Celebrating The Mockingbird Society’s Six Year Anniversary

By JAMICA HENDERSON

It’s exciting to be part of an organization that works with foster care and homeless youth. The Mockingbird Society has achieved many of its goals, but there is still much more work to do. I’ve been working here for 4 years and it has been amazing, watching it grow over that time! When I started here, there were only two staff and today there are nine staff.

As you know, the Mockingbird Society was very busy during the past legislative sessions and saw several bills passed. HB2002 is a bill that will allow youth to stay with their foster parents after graduating from high school and going on to college. Under this new law, foster youth will be able to receive benefits until the age of 21. This was a great change for those in foster care because a lot of times young adults who have grown up with a family don’t want to leave the place they call home. These youth now have the opportunity to maintain their current supports and aren’t forced out into the world on their own. The Mockingbird Society also got another bill passed, HB1201, also known as Medicaid HB1201. This bill allows foster youth to continue to receive Medicaid benefits until they turn 21. This, too, was a very important issue especially for those who age out and lose their medical benefits.

The Mockingbird Family Model is doing excellently! The model is improving the lives of children and youth in care. For example, there is a problem at the foster home and the youth does not feel comfortable anymore they tend to runaway. With the help of the model, when a situation like this happens, there is a place where they can go and not be on the streets or getting in trouble with the police. Instead, the model provides a safe place that the youth can run to when in trouble. This model proves that if we work together, not only as an organization but as a community, we can change the world. The goal is to replicate the Mockingbird Family Model state-wide.

The Youth Lead program is doing amazing things! In June, Youth Lead received a grant from the Seattle Youth Grantmaking Board to create a tool called Life Advocacy 101. This tool is directed towards youth and young adults. It will help them navigate and access the important aspects of life, for example, how to advocate for yourself at school, in your work place, in your personal life, and within the community. We are also planning to have trainings to show youth how to use this tool.

Congratulations, Youth Lead, and keep up the good work!

The Mockingbird Society Executive Director Jim Theofelis, has a vision for seeing changes in our foster care system and the lives of homeless youth. Here is what Jim had to say when interviewed by the Mockingbird Times:

How does it feel to celebrate six years of The Mockingbird Society?

It feels very good to see what we have created in the past six years. We started with three youth in my small private practice office developing the first edition of the Mockingbird Times and I believe we now have a vibrant advocacy organization that is doing some very innovative work.

What was your hope for this organization? Have you seen any of it happen over the last five years? My hope was to create an organization that engages, supports and empowers the children, youth and families that must rely on the child welfare system. I think both Youth LEAD and the Mockingbird Family Model have demonstrated their ability to engage, support and empower those involved in foster care.

What are your goals for the next 2 years? I believe the next two years are very critical for The Mockingbird Society. I think both Youth LEAD and the Mockingbird Family Model may get the opportunity for major expansion. At the same time, as we mature as an organization, we need to also develop the infrastructure including fund development to support our work. We started in 2001 with a $50,000 donation and our 2007 budget is $1.4 million dollars.

Being in charge of an organization that helps youth who are in and out of foster care and homeless, how do you feel you’ve made a change in our society?

For the past thirty years of my life, I have been blessed to work with young people and families in Washington. I like to believe that The Mockingbird Society?

Congratulations to The Mockingbird Society, for Six Immensely Successful Years!

The Mockingbird Society Goes to California

by ANDREA ROLDAN

Recently, a handful of Mockingbird’s Youth Lead and staff members traveled to California to learn as much as possible about California Youth Connection (CYC). CYC is an organization that does foster care advocacy, similar to what Mockingbird does in Seattle, but throughout the state of California. Mockingbird was given the opportunity to learn, ask questions, and observe the business model CYC has created for their program while interacting with CYC members, both staff and youth.

