



YOUTH MILLENIUM 2000: LEADERSHIP IN PROGRESS

Youth Millennium Group Mission Statement

The mission of Youth Millennium 2000 is to function as a core group of young individuals coming together to overcome our problems, reach our goals and sustain progress, develop our leadership skills help others in our community, socialize with each other and meet different people, come up with new ideas and have fun! We will accomplish our mission by conveying respect and ensuring confidentiality among all our members.

When it comes to developing a comprehensive system of care for adolescent youth with an emotional disorder and their families, a community must ensure regular access to adaptive, structured social activities. This can pose a significant challenge to the case manager or wraparound team because these activities typically are difficult to locate and access in many communities, primarily due to eligibility, transportation and economic barriers. Rural populations experience these challenges even more prominently and often have to resort to crossing county lines in order to link youth to adaptive leisure-time activities. When activities are available, they frequently address only basic social and recreational needs on a limited basis yet fail to incorporate formal social skills training and leadership development, which are clearly desirable goals for youth struggling with issues of competency and self-worth. In Birmingham, Alabama a unique program called Youth Millennium 2000 has been created to address these and other youth development needs, with the ultimate goal of increasing youth leadership, resiliency and socially adaptive behaviors in the home, school and community environments.

BACKGROUND

Youth Millennium 2000 was formed in June 1999 for adolescents ages 13 to 19 years who are receiving services through Alabama's CMHS grant site. The Jefferson County Community Partnership operates four child and adolescent mental health Diagnostic and Evaluation Units (D&E) on site at juvenile court, child welfare, two city middle schools (Bush and Hayes) and two county alternative schools (East and West Campuses). Beginning in August 1998, these units were established at key entry points within the service system in order to identify and serve "at risk" youth with mental health issues who were coming to the attention of court

and child welfare officials or dropping out of school by the ninth grade at a higher than normal rate. The teachers and family representatives at Bush Middle School voted to name the units C.O.P.E. (*Children Overcoming Problems Everyday*) to reduce the stigma often associated with seeking help for mental health issues and to reinforce students for resolving their problems in a constructive manner.

D&E specialists and case managers at each unit work closely with eligible children/adolescents and their families to identify individual strengths and service needs. Since 1998, the C.O.P.E. units have evaluated over 500 children and helped families obtain access to a wide array of mental health and social services available through the system of care, all in an effort to prevent out-of-home placement of the identified child/adolescent client. The addition of a youth group was seen as an opportunity to develop a unique service in the community that was not previously available and would serve as a forum for youth leadership and empowerment.

FIRST YEAR ACTIVITIES

From the beginning, *Youth Millennium 2000* was geared at adolescents within the C.O.P.E. program who had progressed in terms of managing their mental health symptoms, had leadership qualities that were being under utilized, and were interested in giving something back to their community. In April 1999, The Partnership recruited and employed 17 year-old Turi Tinker to serve as the first president of the group due to his successful meeting of personal goals within the program and his ability to relate to younger members in a firm yet humorous, engaging manner. Tinker participated in meetings with grant staff to set up basic goals for the group prior to the first official meeting. During the first few months, members decided on a name for the group, defined basic rules of order,

elected officers to serve with Tinker, composed their mission statement, designed an official logo to print on tee-shirts and hats, identified social projects in the community and voted on recreational activities for participation throughout the year. In addition, the members decided to invite speakers in to address the group on various topics of interest. To celebrate the first anniversary of *Youth Millennium 2000*, members recruited Birmingham native and former NFL Rookie of the Year, Bobby Humphrey, to speak at the group's June 1st Oak Mountain Summer Blast Off Picnic, which was open to all adolescents involved in the C.O.P.E. program. Humphrey challenged the teens in attendance to maintain clear focus on their goals in order to avoid the peer pressure and substance abuse, problems he encountered in college and professional football.

BUILDING GROUP COHESION

To help mold the members into a cohesive unit, initial business meetings were augmented by structured social activities such as bowling, organized board and card games, a trip to the Jaycee's Haunted House and monthly dinners. As the first year progressed, staff periodically nominated other youth involved with C.O.P.E. for membership in the group. Many who were initially brought to a meeting to see how they would adjust and connect to the regular members soon weaned themselves out of the group when it became clear to them that the goals of *Youth Millennium 2000* went far beyond merely socializing and "hanging out". By the time the core members visited the assisted living home at Christmas to sing carols and deliver a gift baskets for the residents, it was apparent that the group had solidified and was ready to take on more challenging tasks with the onset of the new year.

