Jim Theofelis: A Man on a Mission by David Buck

Looking back at the Mockingbird Society’s first ten years, I see an idea coming to fruition. And while The Mockingbird Society today doesn’t quite look like it did when it first started, the idea has stayed the same. We don’t just speak for youth affected by the foster care system and homelessness; we are those who have been affected. This idea came about by one man who, through his experiences working with marginalized youth populations, found himself wanting to create a place where youth can make their voices heard in hopes of creating real change. In this article, we thank Jim Theofelis, Executive Director and founder of The Mockingbird Society, for all that he has done.

Jim was raised in Seattle and as a teenager ran on the same streets that he would later serve as an outreach worker. He was the first male member of his family to earn a high school diploma and went on to serve our country in the U.S. Navy. Upon his honorable discharge, he attended Seattle Central Community College and began his outreach work in the community.

He spent twenty years of his career working on what he called, “the front lines in the war to save children and teenagers.” As a counselor he worked on the streets and in group homes and would later work as the Director of the mental health clinic at King County Juvenile Detention. He also worked closely with the University District Youth Center (UDYC), a drop-in center for homeless youth that would later become a case management resource for me.

As most know, this year, The Mockingbird Society (MBS) celebrates its 10th anniversary as one of the most impactful youth advocacy organizations in Washington State. Since day one, Mockingbird has worked hard at “building a world-class foster care system.” Our staff comes from different kinds of backgrounds and system experiences, but we all share a common vision of creating improvements for families impacted by it, and for the children that don’t know that they will be a part of the system one day.

In light of MBS’ 10th Anniversary Interviewed Lauren Frederick, The Mockingbird Society’s Executive Assistant, who has been a part of MBS for seven years now. Lauren is alwaysدارة a smile on her face at work and is someone that staff consider a “veteran” of the organization. “I came to MBS after working in mental health case management for a time. After working in a large bureaucratic system, I was attracted to the MBS’ unique vision. I don’t think there is another organization out there that is changing the child welfare system in a very real way by partnering with the children, youth, and families who are most affected by it,” said Lauren.

Through all of the years Lauren has been a part of this organization, she has seen and experienced much of the change and growth that Mockingbird has undergone over the years. “When I started we had two-and-a-half outcomes for youth in care that you need to take action and be proactive. It was at this time that Jim launched a legislative advocacy initiative that would become the HOPE Act, which would become resources like emergency beds for youth in crisis. With the HOPE Act’s success, Jim developed the idea that would become The Mockingbird Society, which was formed with an anonymous donation of $50,000 and three homeless youth.

In the ten years since the founding of The Mockingbird Society, many things have changed. We have created a network of youth taking the initiative to drive the engine of change for the foster care system. The system improves with every legislative victory the Mockingbird Youth Network and The Mockingbird Society as a whole, fight for. And, with us every step of the way is a man who has dedicated his life to creating change and works harder than any other person I know. We cannot thank him enough for all that he’s done for our community.

Mockingbird is a place where I feel I really do make a change.

Demaria Kirk - Region 3 North (Tacoma)

As far as memorable moments, I was thrilled to attend the bill signing for HB 2002 [extending voluntary foster care placement] in 2006. The media was there and my mom saw me on TV and was so proud.

Not only has Lauren seen many of the changes that MBS has gone through in the last seven years, but she has also seen and been able to celebrate some of the accomplishments the organization has made over the years. “When I look back over my time here and all of MBS’ accomplishments, I am so proud and blessed to have been a part of the MBS team. And every Advocacy Day, I am proud of the youth for speaking out because no matter what they have been through and even if they are homeless, they show up and they speak up for their rights,” said Lauren.

In closing, I asked Lauren about what she would like to see Mockingbird accomplish in the future and she replied, “I would like to see MBS stick to our mission with all the passion and determination we’ve showed in the past 10 years. I hope MBS always listens to the children, youth, and families who are in the system and that we always push to improve the system for and with them. I truly believe that one of the most important tasks before us is to build a world-class foster care system.”
Dear Friends,

August 2011 marks the 10th Anniversary of The Mockingbird Society. Wow! This is truly an incredible journey. In 2001, after more than 20 years of serving homeless youth including those from foster care, and watching the system fail them, I decided to go “upstream” to change things, and I’m so blessed that I chose this path.

