

Heliogram

Solutions to strengthen people and communities

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A Heliotrope Publication

Winter 1998

Your Feedback Feeds Me!

When I prepared the first issue of Heliogram this summer, I simply wanted to let you — my clients, colleagues, friends, and family — know how my business and my life had evolved in congruent ways. I was excited to share my passion for a strength-based approach to my work.

Your response has been very affirming. Over 30 people took the time to send a note, e-mail, or telephone message about *Heliogram* and what it had to say. I am thrilled that some of you have used the information on developmental assets and strength-based approaches to change something in your own lives. Here are a few examples:

“You have helped me put a new screen in my mind for everything I see and read.” *Margie Smitch, friend and Assistant Attorney General*

“I just want to let you know that I read your brochure and newsletter and really loved them. Not that I have a cynical streak or anything like that (!) but I was anticipating that ... they might be mostly hype. When I read them, however, I was really touched and even resolved myself to make extra efforts to connect with my neighbors and to generate a millennium project of my own.” *Jud Scovill, friend and therapist*

Some asked for extra copies or to be added to the mailing list:

“Your newsletter came across my desk yesterday (addressed to a co-worker of mine) and I have to admit I was so taken by your world view that I read the whole thing from cover to cover before I put it in the appropriate mailbox! How can I get on the mailing list?” *Dablia Cohen, Office Lead, Child Care Resources*

heliotrope 1. A flower that turns to face the sun. 2. An instrument for making long-term observations. 3. A purple that is bluer and stronger than cobalt violet.

Most touching was the two part story of a young woman and her nephews. The first message was dated July 7, 1998, and read in part:

“I am impressed by how integrated asset building is in your life and work. I too have been radically influenced by this framework, especially when it comes to kids. I’m trying to get my brother and sister and their spouses on board, too, with my nephews. I’ve been a rather disengaged aunt because I’ve lived far away for most of their young lives. I send them birthday cards and all, but now they’re getting older (9-16), and dealing with all sorts of pressures, including a teen pregnancy. So I’m taking the boys on a backpacking trip, just them and

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Nancy's Reading Corner...Leadership

I am constantly amazed by the untapped leadership qualities in so many of the people I meet and with whom I work. I have a growing desire to encourage and nurture their ability to be leaders... so they can help develop more leaders. You might want to consider these resources for your holiday gift giving. Who knows, maybe you will inspire a dormant leader, just waiting to blossom!

Leadership for Regular People

"Finding Your Voice: Learning to Lead...Anywhere You Want to Make a Difference" by Lorraine Matusak (Jossey-Bass, Inc. San Francisco, 1997, \$17.95) is written for regular people, who may or may not be part of the business community or government, who may not have positions or titles that bring power, but who are eager to learn more about effective leadership.

In the foreword, Andrew Young notes that many of us are concerned about things we see, but let our lives and nation drift because we don't know how to take action. So we either complain, or worse, remain silent.

Lorraine Matusak uses stories like those of Betty Miller, a self-employed newspaper photographer who had come upon hard times. At age 62, she found herself to be a poverty-stricken retiree living in subsidized, inner city housing. Betty began to make friends with her new neighbors – street kids, gang members, homeless families, and

prostitutes. She discovered that they could not read and that much of their arrogance was a cover-up for their insecurity. With only her creativity and Social Security as resources, she created a card game to help nonreaders learn to read and sat on the curb with her new friends and began a new career of teaching literacy. She subsequently founded a nonprofit corporation and became a leader in the literacy movement.

Matusak believes each of us has the innate power and ability to lead. Success in leadership is almost guaranteed to those who discover their gifts and talents and apply them to something about which they are passionate, she says. She believes each of us has the ability to make things happen – to make a difference — and provides a realistic step-by-step way for readers to identify and implement their potential for leadership. She alerts us to our fears of taking risks, and then provides a plan to develop our skills as risk takers.

