

The Berkshire Experience

A Summary of Lessons Learned

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Transition out of the home into the adult world is never simple for adolescents. Even more complicated is the transition from foster care to independence. Young people in the foster care system have too often been bounced around from one environment to another. They have not had the “luxury” of stability in their formative years. In addition, they are often lacking the resources – both financial and emotional – to ease into adulthood smoothly.

In New York State, Berkshire Farm Center and Services for Youth had a century-long history of working with foster youth and their families. In 1999, the agency developed a new program, the Educational/Vocational Academy, for young men who were aging out of foster care. This Academy was to focus intensively on assisting these young men transition successfully to independence.

Berkshire found an innovative and willing partner in the Andrus Family Fund (AFF), a new foundation just beginning to award grants. AFF had selected transition from foster care to independence as one of its two program areas, and chose Berkshire as one of its first grantees. Throughout the duration of the grant, AFF provided not only funding but also valuable ideas to support the development of the Academy. This collaboration, known as the Andrus Enrichment Project, proved transformational for all involved.

Many changes occurred during Andrus Enrichment Project, both in the lives of the young men at the Academy and in the program itself. Over the course of two years, young men entered the program, graduated from the program, finished high school, started college, embarked on careers, and formed meaningful relationships. They made many mistakes, yet they also achieved many successes.

The Academy also moved forward, offering enhanced support in the critical areas of education, career exploration, mentoring, and psychosocial development. New staff members were hired and roles and responsibilities evolved. In response to a growing need, two other programs at Berkshire were designated to support youth transitioning to independence. The Andrus Enrichment Project, which started with nine young men at the Academy, was ultimately expanded and now reaches forty-five youth at Berkshire.

An integral part of the Andrus Enrichment Project was William Bridges' Transition Model¹. Bridges differentiates between external change – such as starting a new job or moving into a new house – and transition, a more gradual, internal and often chaotic process that people go through to cope with change. Meaningful and sustained change requires the successful negotiation of three transition phases according to Bridges: the Ending, the Neutral Zone, and the New Beginning (see Appendix A for more details on Bridges' Transition Model).

Berkshire chose to implement Bridges' ideas to improve the chances of personal and organizational growth. Bridges taught Berkshire that in order to become independent, youth have to undergo not just changes but internal transformations. During the Andrus Enrichment Project, the young men at the Academy came to terms with pasts filled with abuse, neglect, and loss. They explored core values. They learned through trial and error. Over time, they developed the internal, intangible qualities they would need to succeed as adults – initiative, confidence, determination, and empathy. Bridges' model provided a wonderful lens through which they could view and understand their experiences and use that understanding to ease their transition to independence.

Like the young men, the staff members at Berkshire not only changed, they moved consciously through transition. During the Andrus Enrichment Project, a new paradigm emerged at the Academy and within the agency. As the young men matured, staff members were forced to find new ways of relating to and interacting with them. As the young men became independent, the staff members had to let go and allow them to make their own decisions. The Bridges' model provided a common language that increased self-awareness as well as improved communication. As youth and staff members moved through transitions together, Bridges' model fostered a common understanding.

To concretize the transitions work, AFF invited into the project Jay Rothman, president of the ARIA Group, which specializes in strategic visioning and conflict resolution. Rothman's innovative Action Evaluation process was used to help the three stakeholder groups at Berkshire – youth, staff members, and AFF staff – articulate their goals for the program. These goals included career development, preparation for post-secondary education, mentoring, counseling to help the youth come to terms with past trauma, and ongoing support after the youth left the program. The stakeholders split into "action teams," all of which included both staff and young men, to develop operational plans for each goal (See Appendix B for more information on the Action Evaluation process).

Reflective practice, a key element of Action Evaluation, was employed to monitor progress along the way. Reflective practice allowed stakeholders to think about and discuss what was happening in the project. By keeping in mind their goals and values, as well as Bridges' model, they were able to continuously adjust their course of action.

As an agency that is always learning, Berkshire embraces a firm belief in the potential of all youth to succeed and a fierce determination to help them realize their potential. The Transition Model and Action Evaluation gave Berkshire the tools to consciously and continuously evolve.

¹ Williams Bridges, *The Way of Transition: Embracing Life's Most Difficult Moments* (Perseus Publishing, 2001). Williams Bridges and Associates: www.wmbridges.com

The Andrus Enrichment Project led to the development of the Berkshire Model for Successful Transitions (BMST), in effect, the integration of the Transitions Model and Action Evaluation as applied at the agency.

Although Berkshire is a unique institution, and both Action Evaluation and the Transition Model must be adapted to specific venues, it is hoped that the following valuable lessons learned at Berkshire may help guide other agencies and organizations with similar goals and values:

- ?? Staff members must truly understand Bridges' Transitions Model before they can effectively teach it to the youth.**
- ?? As youth transition to independence, staff members must transition as well.**
- ?? Consciously negotiating smaller transitions prepares people for larger transitions.**
- ?? Reflection is a powerful tool that is essential for understanding transitions.**
- ?? Values and goals guide people through transition.**
- ?? Youth should have a voice in the development of independent living programs.**
- ?? The Ending phase of transitions for this population includes the deep clinical work of coming to terms with past trauma.**
- ?? Making mistakes is a natural part of transition, especially during the Neutral Zone.**
- ?? As the youth emerge into the New Beginning and move out on their own, they require continued support.**
- ?? When measuring success, internal characteristics must be taken into account as well as concrete life skills and tangible progress toward educational and career goals.**
- ?? Documenting transitions not only allows for the sharing of information, but also fosters continued reflection and learning.**
- ?? Those who negotiate a particular transition successfully are in a unique position to help others who are facing that transition.**

Lessons

Staff members must truly understand Bridges' Transitions Model before they can teach it effectively to the youth.

