

HOW YOUNG WOMEN EX-OFFENDERS ARE TRANSFORMING THEMSELVES

Center for Young Women's Development
San Francisco, CA

"Some come in and all they do is cry."

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SUMMARY: The Center for Young Women's Development employs **young women just out of juvenile detention**. The women learn about the roots of the social and political factors that have shaped them and their communities. They **counsel** others and engage in **community activism**, turning their pain into power. Led by Lateefah Simon and other young women, the Center incorporates the following into its approach:

- **Understand What Brought You Here:** While the Center encourages personal responsibility, it focuses on helping young women to understand the powerful forces that shape their lives.
- **Do Healing Work:** Women at the Center do work that requires self-confidence and the ability to work cooperatively with other young women, even those who may, for example, have been in rival gangs. This includes jobs such as counseling and community organizing.
- **Know We're Always There:** Simon and her colleagues have learned from experience that enabling women to come, leave and participate according to their readiness builds essential camaraderie and trust.
- **Co-opt and Cooperate:** Women at the Center brainstorm ideas for transforming the criminal justice system and create practical programmatic and policy-level solutions. While their implementation strategies at times include direct actions, such as holding rallies, they primarily aim for cooperation with others in the system,

Lateefah Simon and her colleagues describe their philosophy and accomplishments in the following case study:

TURNING PAIN INTO POWER

Center for Young Women's Development

Writer: Jonathan Walters

Co-researchers: Lateefah Simon (Award Recipient) and Bethany Godsoe

"I brought poison into my community and now I feel like I need to give back," says an ex-juvenile offender and outreach coordinator for the Center for Young Women's Development (the Center), a San Francisco-based organization that enlists young women ex-offenders in the cause of personal transformation, community healing and activism. "I do it so people who are in the same predicament as I was can see that there are people who do care, and that you can make positive change."

The young outreach coordinator, who sold crack cocaine before being sentenced to juvenile detention and drug counseling, is part of an experiment in fundamental personal and social transformation: putting young female ex-offenders to work helping other young women in trouble, while also doing some basic consciousness-raising about the social circumstances that shaped—and continue to shape—their lives.

Center co-director Lateefah Simon sees the Center's mission as the sharp edge of a wedge in a new way of dealing with young offenders. "We're part of a new national vision of restorative community alternatives for poor, young people involved in the justice system," says Simon. It is a vision, says Simon, in stark contrast to current policy and practice that is based on "reactive punishment" that results in "throwing away hundreds of thousands of young people that our nation feels are without the possibility of redemption."

Many would argue that asking disenfranchised young women to heal themselves and then to also work to heal their communities as leaders of personal and social change is asking a lot of anyone, never mind asking it of troubled young adults from dysfunctional backgrounds. But as the Center continues its work, their approach—and the results they're achieving—are starting to draw attention, both in San Francisco and nationwide. "There are many juvenile justice programs and there are many social justice programs," says a program director at the Criminal Justice Council in San Francisco. "There are very complex programs that are very well funded. But none is as theoretically sound as this one."

Painting the bigger picture

The key, says the Center's 23 year old co-director is to help young women to accept their part in the problems they've had, on the one hand, but also to help them understand the powerful forces that shaped their lives and offer them the chance to blunt some of those forces. "We definitely encourage the individual to take responsibility for their actions," she says. "But if you do not understand all the different factors that contributed to your doing what you did, then you only look at yourself as the problem."

And that's a self-defeating proposition, say Center staff. The key is for young women to learn as much as possible about the environment in which they grew up, how that shaped their lives, and then to think about what they can do to change that bigger picture. Looking at those broader

issues helps young offenders not only work on inner transformation, say Center staff, but it helps them also to focus their energy in a positive new direction.

"So how did you change?" I think I've been asked that question a million times," says an ex-juvenile offender and program director with the Center, "I think I was in a place where I was just angry. But then having a place where I could come and learn and do something about it helped me channel that anger. And the more I learned, the more I wanted to change."

"What can we do to make it better?"

As someone who has grown to understand the complex interplay of personal responsibility versus the struggles of young people in hazardous and chaotic environments, the young program director understands the answer is not simple. "You see our families keep getting pushed out of their homes because of high rents. You see our neighborhoods disappearing. You see people struggling for things as simple as housing or money to pay for your son's day care or groceries. So you take it to the next level: 'Yeah, some of us don't have housing or day care or money to buy groceries, but why is that and what can we do to make it better?'"

For a young woman who only a few years earlier was struggling just to break free of the criminal justice system, these are big questions. In asking them, young adults like the Center's staff bring a powerful street-level view and commitment to solving such problems because they have lived those problems. "These girls have something that other folks will never have," says Simon. "They have lived the experience of how bad it really is. And you can work with those people on developing the intellectual, political analysis. Who is going to be a more fierce advocate for change than somebody who knows what it's like to be selling crack at 2 in the morning to pay for a hotel room in which to live?"

Putting young women to work, working together

The fundamental strategy of the Center is to offer young women just out of juvenile detention the opportunity to work at a decent wage at a job aimed at healing--inner, community and societal healing. The work can range from counseling other young women, to community organizing, public speaking to leafleting. That kind of work involves two things that are very unfamiliar to young, street-toughened women: self-confidence and the ability to work cooperatively with other young women.

