Let's Get on the Bus...

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When I think about children and youth, I see myself. There is a reflection of me because I was once a child and I was once a teenager, full of life, curiosity and purpose. I often hear the exact words that were shared with me, now being passed on to a younger generation, “You can do it, you are the future!”

Although we often hear this kind of encouragement from our country, our leaders, through families, friends, and teachers, it has unfortunately been unattainable for many incarcerated youth. What is the message we giving society and its youth, when there are so many adolescents that are being isolated and imprisoned as a way of punishment
On October 17th, 2014, I attended a Community Connection’s for Youth (CCFY) and Nyack College School of Social Work panel forum with NYC leaders in youth development. The panel discussed South Bronx Community Connections (SBCC) and its first independently evaluated juvenile justice intervention built entirely on the strengths of local grassroots faith and neighborhood organizations. Mr. Vincent Schiraldi, Senior Advisor at NYC Mayor’s Office of Criminal Justice began by providing an informative introduction on the history of incarceration with youth.

For example, in the 1990’s many youths were sent away to far-off detention centers, where they are confined as punishment. These detention centers became the common and normative approach for dealing with adolescents who were “getting themselves into trouble”, committing violent or non-violent actions against the laws. Many youths who were sent to these youth detention centers, would often return to same cycle and eventually become the next generation of adults in prison. With new research, funding and practices, the government and advocates have collaborated to develop programs to help youth with community-based approaches that have shown to significantly decrease the number of court involved youth in the United States; with forty-six states showing a two-digit drop in youth serving jail time.

CCFY is a Bronx-based non-profit organization in New York City that is leading innovations in practices with court-involved youth. Their compassion and drive for youth is evident, not just in their words but by the passion and actions they have taken to make a difference in individual lives, families and their community. During the SBCC Report Forum, Rev. Ruben Austria, CCFY Executive Director, discussed the three values of CCFY: (1) youth leadership, (2) family engagement and (3) community engagement. As I thought about these three values, my heart resonated silently, “This is essential for all human life!” Having a relationship and building a relationship with yourself, family and neighbors are all essential for all of us. When one area lacks, there is a part of us that feels incomplete.
Ana Bermudez, Commissioner of NYC Department of Probation affirmed the values of CCFY; “Learning, doing, belonging, attaching” …because this is part of human life from birth until old age. Incarceration, confinement, those hours, days spent alone, or even when one is trying to “act tough” to protect one’s self from harm, it goes against our human needs because we were born to commune with each other, we were born to find trust, feel secured, and be loved.

The SBCC forum also invited us to listen to the voices of youth. We heard the inspirational story of Crystalie Romero. At the age of 15 she was given a chance to avoid involvement in the youth detention system and instead received community-based support services. She is a wonderful example of why programs like South Bronx Community Connections (SBCC) matter. Crystalie Romero shared her powerful, experience with SBCC:

“I learned a lot, mostly unity, trustworthiness, and I learned a lot about myself. I learned that I am powerful and all the powers are in my hand and I am in control of my life. The reason why I stayed at SBCC and I continue is because I have never seen so much hope these people have, the dedication and the determination these people have for me really stood out to me and nobody has ever done that for me, not even my parents. I know I can make a difference in my world and if I cannot do it all over the world, I know I can start somewhere small. That is what happened. I remember actually graduating from SBCC and Reuben calling me to receive an Advocate Award and him telling me how proud he was, I looked over and I saw my mom sitting in the audience and the smile she had on her face… really, really made my heart jump and I knew from there I had a purpose.”

Crystalie is now involved in multiple leadership programs and she is also a student at Nyack College. Learning about her success and how she has blossomed through her teenage years, finding herself, her strengths, learning skills, and being able to use her talents and share with others because of the encouragement and hope South Bronx Community Connections is an important success story that needs to be told.

Rev. Austria shared a compelling metaphor that best explains the importance of SBCC and its work with court-involved youth, “As people who live in a fast city, New York City…sometimes we need to get on those –SBCC- buses; these buses go to areas the trains do not go. Although the trains are faster and we can take the express…a person’s life is not meant to skip areas. A
person’s life is an on-going process, whether slow or fast in learning, doing, belonging and attaching. Each individual is different. As much time one needs, it is about investing our time and hearts into each individual by their needs, not ours. Not by isolation, not by punishment or discouragement but through kindness, hope and empowerment.