This may seem an obvious point, but in retrospect it is a very important one. Staff members read descriptions of Bridges' model and participated in training sessions. They thought they understood the framework. However, their initial efforts to teach the model to the young men

were unsuccessful. As one of the young men stated, “When you’re confused, we’re confused.” So, the staff members took a step back and really learned the model. They read Bridges’ writings and met to discuss the Transitions Model in depth. They also traveled to workshops presented directly by William Bridges. All of the staff members, from Executive Director Rose Washington to the direct-care workers at the Academy, became well versed in Bridges’ language. Washington described thinking as she learned the model, ““This is right. This is brilliant. This happens to me.’ I could see it on a personal level, and I could really see it as a tool to help us understand what these boys were going through at this critical time in their lives.”

Only after they saw the value and truly believed in the Transitions Model, did the staff become effective teachers of it. Group and individual meetings were held with the young men specifically to explain the model and to help them apply it to their own experiences. Staff members were also able to reinforce it on an ongoing basis during informal counseling sessions and conversation, using the model to help the youth understand the “transition process” and apply those lessons to the every day changes they encountered.

Although Bridges’ terminology was initially difficult for the youth at Berkshire to grasp, it was certainly not above their heads. While these young people resisted what they saw as theory, staff members did not give in to this resistance. They gently pushed the youth, believing that they would eventually benefit from and appreciate the model. As time passed, the youth embraced the model and realized that they were in fact moving through the transition phases. The model became liberating, normalizing their difficult experiences.

As youth transition to independence, staff members must transition as well.

As the young men at the Academy transitioned, the staff members at Berkshire realized that they had to transition with them. As Washington stated, “We, the staff, have to grow as the young men grow.” They had to let go of old ways of operating the program to truly foster independence in the young men. In fact, the program itself, and the agency as a whole, had to change. As everyone moved through transition together, Bridges’ model provided a light to guide the way.

The Educational/Vocational Academy functioned like a family. The young men needed the support of caring, invested staff as they transitioned out of the system. Staff members loved the young men and were committed to their safety and security. Staff members, though, had to be careful not to be too protective. As the young men began to let go of the structured support at Berkshire, staff members had to let go of them, allowing them to shape their own lives.

This was a traumatic process for many of the staff members at Berkshire. Reflecting on Bridges’ model helped them find a balance between keeping the young men safe and letting them grow up, between enforcing the rules and allowing the young men to make their own decisions. The model helped the staff members maintain focus in the chaos of this transition and normalized their anxiety.

Through continued reflection, the structure of the programs at Berkshire evolved. The Andrus Enrichment Project initially focused on one program, the Educational/Vocational Academy.

During the course of the project, two other programs at Berkshire (the Lawrence Transitional Cottage and the Transitional Apartment Program) were adapted to serve the same population, creating a continuum of services. As the young men gained skills, knowledge, experience, and maturity, they moved forward from one program to the next, earning more freedom and more responsibility. This continuum of services gave the staff members the confidence to step back and gradually allow the young men room to grow.

Consciously negotiating smaller transitions prepares people for larger transitions.

The major transition from foster care to independence is made up of smaller transitions. Using Bridges' model to understand these smaller transitions helped youth work through the larger one. In turn, successfully transitioning to independence prepared them to face future transitions.

The lives of the young men in the program had been filled with changes. Many of them had grown up in the foster-care system. They had moved through a series of placements – foster families, group homes, and residential centers. Coming to Berkshire was yet another change, as was entering the Educational/Vocational Academy. Changes, in fact, were happening all the time – including new schools, new jobs, and new relationships. Staff members guided the young men through these smaller changes using the Bridges model. This helped them understand the larger transition they were experiencing. By becoming equipped with the experience and knowledge of the model, it is hoped that the young men will be more successful in responding to change throughout their lives.

Reflection is a powerful tool that is essential for understanding transitions.

Reflection entails the self-conscious thought or discussion about action that is taking place, and contemplation on progress or lack of progress made toward a goal. During the Andrus Enrichment Project, stakeholders explored the transitions they were going through individually and as a group using reflection. Reflection lies at the heart of Action Evaluation.

Stakeholders learned to reflect gradually, on both a personal and organizational level. Initially, when something significant occurred, they became preoccupied with solving the problem and failed to step back to reflect. Staff members spoke about the ongoing challenge of balancing reflection and operational issues. At first staff dropped reflection when crisis occurred. Over time, however, the three groups began to appreciate that reflection not only complimented action but also was essential in finding the right course of action. As all participants, particularly staff, realized this, they made time to reflect, coming to understand that reflection – by providing clarity and preventing mistakes – actually saves time in the long run.