"A lot of the people when we first interview them for jobs, they can't even hold their head up," says the Center's Associate Director. "They can't look you in the eye, not once in an hour-long interview. Some come in and all they do is cry. For their whole lives the only people who've said they've loved them are their abusive parents or maybe their pimp. And here you have other females of your age who on the street would have been asking you to fight, who wouldn't care about you at all who are now saying, 'You look cute today. Your hair is really pretty.' Or they support you when you're crying."

"We're not going to give up on them"

Center staff emphasize that their approach is no quick fix. Not everyone is ready for the program the first time they sign on, nor do transformations occur overnight. "One of the issues we struggle with is how to retain someone who doesn't want to be here," says Simon. "When out on the street is more attractive than our \$10 an hour. When they're locked into an abusive relationship on the outside or when their mother needs money or someone to take care of the kids. Or they come here and they have an attitude and they're cussing everyone out. That's hard."

Center staff says naturally there are limits to what they'll put up with when it comes to how staff behaves, but the fundamental ethic is to never give up on someone. "I left and came back," says the Associate Director of the Center. "And I thought, 'Hey, the Center is still here for me. They're still coming to my court dates. I am going to be okay. I see a new group now. It took me some time, it took me leaving and coming back to know this work is important.'"

The power of time can't be overstated, agrees one of the Center's senior staff, nor can the power of the camaraderie and trust that results from the Center's willingness to keep trying. "You look at most programs that run for nine months or a year and that's not enough. I know for me it took five years, really. Sometimes leaving for two and then coming back for one. But then you say, 'I'm ready now.' And people know they can do that, that we have each others' backs."

Ideas from the heart

Helping reinforce the camaraderie is the Center's primary approach to the work it does and how it gets it done. Programs aren't developed on high and handed down; they're the result of roundtable brainstorming where nobody's idea is ever discounted. "Everyone looks at your ideas as important," says the Center's Associate Director. Adds another staff member, "If we feel like there is a need to do something and we have the capacity, then we do it, even though we may be short staffed and have no money." And given their special knowledge of the systems they're working to fix, the Center's young employees have proved especially adept at coming up with good ideas that work.

For example, the Center undertook a large-scale book collection drive in response to first-hand knowledge of the poor and limited quality of books available to women in detention. But their approach was slightly different than what one might expect. Rather than demand that officials beef up the book selection, the Center organized its own book drive, collecting thousands of volumes that officials found they simply could not refuse when presented. "It was great," says the Center's co-director. "And the Center gave us the space to figure that out."

Co-opt and cooperate

The book drive was symbolic of a style of activism that has come to serve the center well. While it can be confrontational - the Center has organized downtown rallies and demonstrations - frequently the Center's approach is based on co-opting and cooperation. "I remember I got a letter from the center asking for a meeting about the good things that the probation office was doing with girls," says a program director at the Criminal Justice Council in San Francisco. "I mean, I've never gotten a message like that in my life. That's not the way most community groups approach us when they want to talk about probation. The Center actually gave an award to the Chief Probation Officer."

It's a strategy that has won the Center a reputation as being serious about change and serious about wanting to be partners in and contributors to change. That manifests itself in seemingly small programs like the book drive, but also some major initiatives. The Center is working with the juvenile justice department on some basic policies, like unshackling women when their kids come to visit. The Center recently drafted a sweeping set of policies and training recommendations aimed at better treatment for gay, bisexual and transgender juveniles who frequently find themselves under attack by other juveniles and by staff alike. "What our girls are doing around that is really beautiful," says Simon. "They're not outside the Probation Commission chanting, they're working with them on developing this policy. They can say, 'Look, we developed this policy, and we have seven organizations that will do the training for the department for free.'" It's the sort of offer that is very hard for officials to refuse, says Simon, especially from a group that's handing out awards to city probation officials.

After "no justice, no peace," then what?

"It's a policy grounded in common sense and an interest in winning real change," says Simon. Making a lot of noise is all well and good, but what she wants to see is a program where young women can come together, work together and achieve real results. "You can chant 'No justice, no peace,' but then what? We are trying to teach women another way." Rather than angry confrontation and long lists of demands, the Center has decided on a more focused, results-oriented approach: to help in the transformation of young women offenders into activists who can join society and infuse it with an ethic that is focused on personal and systemic community change.

"They aren't just coming over to the juvenile lockup to get people out of jail," says a close collaborator with the Center and member of the Center for Ethics and Popular Education in San Francisco. "They're looking at the more complex problems of why is there so much hurt and pain among young women and what they can do about it."

"We are at that cross section," says Simon. "Of not just getting people off the streets and into a program, but getting them into a program where, one, they have to sit and work with each other, across from each other even if they were in rival gangs; and two, where they have to deepen their understanding of the political and social forces that have shaped their lives and then work toward something together, to see some kind of victory."

Those who work in and with the Center understand that the path they have chosen is steep and slow but one that offers real promise for basic change. "They're not trying to save everyone," says a Center's collaborator. "They're trying to make change by taking young women and turning them into young leaders and activists." And slowly but surely, say those who are watching the Center's progress, what they are doing is proving to be a powerful antidote for damaged lives and poisoned communities.

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