Leadership by Young People

The Giraffe Project, headquartered on Whidbey Island, Washington, moves people to stick their necks out for the common good. They have been telling stories of these "Giraffes" to the nation since 1982. The Project knows that good ideas and good hearts won't solve problems if they are

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Nancy's Reading Corner...Leadership

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idle; and that the best way to move people into courageous, caring action is to show them someone else going first. When people hear stories of people taking on tough challenges, they are inspired to take on challenges *themselves*.

The Giraffe Project has developed a curriculum that helps teachers and youth leaders build courage, caring and responsibility in kids from 6 to 18 years old. *The Giraffe Heroes Program* uses a three-step strategy:

Hear the story – learn about profiles of real people becoming heroes.

Tell the story – searching for heroes in their own lives or in books and movies, and reporting back on “Giraffe sightings.”

Become the story – the kids look around themselves, decide what they want to change for the better, then design and carry out service projects to make it happen.

Contact the Giraffe Project at 197 Second Street, Langley, Washington. Mailing address: PO Box 759, Langley WA 98260. Telephone 360-221-7989. Fax 360-221-7817. E-mail office@giraffe.org; web site <http://www.giraffe.org/giraffe/>.

Leadership Built Through Small Kindnesses

Seattle Mariner Alex Rodriguez's book for children, *Hit A Grand Slam!* tells his story of a young boy, deserted by his father, who found himself surrounded by extraordinary people. His mother worked two jobs as a waitress; his brother and sister worked to help support the family; his Little League coach took him under his wing; and the head of the Boys and Girls Club baseball program made sure he could play ball although this boy (Alex) could not afford the registration fee.

David Andriesen, who writes for *The Olympian* newspaper, described the book as “a reminder of the

power of simple kindness, a new baseball glove, an encouraging word, or just a positive place to be on a lonely afternoon.” He adds, “Every child deserves this kindness, and not because he or she might turn out to be a sports star.”

Hit a Grand Slam (Taylor Publishing, Dallas, 1998, \$14.95) is one of several books in a series called Positively for Kids. Co-author Greg Brown of Bothell started the series after being unable to find sports books for his own children that taught life lessons. **H**

Heliotrope Seeks An Administrative Whiz

Heliotrope is looking for a highly-skilled administrative person for a long-term working relationship. The job offers flexible hours, one-half to two-thirds time in a warm, positive work environment. Heliotrope needs someone with meticulous attention to detail, ability to work independently, ability to proactively head off problems, ability to organize paper and systems, excellent communications skills, strong skills and an avid interest in computers and technology — and a commitment to the work of the organization. Cannot be allergic to cats. Salary will be commensurate with experience and skills. Heliotrope values a diverse work force.

Interested persons should send their name, address, and qualifications to Heliotrope, 1249 NE 92nd Street, Seattle, WA 98115 to obtain a screening questionnaire, designed to help ensure a good fit between candidates and the position. Candidates who appear to be a good match will be contacted for further consideration.

Systems Change: Lessons from the Field

How to Improve Our Chances of Making A Difference

Policy makers, community leaders, and program staff generate many good ideas to provide strengths and services to children, youth, families, and communities. Scores of people bring incredible creativity and high energy to carry out these ideas. Yet, year after year, many of these efforts fizzle or fall short of their potential. How can we help more of them to succeed?

The challenge is most dramatic in situations where a group tackles comprehensive systems change. These complex efforts, such as revamping how communities deliver services to at-risk youth or how to revitalize a

What is Systems Change?

Systems change most commonly refers to making a substantial transformation throughout an entire system of care, such as health care, mental health, child protective services, domestic violence services, a public school system, welfare, or juvenile justice. It involves understanding the whole, while realigning individual parts to fit a new picture. Recent examples include the shift from institutionalization to community care for people with developmental disabilities and the creation of managed health care organizations. Systems change can also occur in the revitalization of communities or neighborhoods.

decaying urban neighborhood, involve mind-boggling details and hot political issues. When these efforts are successful, the payoff is large and ongoing – yet the road to get there is full of potholes.

