to the request and forcing a creative exploration of the possibilities. The question I ask is; *how can I say yes to all or part of this request*. If I eventually find that I can't, then I explain that to the young person. But if I give myself some time, and really tap into creativity, I find myself saying "no" a lot less often.