

Heliogram

Solutions to strengthen people and communities

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Strengths-Based Practice in the Real World: An Interview with Sharon McNeil

By Christina Malecka

Nancy and I are always keeping an ear and eye out for individuals and institutions finding innovative ways to approach entrenched social and organizational problems. For this issue of the *Heliogram*, I interviewed Nancy's college friend Sharon McNeil, who used a strengths-based approach to make positive changes in a residential home for foster kids in Lansing, Michigan.

Sharon is a social worker, therapist, registered nurse, and spiritual director with a holistic approach to people and institutions. In all her work, Sharon focuses on mind, body and spirit as intrinsically connected and important to healing and growth.

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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.

New Year, New Lens

Last year was a year of major changes for both Nancy and Christina professionally and personally. In May, we moved to our office near the Shilshole Marina in Ballard, which is also Nancy's new home. Christina moved twice in 2005. She also transitioned from single life to a long-term partnership, and started her clinical internship in counseling at Seattle Mental Health. Nancy had the joy of seeing her former foster kids and current godchildren April and Jesse adopted into a loving home. They are thriving as they begin high school, and provide constant proof that love and safety make all the difference for kids. Last year also brought each of us face to face with grief. Nancy's long-term marriage ended and Christina's mom was diagnosed with a second round of treatable, but serious, colon cancer.

Through all of this, we managed to support each other, and most importantly, our clients to make positive change in the community. We found that we best weathered constant transition when we could stay open to the new and unknown. As a result, we were inspired to focus this issue of the *Heliogram* on people, programs, writing and research that dares to use a novel lens and approach to find new solutions to old problems. We wish you all an innovative New Year.

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CM: Tell me a little about the agency you worked for in Lansing, and your role there.

SM: St. Vincent Catholic Charities serves over 13,000 children, families and seniors each year through 15 programs including St. Vincent Home for Children (SVH).

St. Vincent Home for Children is a residential program for boys and girls, ages seven to seventeen, who have been physically and/or sexually abused or neglected. The goal of SVH is to provide at-risk kids a safe and stable environment for three months to one year, and prepare them for longer-term, successful placement where they might thrive. Most of the kids at SVH have already failed to adjust to their first foster placements. There are about forty kids at SVH at any given time.

In October 2003, I was hired as part-time chaplain for the entire agency, Saint Vincent Catholic Charities, with a focus on St. Vincent Home for Children. Although the agency was originally run by the Sisters, SVH had not had a formal chaplain position until I arrived. I stayed in the position until April 2005, and continue to support the work of the organization.

CM: What were your responsibilities as chaplain?

SM: I was responsible for integrating spiritual programming throughout the agency and in particular at St. Vincent Home for Children. I began with setting up an environment conducive to deepening the faith, hope and joy of clients and staff within the organizational culture. My first step was to create two spirituality committees: one with representation from SVH; and the other composed of representatives from the wider agency programs. These representatives were supportive staff who understood the core values of the agency: faith, compassion, service, stewardship and integrity. These values have been expressed since St. Vincent Home for Children began about 50 years ago with the Sisters of St. Joseph.

CM: A tough role to fill. What were your impressions when you first started at St. Vincent?

SM: I was ready to quit after my second day on the job! SVH seemed chaotic and overwhelming. Staff appeared overworked and morale was low. Facilities were aged and unappealing. I asked myself, "how can I possibly make a difference here?" I expressed my concerns to the administration and they urged me to stay, pointing out the problems I was observing were the result of a spiritual deficit I was hired to fill.

CM: Nancy has mentioned a lot of new strength-based program elements and activities you introduced at the Children's Home. Can you tell me about these?

SM: Basically, my goal was to create and promote positive, strengths-based programming. I wanted to give the children an opportunity to discover their own special gifts and to express themselves in a place of beauty. I connected with a group of artists in town, and they agreed to meet weekly with the kids to create

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Social and Emotional Learning in Scandinavian Countries: Supporting All Developmental Needs of our Kids

By Nancy Ashley

In Fall 2005, I attended a wonderful symposium on social and emotional learning sponsored by several private foundations, public and private health organizations, and child-serving nonprofits. Among all of the other great offerings, I was intrigued by an international panel of speakers discussing their

Social and emotional learning develops the essential skills that children need to be successful in school and in life.

experiences with Second Step, a violence prevention curriculum that stresses social and emotional learning as the key to reducing aggressive and risky behavior in children and young people.

Created by the Committee for Children, Second Step is a classroom-based social and emotional skills curriculum for pre-school through junior high students (4 – 14 years old). The program builds skills in empathy, emotional awareness, impulse control, problem solving, and anger management. It has been implemented in more than 20,000 schools in North America and throughout the world.