GOALS FOR 20002001

Youth Millennium 2000 has now completed year one and is poised to take a more visible, responsible role in the Jefferson County community. With this in mind, members have identified several goals for the second year with the help of their advisors:

- Continue to receive formal training in social skills, leadership, cultural diversity, and peer mentoring.
- Recruit additional adolescents with leadership potential to join our group.
- Invite speakers every quarter to address the group on topics of interest.
- Produce a line of *Youth Millennium 2000* products to sell as part of a fundraising campaign, to include tee shirts, hats, key chains, pens, bookmarks, etc.

- Write, edit and produce a newsletter highlighting the efforts of *Youth Millennium 2000* on a quarterly basis.

- Visit and work with the Patricians Assisted Living Program and Habitat for Humanity on a quarterly basis.

- Identify social projects for the holiday season to give back to the community in some significant manner, such as cosponsoring the annual "Stocking Tree" with the C.O.P.E. program, which provides presents for indigent children at Christmas.

- Expand local awareness of *Youth Millennium 2000* by partnering with 02 Ideas, C.O.P.E.'s communications campaign firm, to develop a speaker's bureau for youth to interface with local rotaries (Lion's Club, Kiwanis Club).

- Develop ideas for *Youth Millennium 2000* entrepreneurial enterprises that could potentially lead to endowment of college scholarships for members vested in the program over time.

- Promoting the youth group in the community for long-term sustainability. Designing and printing an official logo and mission statement on tee shirts can help validate the youth group in a powerful way. It provides a visually stimulating illustration of their purpose and allows them to promote the group on the spot whenever the tee shirt catches the attention of a peer or adult in the community. Also, promoting the group through logo products is a great way to attract community and corporate attention for possible long-term financial investment. Addressing local community clubs, such as Kiwanis and The Lion's Club, is another way to spread the word about the youth group. Community action leagues are often interested in assisting youth leaders with obtaining college scholarships and could be excellent partners in general.

LESSONS LEARNED

With any new enterprise, the first year of operation is usually the one in which the greatest lessons are learned. Fortunately, the members and advisors of *Youth Millennium 2000* have not had to suffer through too many growing pains and can point proudly to several accomplishments from the first year. However, for communities thinking about developing a youth group for adolescents with a serious emotional disturbance, several considerations need to be made:

- The goals and objectives for developing this type of group need to be clearly outlined from the beginning. In other words, what is the purpose or the mission of the group? What outcome will the advisor,

youth members, and the community at large be expecting? Youth members should have a direct voice in deciding what their mission is and how they expect to accomplish it. This ensures ownership of the process and reinforces the likelihood that they will commit to the goals and objectives of the group over time. *Youth Millennium 2000* was specifically created as a forum to develop social and leadership skills in adolescents receiving services through the C.O.P.E. program.

- The size of the group should parallel the goals and objectives. Trying to carry out a business meeting with 15 or more active adolescents may not be a recipe for success but a group of 10-12 who have clearly-defined roles and responsibilities with the group can accomplish a great deal. Training the officers of the group to set and maintain order with their peers will ensure a productive meeting every time.

- Decide on when, where and how often to meet. Meetings should occur at least 1-2 times a month in order to sustain interest and to realistically achieve goals and objectives. Advisors should be flexible in scheduling meetings after hours (5-8 p.m.) in order to allow for members to participate in other academic and extracurricular activities with their peers. Allowing a period of time for the youth members to meet and socialize without the advisors should also be considered, as this promotes independent thought processing and decision-making. During these periods, youth members have an opportunity to practice mentoring techniques with each other as well.

The following voices tell the story of how youth can move from the periphery to the center of leadership and development in systems of care.

Confessions of a Youth Mentor by Ana Gorupic

When I first agreed to come check out *Youth Millennium 2000* to see if I wanted to become a youth mentor, I had no idea what to expect. The plan was that we would have a quick meeting with the members, visit the assisted living home in Fairfield and then go have dinner at Outback Steakhouse. As I walked into the conference room where the meeting was going to be held, I was greeted by some of the coolest kids I've ever met. They seemed very organized and determined about what they were doing and what they were involved in. During this meeting, the group was discussing fund raising ideas. For example, having a car wash, having one or more bake sales and a penny drive were suggested. Social activities discussed for the upcoming year included visiting the

Birmingham Zoo, the Botanical Gardens or art gallery, working at the Human Society Shelter, eating out and going to the movies. As I listened and participated in the discussion, it occurred to me that these activities would give the *Youth Millennium 2000* group a chance to visit, get to know each other better, and possibly do some activities that they have not participated in before. I found myself looking ahead to the next summer when we could possibly work with Camp Birmingham. This would give all of us an opportunity to be positive influences in the lives of other young people.