I started with an essential belief that we could create change, and yes, “build a world-class foster care system.” The Mockingbird Society was originally started out of my private practice office, and together with three street-dependent youth, we set out to change minds. We began by producing The Mockingbird Times and today, I’m proud to say, the voices of youth in care and homeless youth have been heard without interruption for a decade. Our paper now is distributed to thousands of readers nationwide and the work of producing this paper is improving outcomes and changing lives.

We have put forth an innovative idea to re-structure foster care known as The Mockingbird Family Model. It has been replicat-ed by private and public agencies because it works to improve safety, stability and well-being, and surpasses state and federal safety standards. Children in the model have been 100% safe from abuse and neglect. Thanks must go to U.S. Senator Patty Murray for her advocacy in securing resources to pilot the initial “Hub Home” to extend assistance to foster youth. The Mockingbird Youth Network is now operating statewide and hundreds of youth strong. We believe it could be a model for other states to ensure that the experiences of youth are reflected in the policy and prac-tice. We employ, engage and empower youth. You’ll read in this issue the high-lights of our work to increase safety in care, safe housing for youth aging out, health-care to 21, and stronger sibling connections. Thanks to Congressman Jim McDermott for his leadership on behalf of children, youth and families to enact the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act. This year our state opted-in to this program with passage of HB 1128 which allows youth to remain in care to age 21 if they are working on their high school diploma or GED.

I am deeply grateful to community leaders, legislators, advocates and service provid-ers for their commitment to achieving the mission. The best measure of our success is the impact on the youth themselves. At any given point in time, there are more than 10,000 children and youth in the system. Historically, they were largely unseen. Not any longer.

We are stronger together. We have a seat at the table. And, with your continued part-nership we will ensure that children, youth and families have what they need, not only to survive, but to thrive.

The Mockingbird Society: The Story Behind the Name

The 1962 American classic To Kill A Mockingbird by Harper Lee is the inspiration for our name, The Mockingbird Society. Atticus, the widowed father of Jem and Scout, justifies Mockingbird to his kids that it’s a sin to kill a mockingbird because Mockingbirds don’t do one thing but make music for us to enjoy. They don’t do one thing but sing their hearts out for us.”

What if we created an organization, a community, indeed a world, in which all our youth—not just those who survive, but those who thrive—could do exactly the same thing? It’s an incredible dream. Could we turn a dream into reality? Could we make change happen?

In 2001, I decided to go “upstream” to make change happen. Together with 3 youth, we set out to make change happen. Together with 3 youth, we set out to create the Mockingbird Family Model. It has been replicat-ed by thousands of readers nationwide and the Mockingbird Youth Network is now operating statewide and hundreds of youth strong.

The Mockingbird Times is a monthly newspaper written and produced by youth who have experience in foster care and homelessness. All youth employees of The Mockingbird Society are paid between $9.50 and $12 an hour. Additionally, youth from across the country submit articles, art work, and photos for publication. On average, this amounts to over $25 per published piece. The Mockingbird Times has a monthly circulation of over 25,000 copies distributed across Washington State and the USA, through a private distribution network. The Mockingbird Times is a non-profit organization. Donations to The Mockingbird Society may be tax-deductible and are greatly appreciated. No part of the Mockingbird Times may be reproduced without the written permission of The Mockingbird Society. All contents copyright ©2011 The Mockingbird Society.

The Past’s Light Makes the Future Bright

As many of you may know, August is Mockingbird Society’s 10th Anniversary. We are very excited about all we have achieved, but let me say on behalf of Mockingbird as a whole, that we could not have done it without your support. But we aren’t finished yet, so understand me when I say, we at Mockingbird are always striving to reach bigger and better results for the youth and the youth system that everyone affiliated with the youth welfare system.

This article will help shed some light on what we as an organization hope to achieve in the future. Since we are at our ten year mark, we thought it might be cool to look into what we thought would be important key factors within the next ten years, and what would be our most challenging barrier(s) to overcome these factors.