Social and emotional learning teaches children how to deal with their emotions, resist impulsive behavior, resolve conflict, and make positive and effective choices. Social and emotional learning develops the essential skills that children need to be successful in school and in life.

Research shows important connections between children's social and emotional skills and academic performance. When students feel safe and good about themselves, they tend to do better academically.

How Scandinavian countries support social-emotional learning for kids

At the symposium, professionals from Scandinavia shared their cultural perspectives on social and emotional learning. In the short summaries noted below, we can see possibilities for how our public and private institutions could provide greater opportunities for children to more fully develop the social and emotional skills that are so important to personal and career success and satisfaction.

- **Norwegian** municipal governments view children's well-being as of primary interest to policymakers, and support family counseling in schools to increase support for parents and children. In Oslo, school nurses run groups with children to discuss their lives outside of school, and this is considered as important to wellness as cleaning scraped knees and soothing fevers. Schools often run several programs to increase social and emotional learning (including Second Step), and every school is expected to focus on anti-bullying and children's feelings of confidence and safety. Social competencies are part of every school's core curriculum, and research shows that this leads to increased scores in math and reading.
- **Swedish** teachers often work in teams, and one teacher may stay with the same child for several grades to increase consistency and the ability to track student progress over time. Swedish curriculums focus not only on academics, but also on basic societal values such as empathy, justice and democracy. Children start "pre-school" at the age of 18 months, with a strong emphasis on social and emotional learning and play. This early pre-school is government sponsored and free to parents to decrease achievement gap problems. Children do not start kindergarten, which has a stronger academic focus, until age seven.

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Book Review:

Going to the Source: Poor Women, Marriage, and Motherhood

By Christina Malecka

Much has been written on single mothers, especially single moms living below the poverty line in American cities. However, little has come from single mothers themselves. For *Promises I Can Keep: Why Poor Women Put Motherhood Before Marriage* (University of California, Berkeley, 2005, \$24.95 in hardback), sociologists Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas spent five years asking poor urban women why they prioritized children over marriage. In this long-term, ethnographic study conducted in eight of Philadelphia's poorest neighborhoods, Edin and Kefalas talked in-depth with 162 low-income single moms and followed their progress over time. Mothers interviewed for the book were primarily white, African American and Latina, ages fifteen through fifty-six, with an average age of twenty-five, all living at or below the federal poverty line. Most of the women interviewed identified as heterosexual or were living a heterosexual lifestyle.

Edin and Kefalas' compelling book uses poor women's own words and stories to convey the meanings they associate with courtship and romance, pregnancy, motherhood and marriage. The authors' most striking finding is that contrary to common cultural assumptions, poor women are not rejecting the institution of marriage. Rather, like middle class women, poor women are changing their expectations for marriage and delaying marriage until they can find a lasting partnership of equals. That presents a challenge in poverty-ridden communities where many men fall prey to unemployment, illegal activity, drug or alcohol abuse, and incarceration. High rates of domestic violence also contribute to poor women's reluctance to marry, and societal inequality in poor communities makes equality in marriage a challenge. As a result, many poor women may view marriage as a luxury and long-term goal, not a necessity.

In contrast, the women interviewed for this study viewed children as an essential necessity in a woman's life, taking precedence over education and career.

Indeed, many poor women face insurmountable obstacles to higher education or white collar employment, and would be unable to reach these goals even if they delayed parenting until their late-twenties or early thirties. Unlike middle class women, who often delay marriage *and* childrearing for education and career, poor women make significant meaning through motherhood, and most would not dream of delaying childbirth. The women interviewed for *Promises I Can Keep* took great pride in being "good moms" and providing for their kids under difficult circumstances.

Indeed, child rearing presents one of the few opportunities for a rewarding life for women *and* men living in poverty. Edin and Kefalas argue that until poor people have greater access to education and economic opportunities, they will continue to have children early, in less than ideal circumstances than most Americans think they should. They challenge us to view single parenting as an adaptive move that represents deep reverence for, rather than rejection of, marriage and stable family life. Most women interviewed said they would rather remain unmarried than get married and divorced, or married and controlled or abused.

Unfortunately for us in an increasingly diverse King County, there was little representation of refugee or immigrant women in Edin and Kefalas' research, and no deep exploration in the ways in which culture nuances women's attitudes about marriage and child rearing. However, one of their major findings was that class, rather than race drove many of the choices of women interviewed, and *Promises* sets a precedent for further qualitative, strengths-based research on single parent families.

