

Best of the NETWORKER

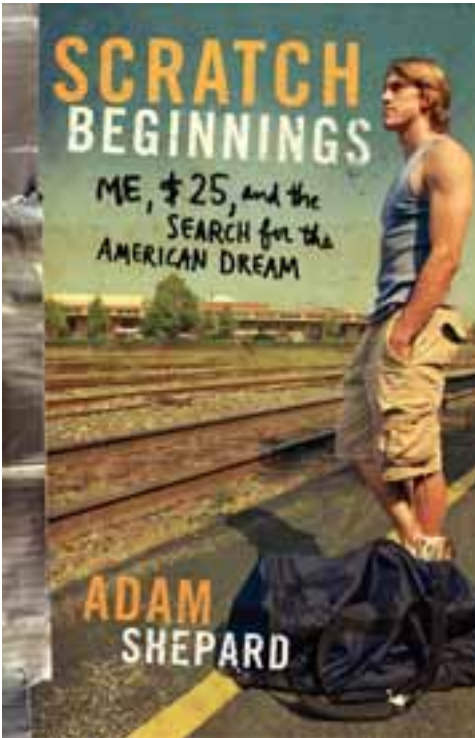
Feature Articles from Past Issues

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

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Looking for a Good Book

By Jerry Fest

Summertime is coming. Time to create our summer reading lists. I recommend you put this one on yours.

It's the true story of a young man, early 20's, recent college graduate, named Adam Shepard. He read a book that says you can't make it in America, that the deck is stacked against you ... so he sets out to find out if it's true. He picks a city out of a hat, a place he's never been before, and he shows up there with \$25.00, a sleeping bag, and the clothes on his back. His self-imposed rule is that he can't rely on his education or any previous contacts or supports. His goal? Within 1 year he will have a job, a furnished apartment, a working car, and \$2500.00 in the bank. He accomplishes all of that with several months to spare.

There were two things I found extremely interesting about his story, both of which were messages he probably didn't intend to communicate. The first was how his experience at a homeless shelter shaped his beliefs and behavior. There were several things he described that were little different from how homeless youth react in similar situations. In other words, the environment created beliefs and behaviors that were not part of *who* he was, but rather a result of *where* he was. It underscored my long-held premise about the beliefs and behavior of homeless youth. Their beliefs and behaviors are not a statement about *them*; it's a reflection of their *environment*. Put anyone in that situation ... Adam Shepard, *you* ... and they will begin to believe and behave the same way.

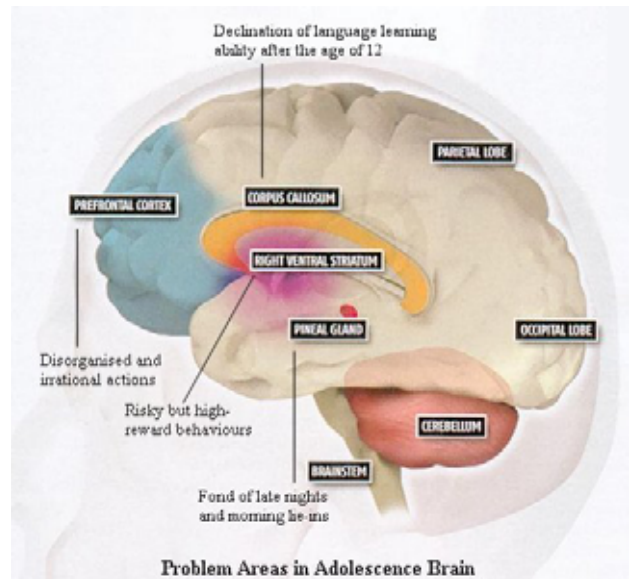
The second has to do with his success. As he himself points out, we can claim that his experience was "artificial" in some ways, but there's no way around his achievements, and the fact that his achievements were possible. This, in my mind, points out the importance of Youth Development. Mr. Shepard's greatest asset in his quick escape from homelessness was his perspectives and attitudes. He had the *ability* and the *motivation* to escape homelessness. Looking at homeless youth from a developmental perspective, it is not a lack of resources or opportunities that keeps them trapped in street life ... it is their *ability* and *motivation* to change their *environment*. If we can address a young person's development, they can accomplish what Mr. Shepard accomplished. When we focus on socio-economic outcomes, we create an environment of low expectations ... because young people can achieve those outcomes themselves. When we focus on their *developmental* needs, we give them the internal resources they need to achieve great things without us having to do it for them.

Click on the picture above for more information on Scratch Beginnings, and Adam Shepard.

Juvenile Decision Making.

By Gary Hammons

Two publications hit my “in” box the same day last week. [Youth Today](#) had front page coverage of the recent juvenile court debacle in Pennsylvania and in-depth review of the elements. While it is/was easy to feel outrage that judges would enrich themselves via kickbacks from private detention facilities for locking up juveniles for minor offenses, an equally important part of the situation was their justification of “getting tough” with kids to show them that they needed punishment for misbehaving. Not only were the rights of many of the young people completely violated, but the permanent scars left some not able to function as adults.