Hard-Earned Wisdom Can Guide Us

Several recent reports and publications have distilled years of sometimes painful lessons from those who have wrestled systems change out of the jaws of the tiger. Their remarkable candor provides a refreshing sense of what is possible, under what circumstances, and when to concede that the odds outweigh the desire.

Here are some key pieces of advice extracted from those reports that may help those of us who continue to believe that broad systems change is worth the struggle:

- **Match Actions to Desired Outcomes.**

An amazing number of systems change efforts are launched based on a specific concept or theory that is inherently valuable, but which doesn't have the ability to create the desired change. For example, will integrating services actually help people if the services are inappropriate, mediocre, or don't address actual needs? The key is to ensure that major activities generated out of those theories are logically connected to the desired outcomes.

- **Build Roadmaps and Relationships Before You Leap.**

The complexity of systems change requires a detailed map and trusted traveling companions. Don't leave home without them!

- **Assess Community Readiness.**

Sometimes the time is not ripe for a systems change effort. Resources may be tied up in other priorities; leadership may be lacking; or the effort may be rational but lack excitement. You may be able to shore up these components; but in some

cases it may make sense to wait for a more opportune time.

- **Be Realistic about Needed Intensity While Keeping an Eye Out for Opportunity.**

We have a history of thinking that a peashooter will knock out Godzilla. We devote a puny amount of resources to a huge mess and then are surprised when we barely make a dent. Intervention intensity must match the problem. On the other hand, sometimes a burst of energy by a small group of serious advocates can bust through a roadblock in a way no one could have imagined. Watch for these serendipitous moments and move to take advantage of them.

- **Race, Class, and Culture Matter.**

Rather than ducking issues of race, class, and culture, change agents need an awareness and

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responsiveness to these issues. Multiracial leadership groups can be very effective, especially where the members have or are willing to learn skills for cross-racial relationships. The race, class, and culture of community members may be the most important factors in creating systems that are effective.

■ Ask the Community for Solutions; Keep Asking Them.

The people we are trying to serve often have strikingly different ideas of what would help. Ask them! Why counseling, when people want jobs? If we don't get it right the first time, we need to ask again!

■ Build Capacity Rather than Create Demand for Services.

Sustainable systems change often includes strong efforts to develop the ability of people, neighborhood institutions, and service providers to become part of the solution in ever-widening ripples. Those previously viewed as “recipients” and “users” of services become community strengths, able to help others.

■ Recognize and Enhance the Value of Caring Relationships.

More and more funders and policymakers are realizing that services aren't at the core of how kids survive and thrive – *relationships* with caring adults are. When services result in an improvement, it is often not the programs per se that matter so much as the interaction between the teacher and child, worker and client.

■ Revise and Reassess.

Build in opportunities for midcourse assessment and correction. Implementation often uncovers things that weren't in the original plan. Readjusting to meet actual circumstances is a sign of strength, not failure.

■ Stay at It; Celebrate Interim Accomplishments.

Many of the systems change efforts that anticipated measurable improvements in three or four years found that it required eight or nine years for the long-term effect of their work to show up.

It took many years for most individuals, families, communities, or service systems to fall into disrepair; it will take a long time to revive them. Mark successes and interim benchmarks with celebration to refuel for the long haul.

Emerging Emphasis on Neighborhood Transformation

Approaches for reform have swung between repairing damage and preventing damage, between top down and bottom up, and between informal alliances and formal services – all looking for the one golden way to intervene that would be simple and cheap.

In the past several years, leading-edge funders, researchers, policy analysts, and legislators are beginning to endorse a web of interrelated solutions at the neighborhood level. A neighborhood may be a more manageable microcosm of change. And it might just be the level at which those who have the most at stake are most invested. **H**

This article grew out of research and consulting services performed for the Seattle SafeFutures Initiative, a five-year project to reduce juvenile crime and delinquency. Heliotrope thanks SafeFutures for permission and encouragement to share this information with others interested in systems change.