While reflection cannot be scripted, it is best accomplished when some structure and guidelines are put in place. That includes scheduling a time and a place for reflection to occur and using an experienced facilitator to guide reflection and keep the discussion on track. At regular action team meetings and larger meetings for all stakeholders, participants learned to include reflection on the agenda. Reflection was often done in the form of a check-out following progress reports. The facilitator asked participants: What do you think is going well? What could we be doing better? Questions were also posed regarding goals and values: Are we making progress on our

goals? Why or why not? Are our original goals still valid? Should we change our goals? Is our action congruent with our values?

Values and goals guide people through transition.

One of the premises of Action Evaluation is that focusing on values and goals fosters success. During transition, values and goals must be constantly revisited. At the beginning of the Andrus Enrichment Project, the stakeholders explored their values and came up with a list of goals for the Educational/Vocational Academy. Action teams, consisting of both staff and youth, worked toward the implementation of the goals.

Stakeholders kept their goals and values in mind as they moved forward asking, through regular reflection, whether their actions were congruent with these goals and values. In this way, constant adjustments were made to stay on course. Reflection also enabled stakeholders to question their goals and, in some cases, to dramatically revise them. Reflection allowed action teams to engage in a process of continuous learning. The action team that focused on mentoring, for example, initially envisioned a program similar to Big Brothers/Big Sisters but for older youth. The young men on the action team were resistant to this idea. They did not want mentors to be imposed upon them. Noting that the goal of the Andrus Enrichment Project was to build independence, they felt that the team should focus on helping them find their own mentors as well as strengthen the relationships they had already developed. Through reflection, the action team developed a new plan for promoting mentoring, keeping in mind their overarching goals and values. The plan involved teaching the young men how to recognize potential mentors and build relationships with them. It also called for the young men to be mentors themselves, serving as role models for younger residents at Berkshire.

Youth should have a voice in the development of independent living programs.

Action Evaluation emphasized the participation of all stakeholders, especially the young men at the Academy. As they took control of their own lives, they also had to take some ownership of the program. Participating in the development of the program went hand in hand with letting go of their dependence on others.

Through participation, the young men were empowered to change their environment. They were involved in both setting goals for the Andrus Enrichment Project and working toward achieving those goals. From the beginning, they articulated passionately their suggestions for how the program could best meet their needs. Staff members came to realize that the perspective of the young men was essential to the development of the program. About mid-way through the course of the Andrus Enrichment Process, for example, the young men eloquently asked for more freedom in the program during a stakeholders meeting. One of them stated, “the rules keep you from being independent.” That day, the stakeholders initiated a new policy for the program. If the young men proved that they were responsible and honest, if they took initiative and worked hard toward their goals, they could apply to become “Senior Residents.” Senior Residents would be allowed more freedom of movement, they could have a vehicle and staff members would step back and let the Senior Residents monitor themselves. Of course, additional responsibilities

came with those freedoms. Senior Residents would be expected to be leaders in the program, advising the other young men and running house meetings to address concerns.

Initially, the young men were expected to participate as “equal partners” at all levels of the Andrus Enrichment Project. The staff members soon realized, however, that they had to find a balance between pushing the young men to participate and letting them find their voices. To learn, the young men needed to move beyond their comfort levels. But if they were pushed too far, they shut down and stopped participating. Staff members quickly realized that clear expectations needed to be set.

The Ending phase of transitions for this population includes the deep clinical work of coming to terms with past trauma.

At the beginning of the Andrus Enrichment Project, some of the young men expressed their desire to explore how past trauma would impact their futures. They wanted to break the cycle into which their families had fallen. They wanted to learn to be better fathers than their own fathers had been. In other words, the young men understood that they needed to complete an ending before they could move forward.

The importance of the Ending phase cannot be emphasized enough. The young men transitioning to independence had been subject to a great deal of abuse, neglect, and loss in their lives. Consequently, they exhibited negative emotions, behaviors, and attitudes deeply rooted in these early experiences. They had never completed the grieving process for the many losses they had experienced in their short lives.

One of the action teams specifically addressed the psychological journey the young men needed to make to truly achieve a healthy sense of independence. Individual counseling and group therapy were necessary for them to come to term with their pasts and develop a positive sense of self. A new clinical staff member was hired to focus on these tasks. All staff members, though, had to be aware of and assist with the Endings the young men were working through. A therapeutic environment was necessary for them to confront these issues safely.

Making mistakes is a natural part of transition, especially during the Neutral Zone.

Transitions are not easy. Mistakes must be expected during the chaos of the Neutral Zone. Yet mistakes are, in fact, tremendous opportunities for growth. Bridges’ model helped both staff members and young men learn from their mistakes.

Staff members came to understand that although they could not prevent the young men from making mistakes, they could help them learn from their mistakes and move forward. Staff members used the Transition Model to process specific incidents with the young men. Instead of just imposing consequences and taking away freedom, they encouraged the young men to see their mistakes in the context of their values and goals. In this way, the youth were held to their own high standards and learned to accept responsibility for their actions.

While staff members understood the value of mistakes, there were certain behaviors they could not tolerate. A balance had to be found between allowing the young men to make mistakes and preparing them for a world in which those mistakes could have dire consequences. Staff struggled at times with decisions to move young men out of the program because of their behavior. Serious or repeated mistakes indicated that a youth was not appropriate for the program. However, those who made serious or repeated mistakes were also those who needed support the most. Incorporating two other programs at Berkshire into a continuum of services allowed staff to temporarily move young men a step backward if necessary, to a safer, more structured environment.