The *Youth Today* article notes a very disturbing factor in that there was/are not very effective checks and balances for juvenile justice. The Pennsylvania situation was a concern for many years including review by the state supreme court before the criminal element finally surfaced. This, in turn, led to a second Supreme Court review and recognition that more than 1300 young people had been unfairly sentenced.

Part of the problem is the closed nature of juvenile justice. In an effort to protect the privacy and youthful status of kids charged with juvenile crime, court and related legal proceedings are restricted from public scrutiny. Thus, abuses can go on for extended periods. Sadly, the professionals within juvenile justice do not seem to be able to self regulate in this regard. Worse, legislators and other officials seem to think that being tough on kids is ok. This treatment and relegation to second class citizenry is somehow supposed to be good for young people.

The second publication last week was [Prevention Researcher](#). The theme for each of the articles was adolescent decision making. Each of the authors explored elements of decisional behavior for young people in a scholarly format. What surfaced was that decisions made by young people are often impulsive rather than analytical and this characteristic extends to as much as age 25. Also noted is that less is known about delinquent behavior even though this has received the majority of research attention.

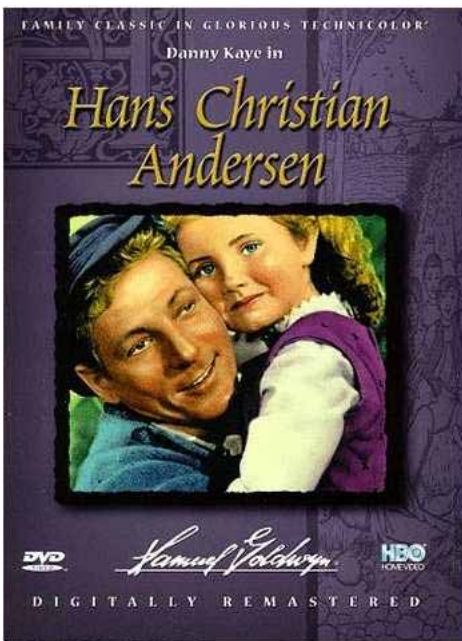
The combined impact of these publications and the fact that juvenile detention costs are spiraling upward as cuts are being made to education and other social services leave me pondering what can be done to change the situation. Also, I suspect that many readers of this newsletter have much more practical experience and insights into juvenile justice inequities and adolescent delinquent behaviors than the researchers and policy makers. It would be great if we could receive feedback and comments in regard to juvenile justice reform and ways to breach this closed system without compromising the rights and protections that are/were intended. We would welcome the opportunity to feature contributions in forthcoming newsletters.

The Ugly Duckling A Metaphor for Street Youth?

By Jerry Fest

I was talking to a friend of mine about Danny Kaye as Hans Christian Andersen, who helps a little boy who had his head shaved due to illness feel better about himself by singing him a [story of an ugly duckling](#). Suddenly it struck me that the story is a near perfect metaphor for street youth, and for what they really need from us. The song goes:

There once was an ugly duckling, with feathers all stubby and brown. And the other birds in so many words said get out of town. Get out, get out, get out of town. And he went with a quack and a waddle and a quack in a flurry of eiderdown.



This how it starts ... a child is made to feel unwanted, either maliciously through abuse and neglect, or due to their inability to cope with circumstances. Regardless of the reason, they leave.

That poor little ugly duckling went wandering far and near. But at every place they said to his face now get out of here. Get out, get out, get out of here. And he went with a quack and a waddle and a quack and a very unhappy tear.

And this is the quest they're on. Find some place to fit in. Some place to be wanted. Isn't this exactly the attraction of the streets and street families ... a place where they are accepted for who they are? But most places they go other than the streets they *aren't* accepted. They are labeled, or controlled, or shunned ... but rarely accepted.

All through the wintertime he hid himself away. Ashamed to show his face, afraid of what others might say. All through the winter in his lonely clump of wheat,

So they hide themselves on the streets, and behind a mask of behaviors. They challenge and offend their community, but they are not a part of it. They hide who they really are, believing that they are not worthy of care

or love, behind a protective force field of beliefs and actions designed to keep anyone from getting close to them.

'til a flock of swans ...

Outreach workers? Program staff?

... spied him there and very soon agreed, you're a very fine swan indeed!

Yeah, right. We may be able to look past the protective behaviors and see their value and their humanity, but they initially will not believe us.

A swan? Me a swan? Ah, go on!

And they'll do everything in their power to prove to us how worthless they are. Now it's our turn to not believe *them*.

And he said yes, you're a swan

I don't care how you act or behave, that's who you're choosing to be, not who you are.

Take a look at yourself in the lake and you'll see

And I'm going to be your mirror, reflecting back to you all the good you have inside (one of the 3 resiliency Protective Factors; High Expectations).

And he looked, and he saw, and he said; I am a swan! Wheeeeeeee!

And by fostering their innate resilience, they eventually begin to believe us.

I'm not such an ugly duckling. No feathers all stubby and brown.

And they begin to believe in themselves.

For in fact these birds in so many words said the best in town. The best, the best, the best in town.