Sources:

The Annie E. Casey Foundation has published two reports containing lessons learned from its New Futures initiative aimed at preparing disadvantaged urban youth for successful lives as adults. Copies of the following reports are available free by calling the Foundation at 410-547-6600.

The Path of Most Resistance: Reflections on Lessons Learned from New Futures (no date, probably published in 1995 or 1996)

The Eye of the Storm: Ten Years on the Front Lines of New Futures (1998)

In addition, a book written by Lisbeth B. Schorr entitled *Common Purpose: Strengthening Families and Neighborhoods to Rebuild America* (New York: Doubleday, 1998, \$15.95 in paperback) is a good source of some additional perspectives and lessons.

Breaking News on Developmental Assets

Alaskans Speak on Helping Kids Succeed

An exciting new book “Alaskanizes” the asset building framework developed by Search Institute. Culturally diverse Alaskans have learned to scrutinize ideas that come from the “Outside” (as they refer to the Lower 48). Village residents throughout Alaska agree that the asset framework does fit them, and is very much like what Native Elders say about raising children. They see that one of the strengths of the asset approach is its power to honor and strengthen the unity that exists among Alaskans.

Alaskans involved in writing *Helping Kids Succeed—Alaskan Style* decided not to add assets or change the basic concepts of asset research. However, they defined ten of the assets differently and provided hundreds of ideas for traditional ways to build assets. They noted that perhaps the most obvious cultural difference is with the asset-building activities. What people do to build assets is different, depending on their background, culture and lifestyle.

This book provides a comprehensive and thoughtful example of how the research and overall appeal of the asset framework can be adapted so the list of assets fits well for different cultural groups. It also provides a simple new way to explain assets:

“This is so simple! All it is is 40 words that describe love.” — *Elder in Kake*

To order *Helping Kids Succeed—Alaskan Style*, call Derek Peterson at 907-586-1083 or Becky Judd at 907-269-3400. Cost is \$5.00 plus shipping.

New Research Synthesis

Search Institute is publishing a compilation of more than 800 scientific articles and reports on adolescent development that tie to each of the 40 development assets. The new book, *Developmental Assets: A Synthesis of the Scientific Research on Adolescent Development*, also

shows what is known about how assets are built and their affect on different populations of youth.

This book is for those who need and want in-depth information on why and how assets appear to “work.” Wading through it (as I did with an advance copy) is intriguing, if a bit daunting. The book will be available in December 1998 from Search Institute for \$24.95. It can be ordered by calling 1-800-888-7828.

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Your Feedback Feeds Me!

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me and the coastal mountains of California. It’s just silly for me to continue working in this field if none of it benefits my own family. *Carina del Rosario, School’s Out Consortium*

Upon checking with Carina later in the summer about the outcome of the backpacking trip, she sent this message:

“I went on the trip with nephews. Bonding-wise, it was absolutely great. Mari had given me the *Kid’s Book of Questions*¹ and they all got really into asking each other some pretty deep stuff and sharing so openly with each other and me. I got to share a tent with my youngest nephew, Vincent, age 9. We talked about all sorts of things. He plays different war-games (much to my chagrin) and we talked about real war.

I just wanted to share the rewards of directly engaging in the lives of kids. I don’t get it very often in my job or day-to-day life, so it’s thrilling when it does happen.”

I encourage readers to keep sending me your stories. They inspire me and others. H

¹ A book for kids about knowing what they believe in and who they are, with 260 questions they can ask themselves, their friends, and adults. Stock, Gregory. *The Kids’ Book of Questions*. New York: Workman Publishing, 1988. Cost is \$4.95.

Using a Strengths Perspective in Counseling and Therapy

“Unfortunately, most counselors and therapists are trained and taught to view clients primarily from a pathological or deficit perspective, focusing on the assessment of problems. Rarely are counselors taught how to identify, appreciate, and utilize client strengths,” writes Craig Noonan, L.C.S.W., in the Spring 1998 issue of *Resiliency in Action*.

