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Partners in Growth:

Elder Mentors and
At-Risk Youth

by Marc Freedman

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FOREWORD

"Gus Papageorge," whom you'll soon meet in this report, is the pseudonym for a retired leatherworker who tries to help youthful offenders find jobs and get established in society. His method is simple and direct: he talks to the kids, spends time with them, opens his own life to them. "Give [the kid] your telephone number," he says. "If he gets in trouble, tell him, 'Let me know what's happening, maybe I can be a help.'"

Gus's views on why youth fail, and his approach to helping them, reflect a natural, common-sense perspective: "My theory on the subject is these kids are smart, [but] they're lacking the supervision, they're lacking the guardians, they're lacking the compassion and love. And that's what throws these kids off kilter. The first thing I tell them, I says, 'I'm not a government agent. I'm here for you. Only you.'"

His formal schooling never went beyond the eighth grade. Yet Gus's solid insights echo conclusions reached by many child development and learning theorists. Hard evidence for such conclusions may thus far elude us, but as Margaret Mahoney of the Commonwealth Fund has argued: "Some critics will be reluctant to accept anecdotal evidence as proof that mentors matter in the positive development of young people. But studies of humankind convince me that society is better off when its members take some responsibility for developing individuals in the next generation."

Professionals in our business are particularly inclined to discount such theories in quest of the measurable result. Often, we think far too narrowly in terms of testable program models--some "right" but mechanical admixture of education, work training and competencies whose results we seek to define and quantify. Lost in the equation is the the extraordinary potential of caring human relationships to strengthen, revitalize and expand a youngster's capacity to cope with the world and its demands.

The people and the voices in Partners in Growth are testimony to that potential, and reading the report should leave us feeling somewhat uncomfortable in our reliance on systems, models, components, outcomes, coordination and the like. The case studies, drawn from the few initiatives around the country that seek to foster meaningful relationships between elder citizens and at-risk teenagers, speak vividly of the human dimension and its power to change the trajectory of youngsters' lives. To be sure, the study is not hard evidence; but that, I submit, is a reflection of how little we now know, and of the gulf between common-sense wisdom about how youth develop and the way we design initiatives to help them.

It is a gulf we hope to bridge. Public/Private Ventures has committed itself to sustained work in this area in the years to come. Partners in Growth is a first step in making sense of how social programs can foster developmental relationships for at-risk youth. It suggests new avenues for research and intervention; through them, we will explore the potential such relationships hold, and seek evidence to satisfy advocate and skeptic alike.

Michael A. Bailin
President

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Many at-risk youth are growing up isolated from the range of caring and consistent adult relationships so important for navigating the treacherous course from adolescence to adulthood. An accumulation of longitudinal research suggests that adult relationships--provided not only by parents, but by grandparents, neighbors and other interested adults--are a common factor among resilient children, who achieve success despite growing up in disadvantaged and stressful circumstances. An important, and not often addressed, question for social intervention is whether the circumstances of more at-risk youth could be improved through efforts designed to provide greater access to these relationships.

In the search for new, cost-effective approaches to improving the life chances of at-risk youth, older adults are an intriguing potential source of developmental relationships for these young people. Elders are the fastest growing segment of the population, may be relatively inexpensive to employ, and are in need of opportunities for socially productive activity. There is considerable intuitive appeal to the notion of bringing together these two segments of the population for mutual benefit.

The intent of this study is a fuller understanding of what really happens when elders and at-risk youth are brought together. In an effort to develop this understanding, P/PV staff visited five exemplary intergenerational programs in Michigan, Massachusetts and Maine. During two visits to each site between February 1987 and May 1988, the research team interviewed program staff, elders and youth. Funding for the study was provided by the Luke B. Hancock Foundation of Palo Alto, California, and the Skillman Foundation of Detroit, Michigan.

The five initiatives involve adults in the federal Foster Grandparent program, retirees from several labor unions, and other older volunteers. They seek to aid teenage mothers, jail-bound young offenders, and students in danger of dropping out of school. The programs are IUE/The Work Connection in Saugus, Massachusetts; Teen Moms in Portland, Maine; School Volunteers for Boston; Teenage Parent Alternative Program in Lincoln Park, Michigan; and Teaching-Learning Communities (TLC) Mentors Program in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

The report also draws on a conference, extensive interviews with experts and academics, and a review of the literature on adolescence and the condition of institutions that have traditionally moved young people toward adulthood, a digest of views by current observers and actors in the field of adolescent development, and a brief review of current intergenerational programming. It also includes extensive quotations from elders and youth involved in the relationships typically observed. Excerpts from these quotations can be found on pages 2, 4 and 6.