And as others see who they really are, they begin to believe in them, too, and the young person begins to form a new community and support system off of the streets.

Not a quack, not a quack, not a waddle or a quack, but a glide and a whistle and a snowy white back. And a head so noble and high. Say who's an ugly duckling? Not I! Not I!

And once they believe in themselves, our real work is done.

Yeah, I know ... kinda' corny ... but corniness sometimes makes the point ;-)



Lesson from LAX

By Jerry Fest

Traveling back from the Los Angeles area, I was sitting at LAX reading a book and waiting for a flight. I had my legs stretched out ... not enough to block the aisle, but more than if I was sitting up straight. For most people, it wasn't a problem. They had plenty of room to get by and I wasn't in their way at all.

Out of my peripheral vision I noticed a very old man coming my way. He was one of those elderly people who kind of shuffles along taking very small steps, appearing to be on the verge of tripping and teetering over if they don't place each foot carefully in front of the other. He was walking close to the side I was sitting on and he would have had to take a step or two toward the center to get by my legs ... no big deal for most people, but for him it seemed that it would be a major effort. I drew my legs close to my seat and allowed him to shuffle by without changing his path. He didn't notice this gesture on

my part, as he seemed a bit out of it, and I suppose it was the fact that he seemed not all together that kept me watching him as he shuffled along his way.

He was quite a distance from me when I noticed that one of the papers he was clutching in his right hand slipped out of his grip and fell to the floor. As it dropped I clearly recognized it as his ticket, and he was completely oblivious to the fact that he had just dropped it. I looked for someone to let him know about it, but even though several people had to have seen it happen, nobody was moving to let him know. Instead, he was beginning to disappear into the crowd, sans ticket.

I got up and ran to retrieve the ticket off of the floor, and then moved through the crowd to catch him. He must have been fairly deaf as he didn't respond to any of my calling after him, and when I caught up to him he seemed confused and bewildered until he figured out that I was giving him his ticket back. Even then he seemed more confused about who I was and why I had his ticket than grateful that I had retrieved it. I asked if he needed any assistance, but he just mumbled unintelligibly and shuffled off.

But here's the point of the story. If I had examined my feelings in that moment, they would have been more or less neutral. Yes, I had done my good deed for the day, but the fact that the old man wasn't fully aware of what I had done ... in fact, I may have scared him a little ... left me feeling ... I don't know ... unacknowledged? Not that it was a big deal. I may not have even noticed that feeling in myself if it wasn't for what happened next.

I turned around to return to my seat and saw a janitor who was going through the concourse with a trash can cleaning things up. He had obviously seen the entire event, because he *caught my eye, smiled at me, and*

nodded. It was a small gesture of acknowledgement, a small gesture of approval from a stranger in an airport concourse ... and I instantly felt like a million bucks. All it took was that one person recognizing and acknowledging my deed to give my actions validation, and to give me the unequalled positive feeling of having done a good deed.

Acknowledgement is powerful, but acknowledgement is not always positive. You can acknowledge people's deficits and screw ups ... and we do that all the time with young people. We correct their behaviors, we set limits, we react to their negative attitudes and actions; we negatively acknowledge them nearly every day. I'm not saying it's malicious on our parts ... it's often part of the job. But that just underscores the critical need to put as much emphasis ... ideally *more* emphasis ... on positive acknowledgement. We are trained to see when youth are pushing boundaries or limits and to intervene, but do we put as much effort into catching them doing things that are good and right, and noticeably giving them acknowledgement for those behaviors, as well? The fact is that we get more of the behavior we acknowledge ... good or bad. Since that's the case, maybe we should up our game when it comes to acknowledging the good. And the same lesson can be applied to staff supervisors. If the only time staff is getting feedback is when they are being corrected, it's not going to feel very good to be a staff, and it's going to be hard for them to acknowledge young people. Every once in a while, when a staff person has a particularly good interaction with a youth, it would be nice if they looked up and saw their supervisor catch their eye, smile at them, and nod approval.

Opinion: Don't Blame Abstinence?

By Gary Hammons

The May 2009 edition of Youth Today in an article by Kay Hymowitz follows the prior month's note that teen pregnancies have risen in the US the past two years. Using state by state comparisons relating to Abstinence Education, the author concludes that we should not put the blame on abstinence only programs for the increase. Rather, she asserts that the variable most likely at play is effective (or ineffective) sex education.

Ms. Hymowitz may be unaware of international studies over more than a decade indicating that economic decline or improvement is far more correlated with teen birth rates than either abstinence education or sex education. Ben Wattenberg, in his comprehensive treatise "**Fewer**", **How the New Demography of Depopulation Will Shape the Future**, (Ivan R Dee, Publisher 2004) shows the interrelationship of economics, culture and changes in birth rates very convincingly.

Since Ms. Hymowitz thinks abstinence education is not to blame for the increase in teen births, why does she not argue for it to end; as it is not effective? The hundreds of millions spent on this program could be much better directed toward improving sex education, or even better, stimulating the economy.

Editor's Note: The Northwest Youth Networker welcomes opposing views: [SUBMIT HERE](#).