Staff members, of course, made their own mistakes as they worked with the young men and developed the programs. Reflecting on those mistakes in light of the Transition Model helped them learn from them and move forward. Staff members modeled for the youth, showing them that everyone struggles at times.

You have to acknowledge the chaos of the neutral zone to break through. Bridges' model tells us that it is OK to be confused. When we fail to acknowledge this, we constantly revert back to what we knew or jump ahead. This is true for young men, staff members, and program... It's about us as well as them.

Rose Washington

As the youth emerge into the New Beginning and move out on their own, they require continued support.

After making tremendous progress and moving through the phases of transition, the young men at Berkshire often resisted the final phase – the New Beginning. Although this New Beginning is filled with excitement and hope, it is also frightening because it brings them closer to leaving Berkshire. This New Beginning, then, leads to a major change in their lives. This change would spark a whole new cycle of transition – another Ending, Neutral Zone, and New Beginning.

For some of the young men, fear of leaving the program caused them to sabotage themselves. Uncharacteristically, they lost jobs, failed classes, or made other mistakes that prevented them from becoming independent. When this occurred, staff members reflected together and with the youth on the situation in light of Bridges' model. Staff members helped them understand and process their fears without letting them run from those fears. The Transition Model normalized the young men's anxiety.

Staff members and the young men worked together to systematically address how to enter into the New Beginning with more confidence. They decided that certain services should remain available to the young men as they moved out – continued mentoring, assistance finding employment, help applying to schools. In certain situations, young men would be allowed to return to Berkshire, like any family, and have a temporary place to stay after leaving and encountering difficulty. It was also agreed that the young men would need to do more extensive planning in advance to set up housing, employment, and education. Staff members implemented this idea, guiding the young men as they developed concrete plans for transitioning to independence. Having a picture of the New Beginning helped assuage the young men's fears.

When measuring success, internal characteristics must be taken into account as well as concrete life skills and tangible progress toward educational and career goals.

As the young men moved through transition, they took advantage of the new opportunities the Educational/Vocational Academy offered (opportunities they had a role in creating). They had learned concrete life skills – managing money, budgeting, maintaining their apartments, cooking meals, finding and keeping employment. They also achieved educational and career goals. Although degrees and resumes are important, transitioning to independence also requires an internal transformation. Based on the input of all stakeholders, the Research Department at Berkshire devised a list of criteria that indicated progress toward independence, including not only increased basic academic and computer skills, but also the following psychosocial skills:

- ? Increased capacity to make one's own decisions
- ? Increased capacity to ask for help, when help is needed
- ? Increased capacity to use available resources
- ? Increased capacity to spend time in the community without supervision
- ? Increased sense of confidence about trying new things
- ? Developed capacity to differentiate in a healthy way (capacity to be autonomous yet connected)
- ? Increased self-esteem
- ? Increased locus of control or internal motivation
- ? Increased capacity to explore options, set goals, and move toward accomplishing those goals
- ? Increased social skills
- ? Increased critical thinking skills; capacity to explore all possible outcomes before acting
- ? Increased empathy; capacity to take the perspective of others
- ? Increased capacity to introspect and reflect

Since this list was developed at the end of the Andrus Enrichment Project, there was no baseline data for quantitative assessment of gains. Instead the criteria were explored through interviews with five of the young men. (See Appendix C for the perspectives of the young men.) In the future, gains could be assessed using standardized instruments that measure each outcome.

Documenting transitions not only allows for the sharing of information but also fosters continued reflection and learning.

Efforts were made to document carefully the transitions made by the young men, the Educational/Vocational Academy, and the agency itself. These efforts included maintaining an online discussion forum, audiotaping stakeholders meetings, and compiling written records. In addition, program manuals and policies were revised to incorporate the changes made during the course of the Andrus Enrichment Project. At the end of the project, a comprehensive Summative Report, as well as this Summary of Lessons Learned, was written. These accounts were themselves part of the learning process. The full impact of the Andrus Enrichment Project, as well as the transitions that it facilitated, was best understood while looking back over the life of

the project. As project participants put together these documents and reflected on them, they were also able to look forward and plan for the future.

Those who successfully negotiate a particular transition are in a unique position to help others who are facing that transition.

As the young men successfully moved through transitions, they developed a desire to give back, which is a true indicator of maturity. They demonstrated this desire by formally and informally mentoring other youth at Berkshire who were experiencing similar transitions. They used their knowledge to guide these other youth, helping them avoid some of the mistakes they themselves had made.

Berkshire also wants to give back to the field of foster care and to share what was learned. All project participants hope that the experiences they have had and the lessons they have learned will help others working with young people transitioning to independence and that the programs they have created at Berkshire will serve as models for other agencies.

The Andrus Family Fund, which, like Berkshire, is always learning and growing, has created a community of current and past grantees to promote this sharing of information. Berkshire looks forward to being an active member of this community.

Appendix A:

WILLIAMS BRIDGES' TRANSITION MODEL

The Andrus Family Fund not only provided funding for Berkshire, but also provided valuable ideas to assist in the development of the Educational/Vocational Academy. Andrus guided Berkshire in the implementation of the Transition Model of William Bridges, a widely recognized expert on transitions who works with both individuals and organizations. The young men, transitioning from foster-care to independence, greatly benefited from his model, as did the staff members.