After spending over three hours with the group, I left with the thought that it is important for these kids to have a good influence and that I could help with this. I could discuss my experiences with them and let them know how to make better decisions, as I have tried to do over the past year through the C.O.P.E. program. This could give me an opportunity to influence and be a good role model for the group. Helping people is an important thing to me and by being a youth mentor I will be working on a personal goal for myself. I'm hoping that this group will give me some motivation to be more active in the community as well.

Ana Gorupic is an 18 year-old fulltime student at Jefferson State Community College in Birmingham, Alabama. She has been involved with the C.O.P.E. program since 1999 and will be graduating from the transitional living program to independent living in November 2000. Ana toured for three years as part of North Carolina's Jump Rope Demonstration Team for the American Heart Association. She enjoys poetry, reading,



Case Manager Roderick McCants presents outgoing president, Turi Tinker, with a cake on his birthday.

and animals. She hopes one day to work for The Discovery Channel.

An Interview with First Year President Turi Tinker

When he decided to withdraw from high school at the age of 16 to work fulltime and prepare for his GED, 18 year-old Turi Tinker had no idea that he would soon be asked to serve as the inaugural president of a fledgling youth group known as *Youth Millennium 2000*. At the time, Tinker had overcome several obstacles in his young life with the assistance of his mother, case manager and a supportive therapist. In addition, his experience with juvenile court left him with a new respect for the judge and probation officer that challenged him to turn his life around for the better. It was this positive attitude change and a growing maturity that caught the attention of the youth group advisors in the spring of 1999 when they were considering possible candidates to help run *Youth Millennium 2000*.

Looking back on his experience as the group's first president, Tinker noted that he has learned a lot about himself that he never expected through this process: "I learned that anybody can be a leader. Most people never looked at me as a leader, as someone to depend on before becoming president of *Youth Millennium*." When asked how the group has impacted his life over the past year, Tinker replied, "It has cleaned me up a bit, my image is more important to me now. I know that people are looking up to me and I have to uphold my image, which means I can't lead a 'double life' or be contradictory in my behavior." Contemplating what his life would have been like without the influence of the program, Tinker noted that he would have been "worse off. It would have taken me a longer road to recovery. It's kept me out of trouble."

This past July, Tinker officiated over the election of officers for the 2000-2001 year and was not surprised when 15 year-old Terrell Williams was voted president in a landslide. "I knew he would be in this position from day one of meeting him and I wish him the best of luck." What advice does Tinker have for his successor? "I would advise him to always hold up a clean image for the group and remember that it [his behavior] goes back to the community, the churches, the neighborhood, and the schools. He's like an ambassador now."

Now that he has completed his tenure as first year president of *Youth Millennium 2000*, Turi is looking forward to attending college fulltime at Alabama A&M this fall. "I'm hoping it will help me obtain a regular job one day. My minor will be in criminal justice and my major may be in political science or sociology." When



asked how he hopes to use this degree in the future, Tinker replied, "I'm looking at a job in law enforcement one day, maybe even become a detective."

On a final note, in early December 2000, Turi will take time out from his studies to share his experiences with the C.O.P.E. and *Youth Millennium 2000* programs at the 12th annual Federation of Families Conference in Washington D.C. Tinker, along with parent advocates and staff from the C.O.P.E. Juvenile Court D&E Unit will present the Jefferson County Community Partnership's system of care. Ironically, this will also serve as a reunion for Turi and his former juvenile court judge, Andra Sparks, as both are set to participate on a panel that will highlight how juvenile court and mental health services are being successfully integrated in Jefferson County to help prevent youth from entering long-term care.