Gus Papageorge and Eddie Dillon
IUE/The Work Connection

Gus Papageorge, a former leather worker and bus driver, is a mentor in IUE/The Work Connection, just outside Boston:

These kids, they need adults to teach them; adults with patience; adults who feel about them. They don't want bluffers. They know. Because they can outsmart anybody, because they've been out in the streets so long. They know if you're sincere or if you're faking.

The first thing I tell them, I says, "I'm not a government agent. I'm here for you. Only you. I'm here because I want to do this, because what you're doing is wrong, dead wrong. You'll never make it in life." . . . They realize what they're doing is wrong. Some of them, they already know. But they don't know how to get out of it, because they don't have any connections. The only connections they got is the same people who started them that way. That's how they got clipped. . . . Most of the families. . . . they've put up with so much from these kids--and these families aren't stable to begin with--they kick them out of the house. . . .

And these kids got no shoes, they're hungry, they live out in the streets, and they try to block everything out by getting drunk or being doped up, because nobody cares. That's my theory on this subject. Give him your telephone number. If he gets in trouble, tell him, "let me know what's happening, maybe I can be a help."

Eddie Dillon, Gus's partner for a year, is a participant in the alternative sentencing program for youthful offenders:

So at first, I felt it was kind of weird. And then I started getting used to him and I opened up to him and he knew where the hell I was coming from. . . . We could talk about anything. Anything. With my family problems, he really helped me out a lot. When I'd be screwin' up, Gus would call on me. He'd come by, play with the kids. He loved the kids. He'd stay over for a while. We'd invite him for dinner. Then a couple times we were down and out, he'd lend us a few bucks. I would never approach him for it, but he'd come out with, "There, go get something for the kids." He was always like that. . . . I trust him more than anybody on this earth. He always makes me feel better, makes me feel like someone cares. If someone cares, then I'm gonna be good. If no one cares, then it makes me not good. . . . Gus never pushed too hard. If he did, I wouldn't have listened. I'm a stubborn guy. If you tell me to do something, I say yeah, okay sweetheart. You know. Not Gus. You know he's been more or less a father to me. He is also kind of a friend. He understands me; maybe because he went through it himself. He's seen something that's made him a wiser man.

The study sought to answer a series of questions and concluded with a sturdy appreciation of the potential of intergenerational relationships for youth at risk of a variety of life disruptions. The questions and the study's answers, briefly stated, follow:

Will intergenerational relationships form?

The study found that bonds between elders and youth will form in social programs structured for that purpose. Despite a sharply age-segregated society and some initial hesitation, the participants were in most cases able to forge powerful bonds. Of the 47 pairs interviewed, 37 constituted significant relationships that provided benefits to both partners.

What do the relationships look like?

The significant relationships divided into two types, primary and secondary; the former are characterized by attachments approximating kinship, great intimacy and a willingness on the part of elders to take on the youth's full range of problems and emotions. In secondary relationships, elders served as helpful, "friendly neighbors," focusing on positive reinforcement but maintaining more emotional distance.

Do they result in benefits for the youth?

Benefits from exposure to the elders appear to exist for all youth in the programs. However, youth in significant relationships consistently cited an improvement in the quality of their day-to-day lives and described learning a variety of functional skills as a result of their alliance with the older person.

Young people in primary relationships reported a further tier of benefits. They described elders helping them weather potentially debilitating crises, bolstering their stability and sense of competence, acting as advocates on their behalf, and providing important access to the mainstream community.

All these relationships appear to help change a life trajectory from one headed for failure, to a more adaptive path of survival.

Are there benefits for elders?

The elders interviewed described meeting their own needs precisely through providing the kind of attention, caring and commitment the youth craved. Beyond simply getting out of the house and earning money, relationships with youth offer elders the chance to pass on skills developed over a lifetime, get a fresh start in a relationship with a younger person, and play the appealing and

Emily Winston and Monique Sanders
T-IC Mentors Program

Emily Winston, a highly educated woman in her early 60s, is a tutor in the T-IC Mentors program in Ann Arbor, Michigan:

She's a big, strong girl and she has a violent temper. And she's far from dumb. She's really quite bright but she doesn't read very well, she doesn't get very good grades, she's got no support at home. . . . It seems like somebody being a friend for her, the way I've been trying to be, gives her a little bit of something. When she's got a problem or something is bothering her she comes down to the mentor center instead of going around kicking or telling off her teacher. She's a perfect example of the kind of kid who's going to end up having a baby or running away or not finishing school or hitting someone so hard it causes serious problems.