Bridges differentiates between change and transition. Change is an event - graduating from high school, moving into a new house, switching jobs, getting married, losing a loved one – that usually happens quickly. Transition, on the other hand, is an internal gradual process that people go through to cope with the change and come to terms with the new situation. Without transition, change generally does not have lasting growth potential. The situation may be different, but that person remains the same. Change without transition is superficial. Change accompanied by transition, however, can be transformational.

According to Bridges, transition is a process characterized by three phases: the Ending, the Neutral Zone, and the New Beginning. Counter-intuitively, the Ending comes first. This phase involves relinquishing the old way of doing things, letting go of who you used to be. The Ending usually follows an event (a change) that makes how things were no longer possible. The next stage, the Neutral Zone, is a chaotic, in-between time that is full of doubt. Although this phase can be difficult and confusing, it is full of possibility and presents opportunities for creativity and growth. The final stage, the New Beginning, occurs when a new way of doing things, a new way of life, emerges at last.

Bridges' model was a tool to help the young men make a successful transition to independence. The problem that Rose Washington identified and that drove her to create the Educational/Vocational Academy was one of transition. Young people were facing a huge change (leaving the foster-care system), but they were not being provided with an opportunity to make a transition. The change, therefore, did not work. The young people held on to their old ways, which did not lead to success.

As the Bridges' model was taught to the young men, they were shown how they were going through the stages in their own lives. The model was a wonderful lens through which they could view their experiences. Being aware of the stages helped them negotiate their transitions to independence.

The Transitions Model was applied much more widely at Berkshire than originally intended. As staff members and the young men truly grasped Bridges' ideas, they gradually became ingrained throughout the agency.

Appendix B:

ACTION EVALUATION

Action Evaluation (AE) is an innovative method that uses social and computer technology to define, promote, and assess success in complex social interventions. It evolved out of Jay Rothman's work as a theorist and intervener in international and ethnic identity-based conflicts. Since the early 1990s, Action Evaluation has assisted thousands of participants, funders, and facilitators in nearly 100 conflict-resolution and community-reconciliation initiatives. As a collaborative visioning exercise, Action Evaluation gathers and organizes input from all the stakeholders in a three-step process:

Step 1: Individual members of each involved stakeholder group are asked:

What are your goals?

Why do you care deeply (or passionately) about these goals?

How could they best be accomplished?

This information provides a baseline showing the range of goals and objectives within all components of the organization.

Step 2: After careful analysis of participant responses, the shared, unique, and contrasting goals are presented back to each stakeholding group (e.g. agency staff, youth, foundation staff). Participants engage in a value discussion regarding the "why" portions of their data. This process fosters a deep sense of common purpose and commitment, which helps the group move on to dialogue over the content of their goals. The dialogue provides an opportunity for points of similarity and difference to be communicated and understood, resulting in a consensus platform of shared goals - first within and then among stakeholder groups - which then guides the entire project.

Step 3: Action Evaluation continues throughout the project to help participants articulate evolving criteria for success. As action plan implementation occurs, continuous learning is the ultimate tool: systematic reflection on values and goals guides the refinement of actions and projected benefits to make success self-fulfilling.

At Berkshire, having everyone directly involved in the Academy collaboratively define goals, articulate core values, and brainstorm action strategies assisted the whole project in being very dynamic and focused. Using Action Evaluation, the young men, Berkshire staff and the AFF staff were asked to talk, within their own groups, about their goals for the project and why they cared deeply about the Transition to Independence program. By asking Berkshire staff, young men and the foundation to collectively articulate their goals, motivations and ideas for action, Action Evaluation helped the resultant project action teams - composed of both staff and young men - engage in a successful feedback loop of systematic reflection and action. These teams developed operational plans that were then implemented over the next two years.

APPENDIX C:

THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE YOUNG MEN

Understanding the process and outcomes of the Enrichment Transition Program, and the future directions for the Educational Vocational Academy would not be complete without the input of the young men who participated in the program. To this end semi-structured interviews were conducted with five participants, focusing on how the program contributed to their growth vis-à-vis objectives and outcomes generated across action teams. Each young man was interviewed for two hours on audiotape; the taped interviews were then transcribed and analyzed.

The ages of the young men interviewed range from 18 to 22. Three of the young men are African American, one is European American, and one is Asian American. Four were involved in the program from the very beginning of the collaboration between Berkshire and the Andrus Family Fund and one was involved for 18 months.

REFLECTION ON BEGINNING

Before focusing on the new objectives formed by the action teams, the young men were first asked to reflect on their initial involvement in the program. Although there were mixed perceptions of initial involvement in the project regarding mandatory vs. voluntary participation, all the young men expressed that participation became part of their lives. One young man stated,

“It wasn’t voluntary in the beginning. It was more like we had to. Then, it became part of us.”

All the young men noted that the program had contributed to their growth in a variety of ways. Some young men addressed not only their own growth but also the changes that had taken place within the program.

“It made them look at the Educational Vocational Academy differently, look at the mistakes that were made, and the changes and progress that needed to happen.”