The day we arrived in San Francisco we had our first meeting with CYC. The purpose of this meeting was to be introduced to the program and learn how it operates in general. We had a lot of questions for the organization such as, “How do you coordinate people and work throughout the 27 counties where chapters are located?” Chapters are the sub-divisions of the whole organization that are dispersed from the northern to southern regions of California. Each chapter is like its own organized company; meeting regularly, dividing tasks between members and advocating for essential issues within the county it’s located. Youth are the leaders of the chapters and do the coordinating and advocating.

The next day was busy also. One of our first assignments was to meet with the Youth Offering Unique Tangible Help (YOUTH) program in Alameda County. YOUTH is partnered with CYC and a program by Bay Area Academy, and is also primarily driven by youth in foster care or who have aged out. The YOUTH members are also members of CYC. One of the primary functions of this program is to give in depth seminars to social workers about how to best work with youth and children in care. All of the trainers are a YOUTH member that was also a youth in care. The YOUTH members then go on to train the other chapters. We had the opportunity to join in and see how the YOUTH members are also being trained. The Youth Lead from CYC again, this time to check in with each other on a personal basis.

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Mockingbird Times

Letter From the Editor by Jim Theofelis

HAPPY 6TH ANNIVERSARY MOCKINGBIRD! As you can probably tell, we are all pretty excited about our 6th Anniversary here at The Mockingbird Society. As a present to ourselves and you the reader, we have included on all four pages of the Mockingbird Times. We have been planning this for some time and it seemed our anniversary edition was the best time to introduce the new look.

It seems so long ago that I hired three youth to develop the first issue of the Mockingbird Times. Since then, we have strived to build a mission-based, solution focused, youth driven organization that makes no apologies for insisting that the children and youth in foster care deserve the same level of care and opportunities as all of our children and youth. We have worked hard and will continue to work hard at ensuring The Mockingbird Society is a vehicle for young people to express their voice regarding their experience in the foster care system and our insights, ideas and wisdom about improving this same system.

We are also proud of the progress of the Mockingbird Family Model and its continued demonstration that indeed there is a smarter, more effective, and more cost efficient approach to delivering foster care services. The “system” designed to provide safety, well-being and permanency to children in care, has, for too long, exacerbated much of the very trauma that was supposed to be mitigated and healed. As we at The Mockingbird Society embark on our next year of operations, we remain steadfast in our commitment to all children in foster care. “Building a world class foster care system through collaboration, innovation and advocacy.” We are excited about the prospects of expanding our advocacy and collaboration work across Washington State, continuing to support and empower a network of youth advocates focused on system improvement and reform. I want to thank our amazing staff at The Mockingbird Society who work so hard every day to fulfill our mission. Our Board of Directors and volunteers have also put so much of their own time, energy and money into this effort and I can’t thank them all enough.

I also want to thank you, the readers and supporters of The Mockingbird Society, for your patience, support and donations to ensure we can do our work. But mostly I want to thank the youth for their determination and persistence in striving toward their own personal goals while also striving to leave this system better than they found it.

Jane Meyerding

Jim Theofelis jim@mockingbirdsoociety.org

Letter to the Reporter

Dear Vanessa,

I was interested to see an article about autism in Mockingbird Times. You’ve clearly been doing some research!

If you’re willing to do a bit more, I hope you will take a look at some of the information on the web that is by autistics themselves (or should I say “ourselves?” I have an autism diagnosis). So much of the information written by professionals and by parents is expressed in terms of autism as a “disease,” as something to “fight” and “conquer.” Those of us who are autistic feel badly when we see who we are described as “a disease.”

Sure, there are many autistic people who need medical treatment for medical problems, and there are autistic people who need support in order to be able to lead the fullest possible lives. But we do not want our autism “eradicated” any more than we want the other aspects of ourselves attacked and destroyed.

The principles and goals of Autism Network International (ANI, an organization of autistic people) are listed here: autisticsociety.org/intro.html. The ANI site (index page at www.autisticsociety.org) has links to descriptions of “Autism as experienced by” members of ANI, and also links to ANI member web sites.

