The Ugly Duckling
A metaphor for street youth
By JT (Jerry) Fest

Life is a great big canvas; throw all the paint you can at it
~ Danny Kaye

I was talking to a friend of mine about Danny Kaye who, playing Hans Christian Andersen, meets a little boy who had his head shaved due to an illness. He cheers the boy up 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 be went with a quack and a waddle and a quack in a flurry of eiderdown.

This how it starts … a child feels 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; to find somewhere to belong. 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 …

Teachers? 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 be 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 be looked, and be saw, and be said; I am a swan! Wheeeeeee!
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.*

And when they believe in themselves, they begin to shed their street survival behaviors.

*Say who's an ugly duckling? Not I! Not I!*

And our work is done …