Resiliency: Strengths, experiences, and environmental conditions that allow children and adults to overcome or transcend adversity.

“As a result, all too often I have observed that counselors (including myself at times) provide ineffective and even counterproductive services because of agendas, roles, and systems that restrain their humanity, are not research-based, and do not meet the needs of their clients.”

Noonan believes that the resiliency literature provides counselors with a more effective and personally satisfying way to work with and relate to clients. He specifically advocates incorporating six protective factors associated with resiliency into counseling relationships:

- Caring and support
- High expectations
- Meaningful opportunities for involvement
- Pro-social bonding
- Clear and consistent boundaries
- “Life skills”

“To really practice from a strengths perspective demands a different way of seeing clients, their environments, and their current situations. Rather than focusing on problems, your eye turns toward possibility. In the thicket of trauma, pain, and trouble you can see blooms of hope and transformation...” writes Dennis Salleebey, D.S.W., in *Strengths Perspective in Social Work Practice* (Longman, 1997).

In a follow-up article (Summer 1998 issue of *Resiliency in Action*), Noonan cites a classic study, which demonstrated that positive beliefs can facilitate positive outcomes in counseling. In this study, alcohol counselors were told that psychological testing had identified some of their clients as having an excellent prognosis for recovery. In truth, these clients were randomly selected and no different from other clients. At the end of the treatment, however, the clients with the “good prognosis” were seen as more compliant and involved in treatment and also had more positive outcomes in drinking behaviors than the clients who were given “no prognosis.” The only difference between the two client groups were the beliefs their counselors had in them. In some way, the positive beliefs were communicated to the clients with the “good prognosis” and became a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Noonan will be writing a regular column on using a strengths perspective for *Resiliency in Action*. **H**

Subscriptions to Resiliency in Action, published five times yearly, are available by calling 800-440-5171.

About Kids and Their Time

1,500 hours The average child spends watching television per year

900 hours The average child spends in school per year

*Source: A Parents Guide to Kids' TV
(Center for Media Education, 1997)*

How Heliotrope is Working To Build Assets

Since our first newsletter this summer, this small business has continued to look for ways to help build assets as part of our commitment to a strong community. Here's a few of our activities:

- Tutoring twice a week at Olympic View Elementary School.
- Writing newsletter articles about assets for the Church Council of Greater Seattle, School's Out Consortium, Atlantic Street Center, and Child Care Resources. In some cases, these organizations plan to run a series of articles about assets so their readers can become more familiar with the concepts. These newsletters reach several thousand people in the greater Seattle area. Do you have a newsletter that could use an article? Let us know!
- Volunteering to write grant proposals for a community gathering space in the Maple Leaf neighborhood. The multi-purpose building will provide more space for school use and child care, as well as provide meeting and gathering space for the neighborhood.

Each asset-building activity has, in turn, built personal and business assets. We'll keep looking for more ideas.

H

The Problem with Problem Solving

The views of Michael D. Clark, a Juvenile Probation Officer in Lansing, Michigan, explain the importance of strength-based approaches for juvenile offenders – as well as for all young people. He writes:

“...Solving problems only returns a person to a previously held position or equilibrium. It is only through exploiting strengths that *growth* can occur. Creating change by exploiting a client's strengths and resources engenders growth that will continue to occur long after exiting our system. Building strong individuals, families, and communities can never occur through the focus on defects and failures. This focus hampers and limits our ability to utilize the greatest single resource for change – the offender.

“... Change efforts do not have to be linked directly to the presenting problems for stabilization, growth, and eventual dismissal from court jurisdiction to occur.

“Working with [the client's] successful side is not the same as condoning, ignoring, or enabling the problems and pain. The Strengths' approach is much more than a Pollyanna notion of 'looking for the good.' It is a sophisticated intervention that takes a different, and very unfamiliar, route to change and solutions.” (Clark, Michael D. “The Problem with Problem Solving: A Critical Review,” *Journal for Juvenile Justice and Detention Services*, Volume 10, Spring 1995).

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