Thanks for your interest in autism. It’s a complicated subject to tackle. I hope you will find the perspectives of the sites I’ve listed are worth including in your thinking on the subject.

Jane Meyerding

Mockingbird Times

Sailing With Johnny

There’s nothing quite like sailing on the water without powering you, but the wind. Many kids from the streets in the Seattle area, myself included, would not normally get the chance to experience something like this, especially with a medical dependency counselor, Johnny Ohta, and the Center for Wooden Boats, located on the south end of Lake Union at 1010 Valley Street in Seattle.

The Center for Wooden Boats has supported Johnny in weekly trips taking homeless and street-involved youth sailing for the last three years. Each week, over 200 kids go out to go on the water. Trips are anywhere from thirty minutes to a few hours, and how far the youth get away from the dock really depends on the wind. Youth are able to sit back and relax and enjoy the ride, or ask questions and eventually learn the dynamics of sailing from hoisting the sail and jib to learning how to control the boat with the wind patterns.

One youth explained that she first wanted to go sailing to try something new and learn new skills. “[Johnny] and I thought it would be better than me doing drugs and drinking.” Her advice? “Don’t go sailing if it’s not windy. It blows when it doesn’t blow—the wind, that is. Otherwise, do it. It’s fun.”

Because it is The Center for Wooden Boats that has lent out a hand to these youth, they don’t get to experience just any sailboat. Each of their boats are a handcrafted, restored piece of history. One of the boats the youth have taken out is the Blanchard Jr. Knockabout, a 20 foot fin-keeled sailboat. About 25 of these boats were built on Lake Union by Blanchard Boatworks between the late 1930’s and the early 1950’s.

Thank You!

Shannon Barella; California Youth Connection (CYC); Karen Cowgill; Mark and Eileen Glasser; Wesly; Adam Jung; Jeanie Keohel-Welch; Kim Mar; Valerie Ramisch; Alan Rothblatt; Seattle Foundation Youth Grantmaking; Board; Nancy and Steve Speth; The Stocker Foundation; Christine Stoll; Stuart Foundation; Youth Offering Unique Tangible Help (YOUTH)

Mockingbird Times

Mockingbird Times, August 2007

Meet Our Staff

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ABOUT US: The Mockingbird Society is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit corporation developing innovative models for improving the outcomes of foster care, while advocating for decisions makers for system reform. All contributions are tax deductible to the fullest extent of the law. Please consult your tax advisor regarding your specific tax situation. The Mockingbird Times is a monthly newspaper written and produced by youth who have experience in foster care and/or homelessness. All youth employees of The Mockingbird Society are paid between $8 and $13 an hour. Additionally, youth from across the country submit art, articles, art, poetry and photography, which are then compensated up to $25 per published piece. The Mockingbird Times has a monthly circulation of 50,000 copies being distributed by Washington State and the USA, through a private distribution list and an online version. The Mockingbird Society and, as such, youth are involved in all aspects of organizational development and decision-making. Depending on The Mockingbird Society may be tax deductible and are greatly appreciated. Not all of the Mockingbird Times may be reproduced without the written permission of The Mockingbird Society. All content copyright 2007 The Mockingbird Society.

Mockingbird Times

An interview with Johnny Ohta

What do you love most about sailing?

I love that the boat has the power of the wind; watching the boat cut through the water and traveling with no combustion; traveling across the earth with no fossil fuels.

How long have you been sailing?

Since age 16.

Why do you take kids sailing?

I hope they would be able to enjoy being on the water and in an environment that is very pure: boat, wind, water.

Looking back, what do you think kids have gotten out of the trips?

Some kids have gotten a break from the daily monotony of their [lives]. Some have really realized how amazing it is to sail on the water and enjoy the experience of “being out, wind, water.”

Anything else you would like to add?

The Center for Wooden Boats has been a great supporter of taking homeless and street involved youth out on the water. I hope to take hundreds more young people out sailing!