I had the opportunity to meet with one of Mockingbird’s great assets about this topic, our very own Public Policy and Communications Director, Rose Berg. Rose shines in policy development and public relations. Rose’s opinion is given a great amount of consideration in terms of Mockingbird’s course of action. When asked, “What do you think the most important goal for MBS is within the next ten years?” Rose responded, “We need to ensure that youth voice and their opinions are always included within the decision-making process done on behalf of youth within the child welfare system.”

Mockingbird’s statewide speaking program is in its very early days, but it can and will be even stronger. When Legislators and others are making a decision about youth, we want them to include the youth.” As a youth advocate, Rose is in an ideal position to communicate youth voice and working on their high school diploma / GED or turn 21. The 2006 Foster Youth Achievement Act allows up to 50 foster youth a safe and loving environment. The safety of care is a very important because every-where deserves to be in a safe and loving envi-ronment. This year the MYN priority HB 1697 - Unannounced Visits passed. This new law is important because now 10 percent of all youth in care while in college. The Mockingbird’s Youth Network Coordinator Fredrick Kingston; Administrative Coordinator Diana Clark; Mockingbird Network Program Assistant Milissa Morgan; Resource Development Manager, Amanda Bevington; Executive Assistant Brenda Ortega; Contributing Writers & Artists Chris Bauer, Brandy Casley, Rebecca Sara Bersek, Nickole Critzer, Sam Martin, Garrett Nadeau, Crystal Stacey, Janessa Thomas, Kristina Thomasman; Design & Layout Highfive.

Jim Theofelis
This month’s edition of our newsletter is a special one. August is our 10th year anniversary here at Mockingbird. There are many aspects of which Mockingbird has grown. The Mockingbird Family Model (MFM) is one of them. Looking back on the past, from when the MFM started, it truly goes to show that it takes a community of genuinely concerned and determined people to build a successful model. From what I know about the Mockingbird Family Model’s approach and main goals, a few of the main priorities are to ensure safety, permanency, support, cultural identity, and sibling connection. Child welfare system change is another goal, and, personally, I feel that MFM is in the perfect spot of how the system should work today. It would result in the same safe, successful communities that The Mockingbird Society is working toward.

One of the things MFM managed to accomplish through the years is maintaining the funding for the “constellations” already in our communities. This year it took writing letters to Governor Gregoire, and sending out “calls for action” to our supporters to maintain the funding from the state necessary to sustain the constellations. It is not in place across the system, but Children’s Administration is working to keep the existing four Hub Homes in the system. And, with additional future funding, we hope they would adopt it widely.

Another success worth celebrating, with much love and thanks to the Blackfeet Indian Tribe in Montana, is having the tribe decide that they would be the funders and support system for organizing a constella tion for Native American families in care. This process is currently being written up by MFM and The Blackfeet Indian tribe are working together to ensure an even more powerful cultural support.

We here in the network, have been supporting MFM as best as possible. With majority of the Youth Reporters being youth whom either have known people in care or have experienced it, the most we can do is provide testimonials throughout this journey when needed. When I was in my last foster home, I attended some Hub Home meetings. The first time I went, I met a wonderful group of people who all had so much in common. Degale Cooper, one of the Hub Home foster parents, has been involved with MFM for quite some time. I was lucky enough to get to speak briefly with her and learn her thoughts on the Mockingbird Family Model as a whole. Degale says, “It is a wonderful experience for first time foster parents with support from a group of skilled foster parents. We come together to provide additional support for the kids and their families as well. By doing this hopefully we can reform the system and have it work as fluently as the MFM. With the support from your constellation, you are guaranteed support from not only the social worker, but the Hub Homes as well.”

It is clear to say that the Mockingbird Family Model has definitely been a success and it looks as if it is going to continue to progress and help the foster families in our community. Special thanks goes out to all our wonderful foster parents and Hub Home families as well as Dr. Wanda Hackett for her amazing work with the MFM. Can’t wait to see where we are when the 20th anniversary rolls near!

