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Circles of Support

By Wilma Friesema

For teens, becoming an adult is exciting but also laced with pressure. Who am I? What career do I want? How am I going to make it on my own when I turn eighteen?

These questions put even more pressure on foster teen youth. Without a strong safety net, staying on track is like walking on a tightrope, and missteps can quickly become disasters. If foster youth age out of the system without a safety net and plan for their future, drug use, unemployment, and unstable housing can easily become their reality.

EPIC `Ohana Conferencing offers a unique program that helps foster youth navigate the transition to adulthood. E Makua Ana Youth Circles is a youth driven process that empowers youth to clarify their goals and identify supportive people and resources. The "Circles," as they're called, are meetings that bring concerned people together to help a youth plan for his or her future.

The youth help to create the Circle from the very beginning. They chose who will attend, what food will be served, how they want the meeting to start, and how it will end. While there is a format that the EPIC facilitator follows, it is the youth who chooses a plan of action. The group is there to brainstorm, identify available resources, and lend a helping hand when they can.

The director of the program, Randy Shiriashi, describes it as a positive process that encourages youth to dream about possibilities. "No dream is too far fetched," he says. "We just help the youth understand what it will take to make that dream a reality and the help they can have along the way." Here's the story of a former foster youth, Adrian, and his experience with Youth Circles.

Adrian was in and out of Hawaii's foster care system since the age of thirteen. A chronic runaway, he would do what most youth do on the streets: shoplift, smoke pot, and drink. His first Youth Circle was held when he was seventeen, and, he admits, he attended because he heard there was free food. Along with the free food, the Youth Circle provided an array of information about scholarships, housing options, and other supportive services, but, unfortunately, Adrian didn't digest the information as well as the pizza. After he aged out of the foster care system he ended up in jail for robbery. Once out of jail, he turned to harder drugs until he landed in a drug rehab program.

It was after exiting drug rehab that Adrian had his second Youth Circle. This time he was clear headed and ready. He *wanted* the information and appreciated the structure Youth Circles offered. EPIC staff wrote down his plans and goals on paper, which helped Adrian focus on what he really wanted. His support team -- made up of EPIC staff, other service providers, and friends -- clarified specific times, dates, and actions to take to meet crucial deadlines. The team committed their energy and assistance to help Adrian meet his goals.

Adrian is 20 now, and is the Vice President of the Hawaii Foster Youth Coalition. He has had five Youth Circles. When he runs into a hurdle he can't get over he calls EPIC staff and requests another Circle. For him, it's like having a coach who helps navigate a difficult playing field that has constantly changing conditions. While Adrian's choices and actions are his responsibility, he no longer feels alone or that he has to figure everything out on his own.

Adrian is an example of the resiliency so many of our foster youth possess, and Youth Circles is a tool that encourages that resiliency. It's available to all foster youth ages 16 through 24, for however many times they may need it. Transitioning into adulthood is rarely easy, but with enough support foster youth can make it and thrive.

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For more information about EPIC, Inc. and Youth Circles please visit our website:

www.EpicOhana.org or call Randy Shiraishi at 748-7055