I think she gets a sense of security out of this that she does not get with her family. And she wants to--oh, for instance, we just moved to an old house last spring and she's dying to come out and help. She said "I'll do anything." She wants to pursue the relationship but I don't think it's a good idea for her or for any of the other students and me and the other mentors to mix up our private lives with our positions here.

Monique Sanders, Emily's partner, is struggling in junior high school:

I would come down during study hour and basically we'd get down to my math work, and she would help me with it. She would not do it, she would just basically help me. Then when we would get through with the work, she'd tell me I better go take that back to my class, so the teacher could correct it. Then I'd come back and she would show me pictures of birds, 'cause she lives in the country. So she shows me pictures of birds and different animals. You know she loves to sew and I do too. We crocheted. . . .

She's really nice. Like my grandmother, she would always bring me goodies. She'd ask me where are your classes, those kind of things. She asked me how I was doing with my family, how are you getting along? I would tell her we get along fine. . . . She'd look--she'll tell me, she'll say, "Monique look me straight in the eye." And I would look down and she'd say, "No, no, no, look people straight in the eye and tell them." She would know if you were telling the truth or not. She would always want you to tell the truth to her and be honest.

somewhat idealized role of mentor. The role also provides the elders with a challenge: helping youth change their lives. They find the assignment sometimes frustrating, at other moments exhilarating, and always engaging.

Why do intergenerational bonds form?

There is a strong emotional basis--not only among the surveyed participants, but fairly widespread among elders and at-risk youth--for the formation of bonds. Rather than being dependent on "chemistry," these alliances seem to occur when youth are receptive--lonely, at a time of crisis, ready for change and desirous of adult contact--and elders are enthusiastic but also lonely and intent on finding meaningful roles in their senior years.

The elders interviewed felt a special empathy that appears to derive from the marginal status shared by elders and youth in our society. They also appeared attracted to fulfilling the "Elder Function," the propensity of the old to share the accumulated knowledge and experience they have collected. Mentoring ability appears to be more easily expressed in the senior years of age.

Perhaps one of the study's most striking findings is that the most effective elders were individuals who had not lived what would commonly be considered "successful" lives. Many had endured strained family relationships, struggled at low-paying jobs, and battled personal problems, such as alcohol abuse. Partly as a result of surviving--and surmounting--such difficulties, these elders seemed to understand the youth, were able to communicate with them from their own experience, and established strong, constructive bonds.

Can program factors stimulate intergenerational bonding?

The elders' success with the young people appeared to be attributable also to their unique role and to some deft decisions by the five programs studied. The elders' location in an optimal spot--as neither parents nor professionals--left them relatively free from role constraints and untainted by the mark of authority. At their most effective, the programs reinforced these natural advantages by casting the elders in nonprofessional roles, giving them freedom to do their work, providing ongoing support, and structuring contact with the young people so that it was personal, sustained and consistent. Merely adding occasional adult contact to a conventional youth program will not produce the ties and benefits portrayed in the case studies that form the heart of this report.

Mary Dubois and Cindy Burke
Teen Moms

Mary Dubois, a widow who raised several children on her own, was born in northern Maine just after World War I. She is now a Foster Grandmother in the Teen Moms program in Portland, Maine:

I really enjoy being with her. In fact, I wouldn't mind if my son brings home a girl like her to me. She's a very good mother. It shows in the children. She's very attentive to the children. My relationship with her is different than a mother/daughter relationship. I'm too domineering with my own children, but I do not dominate her. I think a grandmother/granddaughter would be much more like it. My daughters are my daughters; she's like a granddaughter, and she needs help. . .

I tell her not to down herself so much. She feels so inferior. She's a pretty girl, to me. She's got an awful lot going for her. She downs herself, says "I have two children." I say you had a bad marriage, it didn't work; that's not your fault. It's just little things to make her feel good, to love herself. . . . I taught that to my children, I teach that to all the girls. They are individuals. They don't have to copy this one or that one. What do you want to do with yourself? I don't teach them, I talk with them about it. They are special. Cindy is a beautiful mother.