Mockingbird has impacted me in a lot of different ways; first the awareness of the foster care system. I know a lot more now than I did when I first entered the system which is beneficial and it’s opened a lot of doors and opportunities for me to meet with legislators, representatives, and other foster youth in my region who have become my support group.
Region 1 - North (Spokane)

Region 1 Spokane has been very busy and has grown quickly over the past few years. Just in the nine months since I began, we now have 15 to 25 youth attend each monthly meeting. It has been amazing to see the Chapter’s work to serve the homeless, raise money for organizations such as SafetyNet and have some fun too!

We have a lot of youth who have really stepped up and become leaders within the chapter and are ready and willing to help out with anything needed. I feel that our chapter has a close bond and it is fun to see the friendships that have grown from Mockingbird. We always have a great time and learn a lot at the annual events including Youth Advocacy Day and the Summit. At Youth Advocacy Day the youth were able to meet our Legislators and we looked forward to building that relationship at our legislator BBQ on August 10th.

It has been a great journey so far and I look forward to seeing where our chapter will go and how it will keep growing.

ACT FIRST Staying Active by Tammy Soderberg

Region 1 - South (Yakima)

Over the past years, ACT FIRST has grown significantly in its passion and ability to advocate for creating “a world class foster care system.” In December of 2008, Yakima had a kick-off party to celebrate and recruit for Region 1 South Chapter. That meeting was met with excitement at all of the possibilities and experiences that would come forth from being a part of the chapter. Some of the many experiences that ACT FIRST has had over the past few years include: participating in Advocacy day each year, being a part of Yakima’s MLK march and the peace march, serving food at the Union Gospel Mission in Yakima, raising over $5,000 for The Mockingbird Society, having an active seat at the State Leadership Council (SLC), communicating to our legislators, helping out at a nursing home, training youth and alumni of care on how to advocate for themselves and training them on their rights as foster youth, and many other activities that build relationships, employment skills, and support.

We look forward to continuing these efforts while finding new ways to help youth and serve our community!

HEYMAC: Growing and Changing Every Day by Georgina Ramirez

Region 2 - North (Everett)

H.E.Y.M.A.C. means “Hearing Every Youth Make A Change,” and that is simply what we do. Over the past three years the chapter has been dedicated to put the needs and voice of youth at the forefront of child welfare decisions, while helping youth blossom as leaders in their community.

Perseverance and dedication have been the driving force that has helped this chapter propose an idea that became a law, and now helps youth in foster care all over the state of Washington. HEYMAC was originally located in the Mt. Vernon Youthnet office, with Eva Ervin as their Resource Specialist. In 2009, its first year of work, they provided the innovative idea of notifying youth of their rights. This idea was drafted into legislation (HB 3578), with the help of the Mockingbird Society, legislative champions and community partners it is now a law that youth in care have to be notified of their rights while in care. The following year HEYMCA made a transition to a new Resource Specialist and a new location. I am more than proud of the HEYMAC Chapter, as membership grows, so does the leadership, achievements and community investment of our members.

The Olympia Chapter: From Newest Chapter to Engine for Change by Graham Parrington

Region 3 - South (Olympia)

In the fall of 2009 in Olympia there was host agency staff ready to support the new chapter, a Resource Specialist in over his head, and youth who were ready to lead. Youth like Sam Evans, who described the time as, “new and exciting.” The legislative session, Youth Advocacy Day, and the Leadership Summit in 2010 helped things fall into place. Sam Evans won the 2010 Summit essay contest and spent the day with Secretary Dreyfus; Melody Estevas was a moving speaker at the 2010 Benefit Luncheon; Chris Bauer became the “go-to” speaker for Unannounced Visits (HB 1697); Ryan Cummings joined the Commission and took 2nd place in the 2011 Summit essay contest; and Amanda Utvileir’s personal story became the core of a powerful presentation at the 2011 Leadership Summit.

Now the Olympia Chapter has assumed its role in the Capital as a “go-to” source for youth testimony at legislative committee hearings, and I look forward to watching the Chapter continue to grow as an engine for developing speakers, leaders, ideas, and change in the child welfare system.