Others addressed personal benefits they received as a result of their involvement such as: the opportunity to continue their education, the opportunity to network, getting an internship and jobs, acquiring laptops to develop their computer skills, and off-grounds trips to explore professional opportunities.

The young men spoke also about the difficult parts of the program. Although the process was described as difficult and painful, all the young men expressed that they had grown, in some way, because of it. All commented that they had difficulties participating in the large groups in which all stakeholders were present, but enjoyed their participation in the smaller groups.

“The process was sort of painful. At certain times, some people wouldn’t say anything, and so the pressure kinda got put on me to speak for the rest of the people in the house. It sort of taught me to know public speaking.”

All the young men commented that, initially in the larger groups, adult stakeholders used language that was difficult to understand, thus creating for them a sense of anxiety and inadequacy. Yet, all of them commented also that this “negative” situation allowed them to find their voices.

“When they started talking those big words, we didn’t understand them, so we kept our mouths shut. After a while, we spoke up and after that it was alright because they started to talk in our terms.”

All commented that the program had either met or exceeded their expectations,

“In the beginning, I thought it was worthless. It was just talk. Then, it was more like you wanted to go and participate because you knew things were actually going to happen. We were making progress.”

“We never knew what was going on, now we get to give our input. We got our word across and everybody listened.”

REFLECTION ON WHO YOU’VE BECOME

Each young man was asked to reflect on his self-perception over the two years leading up to the time of the interview and what had changed. All the young men reflected on the substantial growth that had occurred as a result of living in the enriching Educational Vocational environment during the past several years.

“I was an angry little kid, always getting in trouble. Someone knew that if they put me in the right surroundings that I would succeed. That’s what happened. People believing in me and me believing in myself.”

“The Andrus people meeting with us. They didn’t have to meet with us kids, showed us that we have a say so in some things, that we has voice.”

“Reflecting helped. Then you could see the progress you made, the mistakes you made, and what you have to work on.”

PREPARATION FOR LIVING AS AN INDEPENDENT ADULT

The young men were asked to talk about how close they were to feeling like they were living independently as adults. Only one of the five felt prepared to leave the program and live on his own. This young man believed that the program had prepared him to live independently but still expressed a need to learn money management skills. He also talked at length about the need for a structured plan.

“If you’re going to get them into the community, you need to help them get out, not just wait for things to end when no one knows what to do.”

The four young men who did not feel ready to leave expressed a need to finish their post-secondary education and to acquire skills in money management, getting a job, and basic “survival.” These “survival” skills included how to obtain electric company service, how to fix a leaky faucet, how to find housing, and how to get telephone service.

Although apprehensive, all the young men were excited about the transition from Berkshire to living fully independent adult lives. That the program had provided the young men the opportunity for dreaming is evident in the long-term career goals they set for themselves. They all said they knew what they wanted to pursue and were able to articulate the steps they needed to take to reach their goals. Several talked about their dreams of attending a particular educational institution. One, for example, wanted to pursue a career in law, and several discovered a talent for computer technology.

SELF-ESTEEM AND CONFIDENCE ABOUT TRYING NEW THINGS

All of the young men reported that participating in the program had impacted their self-esteem and their willingness to try new things and engage new opportunities. Even the most difficult part of the process seemed to provide growth opportunities and an increase in their sense of self-esteem.

“Yeah, it affected my attitude. I mean a lot of people just get what people hand them down, you get no say in it. You have a say; you got to speak up. I guess I feel important in a way.”

The young men commented also about aspects of the program that did not help increase their self-esteem, such as staffs’ reactions to problems.

“When I’m in trouble, I get yelled at and it doesn’t make me feel so good. Just don’t treat me like a kid anymore because I’ll start acting like one”

Another young man described himself as “confident, but not too confident”.

“Like I have confidence to go and do a job and try certain things, and be good at it. Social confidence, I don’t necessarily have that.”

INTERNAL LOCUS OF CONTROL

The young men were asked about their ability to control and take responsibility for their own behaviors, and what helped them learn that. All of the young men felt that they were at a good place in terms of controlling and taking responsibility for their own behaviors. All talked about the capacity to admit and work on their mistakes, and accept the consequences of mistakes. The reasons for doing so and how they learned to take responsibility for their behaviors varied widely, however. One young man commented that he was able to control his behaviors because he had been taught to follow the rules and rarely broke them.

“I didn’t want to say I’m institutionalized, but I sorta am.”

Another felt that he learned to control and take responsibility for his behaviors through his participation in therapy and groups offered at Berkshire. Another believed that because people trusted him, he grew in trustworthiness. One young man reported that it never felt good to have to own up or confess to something, but found himself doing so because it resulted in people perceiving him as “mature” and “stepping-up.”

Another resident believed that he conducted himself properly and respectfully because he had a responsibility to others of his group. His behaviors gave a social message not only about himself, but also about all others of his group. This he said he learned from his parents.

DECISION-MAKING SKILLS

All of the young men believed that their decision-making skills were fairly well developed, despite stressful early home environments. Each talked about the point at which they came to trust in their own decisions. Most believe that these skills developed over time with the help of others and various experiences.

“I knew I was making good decision when I started trusting other people to help me. I saw good things happen.”

The young men expressed that their involvement in the program helped foster trust in them by others because they were encouraged to share their opinions honestly.