Youth Group Advisors Help Reveal Hidden Talents in Members

Dedication, commitment, and high energy are just a few of the adjectives often used to describe C.O.P.E. case managers Chalonda Smith and Roderick McCants, who have worked diligently with clinical director, Jan Davis, to launch and sustain *Youth Millennium 2000* during the past year. In fact, the majority of youth group members have been recruited by Smith and McCants from their respective clients at Bush and Hayes Middle Schools, which says a great deal about their ability to identify and motivate youth with leadership potential. "I see a lot of different kids being able to come together and make great decisions about their lives and their community," noted Smith, who has involved several of the youth members with Habitat for Humanity. "My main goal for the Youth Millennium 2000 group is to see them become more involved in the community and to show other youth and adults that there are kids out there with leadership abilities who want to make a difference in their community." According to McCants, members have hidden talents that are revealed through *Youth Millennium 2000*: "I see the leadership developing in them every day and some are writing poems, designing logos and brochures for us, all kinds of talents that this group brings out of them." McCants also noted that "those who were bashful are now speaking and are becoming leaders." But the best thing, according to McCants, is "the interaction I see them having at school with other kids who ask that about it

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[*Youth Millennium 2000* tee-shirt] I see them put the mission statement to use everyday.” Smith was quick to agree with this comment, referring to one young female member who “has gone from being a very defiant young girl to now being the secretary for the group. She enjoys this responsibility and takes it serious.” Smith has also observed several of the youth members “take their rules of order from the group and use it to help them control their anger in other situations.” Perhaps this is the true measure of *Youth Millennium 2000*’s worth when members take and apply the lessons and experiences found in the group to help them manage life’s daily challenges.

New President Will Expand on First Year Accomplishments

Described by his case manager, Chalonda Smith, as having “great leadership abilities that need to be nurtured,” 15 year-old Terrell Williams is ready to take on the role of president of *Youth Millennium 2000* for the next year but admits, “It’s a BIG responsibility.” Williams has been involved with the C.O.P.E. program since 1998 and brings a multitude of talents to his new position. For example, Williams submitted the winning design for the C.O.P.E. brochure in 1998 as well as the logo for *Youth Millennium 2000*. He has participated in band for several years while a student at Bush Middle School, earning drum major status before deciding this year to go out for football and basketball. Williams sees these activities as necessary to “keep me occupied and keep a good head on my shoulders.”

In December, Terrell will turn 16 and hopes to obtain a part-time job at Just For Feet, since both his parents work in retail. Williams’ case manager noted that this desire to work as soon as he turns 16 is no surprise: “I can see him in politics one day because he is always talking about work and how he could change this or that if given the chance.” Williams gives credit to “Miss Chalonda” for helping him with his school performance and behavior by getting him the services he needed: “I’m helping other kids now with school problems because I’ve gotten better.”

Regarding his involvement in *Youth Millennium 2000*, Williams described it as “a positive experience. We’ve been going out as a group now for a year and it’s a great way to get teenagers more involved in activities that

keep them out of trouble.” The experience has also helped Williams see that “there’s more to life than just having fun,” noting the group’s exposure to programs like Habitat for Humanity and the Patriciana Assisted Living Home. Terrell also expects that the responsibility of being president will help him in the future as he moves on through high school. His immediate advice to members of *Youth Millennium 2000*, “keep yourself occupied and out of trouble, talk and spend more time with your parents, and if you are having problems don’t be afraid to see our C.O.P.E. counselors because it [the problem] can be talked out.”

Williams’ ultimate goal for *Youth Millennium 2000* is “to move it to an even larger group, across our state and in other communities around the country and the world.” With Terrell’s strong work ethic and high energy, along with the commitment of his fellow youth group members, this is a goal well within reach.

Jan Davis, M.S. is the Clinical Director for Children’s Services at the Jefferson-Blount St. Clair Mental Health Authority, which is the lead agency for the Jefferson County Community Partnership. Ms. Davis is the coauthor of Jefferson County’s system of care grant that was awarded in 1997.

Chalonda Smith, M.S. is a Child and Adolescent Case Manager II for the Jefferson County Community Partnership’s City School-Based C.O.P.E. D&E Unit, which serves Bush and Hayes Middle Schools. Ms. Smith has been employed with the Partnership since 1998 and with Jefferson-Blount St. Clair Mental health Authority’s Children’s Services since 1997. Ms. Smith recently coauthored and won a grant to develop a home for unwed teenage mothers in Jefferson County.

Roderick McCants, B.S.W. is a Child and Adolescent Case manager II for the Jefferson County Community Partnership’s City School-Based C.O.P.E. D&E Unit. Mr. McCants was originally employed with the Jefferson-Blount St. Clair Mental Health Authority’s Children’s Services “Project F.I.N.D.” program as a case manager before being transferred to the C.O.P.E. Unit at Bush and Hayes Middle Schools.

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