



An Example of the Power of Mentoring and Wraparound

“Tara’s” life had been in turmoil for most of her childhood. Growing up in a low-income household, Tara survived despite the lack of resources and outside support for her family. What’s more, Tara’s mother faced mental health challenges. This caused erratic and sometimes violent behavior, which Tara could not understand. Tara’s mother was reluctant to accept help from public agencies, so although help was sought for Tara and her family, it never came in her younger years. As Tara recalls, “When the people came from the agencies to inspect our house, my Mom would force us to clean and make sure we had a full refrigerator. She said we would get in trouble if we didn’t.”

As Tara got older, it was evident that she too would face her own mental health issues. She started receiving mental health services at age 10. The dynamics between mother and daughter did not improve. “Mom saw me as a little girl she had to take care of because I had so many problems, even though I was capable of more than she would allow. When I was a freshman in high school, my mom picked me up in this flimsy nightgown and carried me outside to my bus because I woke up late. She picked me up! I was the size I am now!”

Tara was introduced to Project RENEW in June of 1997, when she was 16 years old. Project RENEW was established to provide comprehensive career and education services to youth transitioning from high school to work. Among the values that guide the services offered by Project RENEW are self-determination, unconditional care, the cultivation of natural supports, and lifelong education. The Project utilizes several key strategies including personal future planning, flexible education services, mentoring, and wraparound.

When Project staff member Gail Cormier first met Tara, she found a quiet, withdrawn, young woman. “I just wouldn’t say anything because I was afraid I would get in trouble. Besides, my mother always spoke for me anyway. It was like I was a person with thoughts but no

way to get them out.” Soon after their meeting, Tara sat down with her newly formed wraparound team to begin

her personal future planning. Tara describes working with her wraparound team as a collaborative process: “Everybody puts in their two cents worth, and we come out with a plan.” With support, Tara articulated her history, dreams, and fears. As a result of this process, Tara had set goals for herself, such as finishing high school, working in a laundry or daycare, and living independently of her mother.

For three years, Tara and her wraparound team worked hard to keep Tara in school and support her progress towards her high school diploma even as she coped with family difficulties and her own mental health challenges. The team’s work continued, not just in scheduled meetings, but also through constant communication among team members on a weekly and sometimes daily basis. Team members were committed to supporting Tara creatively and as flexible as possible, recognizing that wraparound can only be effective if the process is continuously nurtured and the team is constantly vigilant.

At age nineteen, one year after moving out of her mother’s home, the difficulties in Tara’s life came to a head. Tara’s goal of attaining a high school diploma was jeopardized when administrators suggested that she consider withdrawing from her alternative school due to continuing behavioral difficulties. Tara’s living situation was also deteriorating. Tara had difficulty supporting herself and became more influenced and controlled by the “friends” with whom she was living. These “friends” began collecting Tara’s entire monthly income for living expenses and forced her to clean house and care for several children at her roommates’ whim. Under the influence of her roommates, Tara began to abuse drugs and alcohol, but the worst came when she was involuntarily involved in prostitution to her friends’ benefit. Tara realized that she could not be successful at school or in any of her life goals in her current living

situation, but felt she had no other options. She was also reluctant to disclose the full extent of her difficulties to her support team because she felt a responsibility to care as best she could for the young children who were a part of the household. “I wasn’t afraid to leave because of what could happen to me, I was afraid of what would happen to the children living there with me gone.”

Fortunately, Tara’s wraparound team was able to mobilize as soon as the details of Tara’s situation became clear. Tara’s team included RENEW staff, a mental health counselor, a school district case manager, a school counselor, a vocational rehabilitation counselor, and—most importantly in this situation—a mentor. The communication between the team members was constant at this point in Tara’s life. RENEW acted as the central communication point, receiving and delivering information on a daily basis. The team worked feverishly to find a housing option that would work for Tara. Tara’s mentor responded to Tara’s most pressing need by putting a solution on the table; she offered to have Tara move into her home with her family while Tara completed high school.

Because she had a longstanding relationship with her mentor, Tara jumped on the offer. Arrangements were made for her safe evacuation, and Tara was moved out of her friends’ [how about “roommates”?] home within an hour of making the decision. All team members contributed support in the following weeks, doing all they could to ensure a successful transition. The mental health center offered additional clinical support, as well as support to the mentor’s family. The school was aware of the transition and worked closely with Tara through her school day. Project RENEW used *flex funds* (funds used to support youth in a flexible manner) to help Tara decorate her room to make it her own living space.

Tara earned money to contribute to the household and received the family’s support throughout the school year. She learned to budget and felt good about having money to spend on the things she wanted. One evening in late spring, Tara’s entire wraparound team was in attendance in the school gymnasium to see her graduate. Tara attributes the success of her high school graduation and the transition from two unhealthy living situations to having wraparound in her life. Through the efforts of several people representing the worlds of education, work, mental health, housing, and healthcare, a young woman reached her goals. “I told them what I wanted and they used their individual authority to do what I could not do.”

Project RENEW is a program of the Alliance For Community Supports. It has offices in Manchester and Littleton, New Hampshire. Their mission is to assist youth to achieve success in their personal lives. Career and educational specialists incorporate the values of self-determination, natural supports, and mentoring into their daily work, while supporting progress toward goals set forth through personal future planning. The program strongly embraces the wraparound process and facilitates teams to create effective solutions for youth. Being recognized as a best practice by the National and Federal Alliance for the Education and Treatment of Children and the National Transition Alliance for Youth with Disabilities, Project RENEW has statistics available for anyone interested in the documentation of its successes. For more information on Project RENEW, call us at 603-628-7681.

Scott Hunter is Tara’s current Career and Education Case manager. Scott has worked at The Alliance for Community Supports/ Project RENEW since 1999. Currently he coordinates several new initiatives to improve the lives of young persons in the New Hampshire area.