“They told us to be open about everything. Come out, and there would be no problems.”

“We knew we wouldn’t get in trouble speaking our opinions”

Another young man felt that making good decisions was stressed in his home while growing up.

ASKING FOR HELP AND MAKING USE OF THE PROGRAM’S RESOURCES

Most of the five young men reported that they were capable of asking for help when they needed it and using the resources available to them, though they agreed that this was not something that came naturally to them. One young man felt he learned to ask for help after his involvement in the program.

“I think when I was younger I was scared to ask for help, but right now I know that. I guess I noticed that they were giving me a lot of help here, so then that’s when I started.”

One young man said that he could ask for help only if he had put forth his best effort first. He questioned whether a person could truly be independent and still ask for help and wondered if using the program’s resources was simply not a nice word for “freeloading”.

Another young man said that he didn't generally ask for help, but recently had a positive experience when he did so. He was struggling to make sense of what asking for help says about him.

“I just don't like asking for help from anyone.”

This same young man also felt that he had not made use of all of the resources available to him at Berkshire. When asked how the program might help him with that, he responded,

“Just remind me that you're helping me.”

Of the four young men who felt that they had made use of the resources, two reflected that if they knew then what they know now, they would have made better use of the resources.

SETTING GOALS AND MOVING TOWARD ACCOMPLISHING THEM

All of the young men talked about their goals and dreams, and all wanted to finish school and work in their chosen fields. However, the hardest part was not setting goals but taking the necessary steps to accomplish those goals.

“I guess anyone can set a goal. The hard part is trying to stick to it or accomplish it.”

They were able to talk about what they had already done and what they needed to do to achieve their goals: applying to the post-secondary institutions of their choice, requesting letters of recommendation, taking the necessary entrance exams, studying and practicing, and passing exams. When asked what would help teach people how to follow through, one young man responded that the right amount of pressure might help.

“It's sorta like a little kick in the butt to straighten up.”

EMPATHY

All of the young men reported getting along well with their peers and staff members and valued the qualities of those around them, including: genuineness, compassion, caring and trust. For three of the young men the key to good relationships and friendships was non-judgmental respect.

Two of the young men believed that they were not very skilled at taking the perspective of the others. However, all were able to give examples of a time in which they had been able to empathize. The three young men who believed that they were good at taking the perspective of others said that they had learned to do so from either a therapeutic relationship, or through personal experiences in which others had mistreated them. All agreed that having the capacity to take the perspective of others would be a good thing.

ACADEMIC AND COMPUTER SKILLS

Academically, the young men reported doing well, and all believed that they needed to continue to pursue a college degree. All the young men were enrolled at some point in college, and some acquired certificates in the areas of computer technology and film. Nearly all talked about a difficult transition from high school to college from which some recovered immediately and stayed in school while others returned to school after a period of time. All of the young men talked about their college and other post-high school educational experiences as having given them a sense of self-esteem that they had not felt when still in high school, and talked with ambition about their future careers.

The young men rated their computer skills from “excellent” to “good,” despite never having worked on a computer prior to owning the laptop provided by the program. Having access to computers allowed the young men to find their talents and also changed their attitudes in a way that can better prepare them for their futures.

“When I got the laptop I found out I was really good with it. I knew I was good with typing, but I didn’t know I was really good with the computers.”

“Before Andrus gave me my laptop, they were boring, for nerds. I started messing with it, and I started liking it.”

LEAVING BERKSHIRE AND DIFFERENTIATING IN A HEALTHY WAY

All of the young men communicated that it would be a major transition to leave Berkshire. They imagined the experience as both happy and frightening; some likened the transition to that of leaving home and family.

“I think it will be like very stressful, I don’t know how to picture it. Well, I’m excited, but then you know really, I’m worried. I’m scared to leave because I’m scared I won’t be able to support myself.”

“I’m probably going to be nervous because it’s something new, but I’ll adapt to it, survive. Can’t stay home forever.”

“I don’t know how I’m going to handle it. Tough about leaving, It could be the fact that we’re so comfortable here, or it can be the daily routine, it can be the environment, the people.”

One young man communicated his concern that Berkshire did not have positive experiences of “sending someone on their way.” However, he was hopeful that Berkshire could learn how to do it right.

“I’m sure it’s going to be tough, but I want to do it in the right way. I don’t want to do it the way other kids did before. I think the program’s going to have a problem doing it the right way because we’ve never done it like that.”

When asked about whether they could leave and still remain connected, all of the young men responded that it was their intention not to cut their ties from Berkshire.

“Keep in touch with everybody, I mean, you know people here have been my family.”

INTROSPECTION AND REFLECTION

During every interview it was clear that the young men were very insightful and, in varying degrees, had the capacity to introspect and reflect. They knew who they were and who they wanted to become. They were honest about their past and present strengths and weaknesses. Responses indicated that not all the young men were fully comfortable talking about reflection; some saw reflection as a forced process about which they did not have a clear meaning. And there was a sense that reflecting was viewed as somehow threatening or perhaps placed some residents in the uncomfortable place of the neutral zone. Others communicated that being asked to reflect, although painful at times, was helpful, a gift.

“Reflection made me think about all the things I accomplished, and things from the past, where you’re going next, what you succeeded at and didn’t.”

