



IDENTIFYING COMMUNITY SUPPORTS: SOME INFORMAL ANECDOTES

Melody, 12, has been in a group home for almost two years. During that time, she has been on what is called “eyesight supervision” in a number of residential environments. This means that it is Melody’s responsibility to make sure that she is always within the immediate view of at least one staff member. Melody is African American, the only person of color in the entire area. She is a veteran of removal, and ultimately, estrangement from her original family as well as a failed adoption. She has watched other children visit their families and return home. No one has visited Melody except her social worker, who visits about once every six weeks. Melody clearly needs a friend.

A volunteer helper who realized this need tried to define exactly what sort of person the your girl needed. The “recipe”: Melody would best benefit from knowing an African American woman, at least 35 years old, who had a history on interest in civil rights, justice and a value of families. Since her rights had been violated repeatedly (no other child had ever been kept on “eye supervision” longer than a day or two), a friend who had a legal background could be helpful. Adding those criteria together, the volunteer asked herself, “where might I find a middle-aged African American woman with an interest in civil rights and who has a legal background?” Her answer—the Urban League (your answer, based on resources in your community, is probably different). With some trepidation, the volunteer called the Urban League and described the situation and Melody’s needs. It wasn’t an easy phone call to make. After all, the volunteer was ordering a human being like most people order a sandwich. Despite that, the lady who took the call from the volunteer recognized the effort behind it and helped the volunteer find a suitable resource. The woman who first became her friend eventually adopted Melody: a 38-year-old African American woman who was a paralegal and a big wheel in the local NAACP. Melody now has

aunts, uncles, grandparents, godparents and a mother who loves her above all else. These resources didn’t appear out of nowhere by happy coincidence. Melody has a family because someone thought strategically and acted to produce a real result.

I also volunteer on a number of wraparound teams. I’m always thinking about informal supports. For example, a big tree fell in our front lawn on a Sunday. After inquiring what to do, since the fallen tree blocked the entire street, I called the police. When the police officer showed up, he put flares all around it and called Public Works. While waiting for the truck, I got the officer to agree to let a kid who needs to behave legally come and wash police cars a couple of times a week. When the Public Works guys showed up, I got them to sponsor two sisters in their environmental interests. I kept talking and they kept sawing. I ended up with informal supports for three kids AND they removed the tree for free. It was a good day in wraparound. I have a NASCAR fan—teenage boy—learning about cause and effect and learning to make safe choices by studying the lives of the Petty and Earnhardt families. It’s working great. A kid who struggles with schizophrenia is now hanging out at a music store, supervised by the store owner. The young man does odd jobs in exchange for guitar and drum lessons, but his big preference is to jam with other local musicians. He goes there every afternoon and stays until his single, working mom picks him up after work. Result: no more troubles with the law. This is how informal resources (mentors, sponsors, parent coaches, and numerous other support people) are identified.

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