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**Thesis**

**Integrative Project**

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All throughout my life, I have had a peace, serenity, and humbleness to people regardless of race, creed, color, national origin, sex, political affiliation, or beliefs. My mother had taught me since I was a child, to not discriminate because she was segregated in Denmark as a child. She had scoliosis of the spine and tuberculosis, which lead her to be paralyzed for the first seven years of her life. Her classmates and friends never looked at her the same after that. This led her to become firm in her studies and she sought to strive in other ways. These same values were passed down to me and helped me to become the woman I am today. Throughout my struggles and dealings with many prejudices, I never stopped to think negatively about anyone. However, I did strive to express my feelings through art.

In 2006, I joined the Prison Creative Arts Project (PCAP) with Janie Paul and Buzz Alexander. In this group, I did art workshops at Maxey Boys Detention Facility in Whitmore Lake, Michigan. It is here where I first realized my true passion. Once a week my partner and I would go into Maxey prepared to work with two wonderful boys while facilitating a process for them to express their inner self and feelings through art. We would practice self-portrait exercises, poems, body image awareness through text and imagery, as well as inter-personal skills. The two boys we worked with were struggling through sickness and were on a lot of medication, which made them stressed and thus caused emotional

struggles and created barriers for us as a group to overcome. Once we overcame those struggles, we were able to move forward and produce amazing artwork for a final show. They were proud of their artwork and as a result proud of themselves for striving through. The one thing that I know they will always appreciate is the fact that someone cared for them. They knew I wasn't there for just a grade and that I really did care for them and wanted them to be happy. I know they will never forget me or forget that experience, and I will also never forget them. This ideology of showing people that you care will then in turn produce great outcome. Whatever medium or lifestyle, regardless of race, creed, color, national origin, sex, political affiliation, or beliefs, showing compassion for people will lead to triumph. I learned those values from that experience and that has led me to where I am today.

In assistance with StandUp for Kids Detroit, I am attempting to work with three transitional young adults who have "Aged-out" of the foster care system. STANDUP FOR KIDS is a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization founded in 1990 to help rescue homeless and at-risk youth. With national headquarters in San Diego, California, STANDUP FOR KIDS is run almost entirely by volunteers, and has programs in almost every state in America. These national volunteers on-the-streets outreach efforts will find, stabilize, and assist homeless and street kids in their efforts to improve their lives. The organization's mission shall also be furthered through

deterrence and resource programs provided in schools and via the Internet. Our volunteers tell the kids they care about them and then, at every turn, prove it.

In my experience with StandUp For Kids - Detroit, the volunteers did not only seem to be the adult influence these kids really need but also their friends. Founder and CEO, Rick Koca, stated in a personal interview, “We are not trying to get them off the streets and tell them they are wrong, but instead emphasize that there is someone out there who cares about them and we will prove it.” This is the very reason why I chose to work with StandUp for Kids; their ability to express nothing but human compassion, to be a friend before a teacher, and to attend to as many of their needs as possible.

The Detroit Chapter of StandUp For Kids also started a new program under Outreach in 2007 called Alternative Outreach, whereby counselors find alternative venues to access and support homeless youth, or those youth who are highly at-risk of becoming homeless. Due to the huge couch-surfing culture and challenges facing foster care youth, particularly in Detroit, this alternative means led the chapter to take a closer look at both shelters and the foster care system. Currently, the first Alternative Outreach program Detroit has launched works with foster care transitional youth - those youth who are aging out of the foster care system and transitioning into independent adult life. StandUp For Kids - Detroit created

a weekly program to further provide some of CIAO's (Creating Independence And Outcomes) most at-risk foster care transitional youth additional support in the complex process of aging out. Both programs recognized that these youth need so much more support and guidance beyond education and employment, so since April of 2007, StandUp For Kids - Detroit has filled that need wholeheartedly to their program youth.

Many American young men and women have parents to rely on if they fail an exam, go through a bad break-up or are just low on cash. But aged out foster kids don't really have anyone to turn to. Nearly 20,000 foster care teens "age-out" of the foster care system each year. Once they reach 18 or sometimes 20, their state and foster families are no longer required to give them assistance. They are left to fend for themselves.

Foster care studies have shown that in just four years after leaving foster care, 25 percent of "aged-out" youth have been homeless, 42 percent have become parents themselves, fewer than 20 percent are able to support themselves, and only 46 percent have graduated from high school. Because they lack the support systems many young adults take for granted, aged-out foster care teens are at high risk for substance abuse, domestic violence and poverty.

I attempt to aid Taliia, John, Brandon and myself through self-exploration, such as: art exercises, self-image awareness and photo documentation of own lives. This is not *strictly teaching* which is why I am

**involving myself with this process. I believe that I am not higher than them and that they are not lower than me; I still have room to grow. I am hoping that different communities would benefit from our work; policyholders, community leaders, social workers, parents, youth and more importantly themselves.**

**In detail, I gave the youth five photography assignments and five art assignments. All of the assignments were given to bring self-awareness and to have them take a look deep down in their soul using a camera. If a person had to present to the mayor of Detroit a picture of one good thing they were proud of and one bad thing they disapproved of in their neighborhood, what would it be? If this was their only opportunity to stand up for what they believed in, how would they represent it? These are the types of questions I've asked them and myself.**

**With these art assignments the same values I taught with photography were used. Taliia, John, Brandon and I, along with a few volunteers went to the UofM Detroit center on Woodward Avenue. I brought twelve 75 inch sheets of paper for each of us to outline our bodies three times. My vision for this assignment was to have them 1: express how they feel about themselves on the inside; 2: express how others feel about them; and 3: a black silhouette representing nothing more and nothing less but themselves. I expected them to paint pictures of themselves with eyes, hair, a nose and a mouth but instead they did**

something completely different. I am not sure if this was because they were afraid of what they were anticipating to do but the outcome was amazing. The six pictures they finished were covered with mind-blowing words, with harsh pen marks, with paint splashes, and with visual pain. Some of the words they painted were: “torn”, “unhappy”, “depressed”, “broken hearted”, “alone”, and “smile for me”. While we were painting, we discussed past memories and experiences of our childhood and were able to relate to each other. This is when I realized that my mission to involve myself in this growing experience actually works; even though I have led a completely different life style, there is always something in every human that can be related to. With my persistence and frequent visits with them, our relationship will grow and this is what my project is truly about. My experience with them is a lot more important than the artwork Taliia, John, and Brandon or I produce; it is simply the acknowledgment that I was able to make a difference in someone’s life and that they can believe that other people will believe in them.

This could have a huge impact on an aged out foster care teen. Mentoring gives foster care teens a listening ear and simply a friend to guide them through their struggles. I believe in the power a friend can be; I believe that artistic processes can be a start in life development, healing and expression. There are many ways to help like donating supplies, providing transportation, gift certificates etc. This is not just a local

problem, but also a national one. The Orphan Foundation of American accepts large donations of goods, as well as individual donations of gift cards to national chain stores. I feel that my personal way of identifying, getting to know, and creatively working with these kids could make a bigger difference than giving them money.

On the day of the show, Brandon and John along with the rest of the StandUP for Kids community attended the show; There was one important person missing, Taliia. It has been two weeks and no one has heard from her. The last we heard was that she had a bad break-up with her boyfriend and she moved out. As we all know, this happens a lot in large urban cities. Taliia didn't have many people to count on and this makes me nervous. She had such a light about her and truly had a great eye for art and photography. It would have been great if Taliia could have come to the show; she would have been so proud. This is one thing that goes along with the work I have chosen. It is very emotional and the unexpected is expected.

## **Sources**

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