REFLECTION ON LESSONS LEARNED

During the interview process, there was no doubt that each believed that he had been involved in a powerful process that had transformed him and the Educational Vocational Academy. For each of them it was a process of growth that was painful and exhilarating at the same time. For most of the young men it was the first time in their lives that they had been asked about what they wanted for themselves and how the program should change to meet their needs. This total paradigm shift may explain the young men’s initial reluctance to fully participate. They needed to find their voices and believe that there would be no negative consequences for expressing their thoughts.

That people believed in them was a theme that ran throughout every interview. The young men felt that someone believed in them even before they came to believe in themselves. All of them communicated feeling somewhat lost prior to entering the program in that they didn’t know who they were or what they wanted to become. They were astonished at their own transformation and their accomplishments. During the interviews it was clear that the young men had come to believe in themselves.

“I really hated the situation I was in. And when I tell people sometimes, they can’t believe it. People who didn’t know me then, they can’t believe it. And I am a little bit too. I look back on the stuff I’ve done and now where I’m at. A total change and it’s nice. I really like the situation I’m in.”

“They knew I could have done well, and I kind of knew that but I didn’t see. I couldn’t even picture where I’m at right now. It never crossed my mind to think that I’d get into

Ed. Voc., the opportunities I'd get. I was stuck. I didn't see any light at the end of the tunnel."

The young men attributed much of their growth to the environment created by the program, an environment that fostered trust. This environment allowed the young men to request that the staff include them in conversation in a way that was meaningful to them, and to ask for the resources that would allow them to engage in a variety of opportunities.

They also distinguished areas in which the program needed to grow to better meet their needs and the needs of those who follow them. They felt that the program had prepared them to live as independent adults in a number of ways, but felt that there were other areas in which they were less prepared. All the young men talked about their gratitude for the opportunity to pursue an education that would assure them financial independence, but they spoke also of real-life survival skills that they would need when they lived on their own: looking for an apartment, having phone and electricity turned on, self-advocacy, and personal finance management. The opportunity to pursue an education was salient throughout every interview, as the young men believed that if they were not at Berkshire they would not have the opportunity to pursue their educational and career dreams.

Salient throughout every interview was the young men's anxiety about the program not having yet developed the plan to allow them to transition to adult independent living in a "positive" way. All of them talked about wanting to leave in a way that would allow them to claim their independence yet allow them to remain connected to Berkshire. They were asking the program to formulate the next important steps that would allow for healthy transitions.

From the perspectives of the young men they have grown considerably since their involvement in the program. It appears that with the development of one new skill, a number of other skills naturally follow. All of the young men felt that they had grown in their capacity to make good decisions for themselves. This the capacity to critically think about the possible outcomes of their actions and internal controls, which in turn impacted their capacity to spend increasing unsupervised time in the community.

"I think I just didn't want to screw up what I had."

The capacity to make good decisions, along with the opportunity to fully participate and be heard increased their sense of self-esteem and willingness to try new things. Full participation also seemed to increase some social skills that were not well developed, such as the capacity to speak and advocate within large groups in a way that allowed others to hear their opinions. The young men talked about areas of social skills development that merit more focus. One young man talked about confidence in the areas of education and career and a lack of confidence in his social world. Because all of these young men have spent their adolescent years in congregate care, emphasis on learning skills that present naturally for other adolescents and young adults should not be overlooked.

“When I first moved to Ed. Voc., I wasn’t too comfortable with being out in public all alone, and I hadn’t really experienced that much. I’ve always been in places like this. After a while I got used to it, and I like being out by myself.”

One young man was asked what the program could do to help prepare him for dating relationships.

“Y’all could have done a little better. You could have scheduled more dances or something, more off-grounds trips.”

All of the young men believed that academically and in terms of their computer skills they were at a good place. The capacity to complete high school and move on the post-secondary education and training helped increase their self-esteem and confidence. For many, it led to the realization that sometimes you can’t do it alone and need to ask for help. All of the young men, to varying degrees, believe that their capacity to ask for help when they needed it has increased along with their capacity to search out and use available resources. All of the young men had very high expectations for themselves, and many believed that they should have made better use of the opportunities available to them in the program. All of the young men believed that over time they increasingly made better use of available resources.

During the interviews, the young men struggled most with talking about reflection and introspection. Although the interview process indicated that all of the young men evidenced the capacity to reflect and introspect, many seemed to be uncomfortable talking about it. It is interesting to entertain the notion that those who are experiencing the most difficulty with reflection may be those who have actually made the most use of it. One young man felt that being asked to engage in reflection simply confused him. Could this be the hoped-for outcome, moving away from what was and is no longer possible, and into the confusing, uncomfortable, murky neutral zone?

In terms of future assessments of program outcomes and effectiveness, although standardized instruments for measuring the new criteria for success are parsimonious, they cannot replace the richness and insight that is gained from interviews. These interviews have provided an insight into the lives, hopes, and dreams of the young men as well as providing a sense of their preferred way of interacting with others and how they understand their world. It’s not enough to know where they stand on a standardized scale; we need to know why they are there to best address how to help move them forward. Initial well-documented interviews along with standardized instruments would provide the best assessment of individual needs. Periodic subsequent interviews would allow for the assessment of progress, areas that need work, and new areas that emerge as each new group of young men move through the program.