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**Respite Care** by Leonia Bill

Respite care is available to legally licensed foster parent(s) or foster siblings. It helps the foster child to get away from their family for a short period of time. Respite care is also available in case of illness or emergency that comes up, for example, a death in the family. Licensed foster parents may send their foster children to a respite home for a weekend or two, depending on the circumstances. The foster parents are only allowed to send the foster children to families that are licensed respite care providers. The foster children have to go through a background check and full foster care licensing, so not just anyone can be a respite care provider. The foster parents also can’t just allow their foster children to spend the night at just anybody’s house. Recent rule changes allow foster children to spend one night at a friend’s house, but on a limited basis.

Now, my experience with respite care was a little different. I was a Washington State foster in the DSHS Office of Smokey Point. They called any temporary foster home “respite care.” My experience in respite care was not fun.

I was two times before the respite placements were with people I already knew, and the other kids that lived at the homes that I was placed in for respite care were mostly my age. I would have to be in the office in the DSHS family room, which was what the families used when they have scheduled family visits. So, instead of going to school like other kids did, I was stuck sitting at the DSHS office. I ended up being so bored that I was tired of eating any type of fast food and I wasn’t really one to think about what I was eating. I already watched all the movies that were there. There were even a couple of days where one of my friends would call me and if I was home, we’d drive along the same roadway, we would pick a movie and we would find a theater that was showing it, and we’d see a movie. If it was closed, then it was closed. We were growing apart. I was fortunate to have had an experience that was not the respite care provider. It meant a lot to me because I wasn’t staying there like my previous experiences, but actually going to the respite site of one of my foster parents that placed me there. Also, the family whom I stayed with for that short period of time were licensed respite care providers and had already passed the background check. This made it easy for my foster parents because the respite home they placed me in was already my friend’s so I didn’t have to worry about them having to go over to a friend’s for the weekend and not being able to. At that time, because I was a state dependant, my friend’s parents would have had to go through a more joint process of becoming licensed, but my friend’s parents had already been through that process, so I was all set to spend week-ends with those friends.

Of course, this lasted only for a short period of time until one day I was moved from that foster home to be placed at a different placement. By this time, I was already about 14 years old, but now I was back to moving around again. Up until I was a foster care youth, I had no further experiences in respite care. That’s when I started to spend more time in group homes and in a secure crisis residential center (CRC) for being a runaway of the state.

ANNIVERSARY, continued from page 1

Mockingbird Society has made significant contributions to the health and future lives of kids and families involved in foster care. I envision that The Mockingbird Society will continue to move in the direction of living more authentically in the organization, which I think holds great promise for both the organization and those we serve.

What are some words of wisdom you would like to leave to those who have been a part of this organization and the organization itself?

I don’t know about words of wisdom. I have lots of words of appreciation to the young people that have participated in Youth LEAD, the Mockingbird Youth Model, the amazing volunteers, and, of course, our Board of Directors and staff. Six years is much longer than many folks thought we’d be around. I would like to continue our work to build a world class child welfare system in which kids are able to grow beyond surviving and into thriving.

"These are all our children. We will all profit by, or pay for, whatever they become." ~ James Baldwin

**Califonia, continued from page 1**

During each meeting and seminar we attended, Mockingbird staff and Youth Lead were learning, keeping in mind questions to ask that would help our program get a good idea of how to operate a large scale organization like CYC. We were very productive, and our program directors did a great job keeping us on schedule as much as possible, despite external conditions such as California traffic.

The trip really meant a lot to me because I grew up in the Bay Area. Being back in the city and traveling in the nearby areas, reminded me of a lot being a kid, which was an incredible experience. When I was in San Francisco, the city was clean and my brother wasn’t in prison, my sisters and I were growing up together and building memories together. I was riding in a van headed to Oakland, looking out the window at the hills, and I saw my castle.