Cindy Burke, whom Mary visits each week, is a 20-year-old single mother living on AFDC:

I guess her husband died. It's like she's been through it and it seems like she knows what I am going through. I told her today that I really needed some help about seeing another guy. I am sure she's going to come up with something like she always does. You give her time to think about something and the next week she'll say "you remember when you mentioned this" and you know she'll come out with something. She's really good about everything. . . .

The day that it happened [The suicide of Cindy's boyfriend] she was right over and she gave me a great big hug and asked me if I was alright, and if I was going to be alright, which really helped me out. I really didn't think we were that close until that happened and she was right there. 'Cause I called my dad and he really didn't want to talk about it since he didn't know the person and didn't care about it. So I said 'bye and hung up on him. But with Mary you can talk about it and she's not going to shut you out. That's what my parents have always done to me. If they don't agree with what I say they'll shut you right out and you won't see them for a couple of weeks. They'll just ignore you. Mary comes over every week and no matter what I say to her she's right there still.

DISCUSSION

While much work remains to be done in this field, the study's findings are richly suggestive of the possibilities inherent in the notion of intergenerational relationships for at-risk youth.

First, intergenerational relationships offer a new role for older people. From the perspective of elder productivity, the discovery that a variety of elders can help at-risk youth is of great importance. At present, older people have few choices. Many middle-class seniors escape to separatist playgrounds like Sun City, the retirement community Frances Fitzgerald describes in her book, Cities on a Hill; too many others of smaller means are condemned to isolation, idleness and low-level work. Remaining in their communities and working with these young people is clearly a preferred option for a particular segment of the older population. The fact that some of the elders who need the additional income from this type of challenging work may also be well suited for working with disadvantaged young people is especially fortunate.

In fact, the five programs studied are at once programs for youth and programs for seniors, with both benefiting in equal measure. On the policy level, the experience of these programs supports the wisdom of expanding national service opportunities for seniors. Danzig and Szanton draw similar conclusions in their book National Service: What Would It Mean?: "Persons at or beyond the retirement age may have more to give and more reason to benefit from national service than any other age group."

Second, the activities of the five programs studied point to some alternative directions for social intervention. They show that it is possible to use unrelated, nonprofessional adults to intervene in the natural world of youth, a sphere usually considered the exclusive domain of friends and family. These programs aspire to do more than provide counseling, social support, role models or professional services; they attempt to seed genuine relationships, ones that in a significant proportion of cases take on the appearance of extended family. By using older adults from the community to fulfill these roles, they contribute to building what is essentially a self-help strategy. It is not surprising that these relationships often take on a life of their own beyond the walls and prescribed activities of the program. The elders give the young people their phone numbers, they take them out to dinner, get them jobs with their relatives, and open up social networks to the adolescents that were formerly closed to them.

A third intriguing possibility suggested by the intergenerational relationships studied is that of a distinct paradigm for youth development, an approach that goes beyond the inculcation of academic and employment skills, the proliferation of computer-assisted instruction, and the emphasis on developing competencies so characteristic of many of our efforts to prepare at-risk young

people for the world. Intensive personal relationships with adults are for the most part absent from social programs for youth, and the experience of the young people interviewed suggests that these intergenerational bonds may impart essential skills for surviving in a tumultuous world, where landing on one's feet and developing psychological and social maturity may be just as crucial to achieving long-term self-sufficiency as a firm grasp on the three R's.

These programs, by orchestrating relationships between at-risk youth and seniors, may be offering the young people a chance to acquire tools to develop future relationships with other adults. There is some evidence from other research that close developmental relationships with adults may be a common characteristic of resilient youth, youth from stressful backgrounds who succeed seemingly against all odds. Perhaps these intergenerational programs are offering participants access to resources and opportunities to develop the qualities of resilience that enable some of their peers to navigate successfully out of adverse conditions.

The programs studied offer many lessons for encouraging the development of intergenerational relationships, not the least of which is that it can be done. It is an operationally feasible goal. The models described in this report do not appear unduly complicated, are relatively inexpensive to institute, and may be applicable in a wide variety of settings and systems. Intergenerational programming is a notion with a potent set of natural advantages, and one that may make for appealing policy as well. Further programmatic and research exploration appear fully justified.

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Partners in Growth: Elder Mentors and At-Risk Youth Executive Summary

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