Years ago, when my family would drive to the city, I always wanted to see buildings that looked like castles on the hills. My sisters and I believed we were princesses so, after going past there so many times, we decided we were going to go see the castles ourselves. We’d tell stories about what we were going to do in our castles and all the fancy things we had hidden inside of them. Being older, I laughed a little and wondered what was actually in those buildings. I remember seeing a sign somewhere in the city that said that one of the “castles” was space ship from the future. Being back in my hometown area made me think a lot about how far I have come individually and how far my family has grown apart. I was fortunate to have had enough free time to see my older sister in Sacramento. It had been at least three years since I last visited her. We hung out for a couple hours in Old Sacramento, went shopping, watched a movie, talked and got to know each other better.

In Oakland, I spent time with my cousin at the clothing store that she owns. It had been even longer since I had last seen her. The timing was amazing, because that was the same shop that I was thinking about opening for her shop and I got to be in it! She even drove me to see my other cousin who lived nearby.

The trip was truly a wonderful experience for me because, not only did The Mockingbird Society learn a lot about CYC and YOUTH, but we also met great people who share the same passion as we do for the foster care system. I learned that it is possible to get a lot of work done and have a lot of fun at the same time. To truly enjoy each other doesn’t sound like something that seem like something that can be done but somehow I did it with The Mockingbird Society and the much appreciated support from the Stuart Foundation.
Life growing up in the juvenile system has really been a difficult experience for me. I’m 17 now and I’ve had a criminal record for 7 years. Throughout the last 7 years, during the time I spent running the streets, I spent a lot of time thinking about my past. I realized that I had to stop my way of life. I’m the only one who can change the community, but I struggle everyday. I may not be on the streets in the community, but I struggle everyday. I have to live with all my past memories. I know that I made a lot of mistakes in my past, but I want to change. I want to be free.

I spent 16 months of my childhood locked up in a juvenile prison. I can honestly say it was the worst experience I’ve ever endured. I never experienced any type of gang when I was on the streets, but when I went to juvenile prison, my way of survival revolved around being in a gang. I had to fight my way through my entire incarceration. For the last 90 days of being locked up, I went through so many ups and downs and so much disrespect it wasn’t funny. My anger just kept building up and, when I went to the residential facility after getting released, all at once I let all my anger out and got kicked out of the residential. I then got locked back up for a short period of time.

My record has caused the people around me to conclude that I’m a bad person, and they have developed a negative impression of my character. Personally, I don’t like to be categorized as a bad person, but I now know that my actions from the past have put me in that position. It all depends on my attitude and actions to change all the negative opinions about me. I’m the only one who can change me. People can’t be dependent on others to solve their problems. We can only be dependent on others to help us solve our problems.

I don’t care who you are, nothing will ever just come to you in this world. You have to work for it. The only way to work for it is to be doing something positive with your life. Selling drugs and committing crimes isn’t working for what you own. It’s only manipulating the minds of addicts. So please, anyone who is reading this article, do something positive with your life, focus yourself, set some short term goals and slowly proceed yourself towards achieving them. Eventually you’ll be able to reach your long-term goals.

My story is only an example of what life is like. There are millions of others out there in the world with a story that’s similar to mine, but I’m the only one who has lived my story. I would like to encourage all who are younger than me, and even older, to develop a relationship with someone you care about. If you don’t have anyone, then try and find your soul mate. Find a person you trust and tell your story to them. The reason being is so that someone else understands what you’ve been through. It’s better for two people to know your story than just one. If two people know, then they can offer you advice and help.

Being in the system makes me feel really low at times. I think a lot about how I could have done better in my life. Several times I’ve asked myself why I did the things I did. But I’ve yet to come up with an answer. Most people look at me and say that I have no pain or remorse for the things I’ve done, but in fact I do. I live in pain every day. I feel so regretful and remorseful that the most important thing I would change about myself is my criminal record and the sinful things I’ve done to others. I may not be on the streets in the community, but I struggle everyday.

I have to live with all my past memories. I have a big anger issue. Sometimes my temper is very short and at times I get aggressive really easy, whether that be verbally or physically. If anyone has any questions for me about my past or in general please contact me via the Mockingbird Times.