Despite some minor flaws, this book is a must-read for anyone working in the social service or education field, where a majority of our clients or students are poor single moms or live in single-parent households under the poverty line. *H*

Book Review:

Daring to Talk to Teenage Boys About Sex: A New Approach

By *Christina Malecka*

Howard B. Shiffer's book *How to be the Best Lover: A Guide for Teenage Boys* (Heartful Loving Press, Santa Barbara, 2004, \$19.95 in hardback) originated from a series of talks he had with his own teenage son about sex and intimacy.

In our culture, girls are still encouraged to bear much of the responsibility for mediating first-sexual experiences: from deciding if they are emotionally prepared for sex, to fielding pressure to have sex in exchange for commitment or intimacy, being responsible for birth control, or living with the consequences of early pregnancy. For this reason, Shiffer's book is groundbreaking, as it challenges boys to approach sexuality with respect for girls and women and understanding about intimacy. At the same time, *How to be the Best Lover* honors adolescent enthusiasm about sex and anxiousness about losing virginity and "scoring." Indeed, if we want girls to experience less sexual aggression and pressure, we need to support boys to approach sex in a healthy, respectful manner.

Not for the faint-hearted, *Lover* provides an introductory primer to boys on sexual technique. Parents and caregivers should read the book before giving it to a boy to determine his readiness for this information and their comfort with providing it. However, unlike pornography, which is readily available to most kids, this book presents realistic sexual information along with a message about respect for girls and women, boundaries, the importance of trust and intimacy, and safe sex that no XXX website delivers. In fact, Shiffer discourages boys from relying on pornography, encouraging them to cultivate their own fantasy life to prevent separation of emotion and sex and unrealistic expectations about girls' and women's sexuality.

Never shaming and always straightforward, Shiffer's book is a gift to parents, boys and teenage girls, with a few caveats. I was disappointed that Shiffer did not address homosexuality, or even offer some affirming

words or resources to boys who are gay or questioning their sexuality. *Lover* assumes heterosexuality as a norm, and would be alienating for a gay, bi-sexual or questioning boy when presented the book by well-meaning parents before coming out to them. This book is also biased toward white, middle class two-parent liberal families, where parents have time to be deeply involved in their children's lives and supplement *Lover* with one-on-one father-son conversations. It also assumes a naiveté about sex that many kids have lost by the time they get into their teens. These criticisms aside, I would recommend *How to be the Best Lover* to any adult or adolescent, male or female, who is committed to lifetime sexual equality and health. *H*

Social and Emotional Learning in Scandinavian Countries

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- In **Denmark**, there is a high priority on teaching children tools to handle their emotions as competently as they handle schoolwork. Schools also aim to teach children life-long skills that will stay with them well after they have completed their education.

Hearing about the specific ways in which these countries provide their children with the full range of skills and attributes needed to have full, happy, caring and productive lives opened my eyes to possibilities all around us to better support children's social and emotional development. I also see great opportunities to bring parents; family, friend and neighbor caregivers; child care workers; schools; and community-based programs information and ideas about how all can contribute to guiding the social and emotional development of children and youth.

For more information on Second Step, go to the Committee for Children's website: www.cfchildren.org. *H*

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artwork. The kids painted personal items, such as pillowcases, that they were able to keep in their rooms and take with them after they left SVH. Children also displayed their artwork around the Home, giving them a sense of pride and ownership.

I was also part of a newly formed Art Committee made up of volunteers from the community and staff. When St. Vincent Home built and moved to a new facility, this committee was instrumental in creating a space that was beautiful, nurturing and healing for the kids. SVH's hallway bears a mural with the words of St. Teresa of Avila, "In this house, all must be friends; in this house all must be loved; in this house, all must be held dear; in this house all must be helped." It is a great daily reminder of what SVH is all about.

I also connected with the Michigan State University music department and found a few student volunteers to coordinate and direct a choir made up of kids in the Children's Home. The choir was a huge success, and helped kids discover talents they never knew they had. The choir performed for the opening of the new chapel during Mass and other special events for townspeople and the entire agency. This provided the kids with an opportunity to be seen in a positive light, which increased their self-worth and confidence. Staff members were amazed and pleased with the blossoming of gifts in the children.

When I first started, I worked with a group of kids to grow tomato seedlings in their rooms. The children were thrilled to watch their tomato plants grow. Here was something they could nurture and have some control over, after feeling out of control for most of their lives. Eventually, SVH partnered with 4-H and started a garden on-site. The kids and staff were delighted to show me their garden work.

CM: It sounds like you did a great job identifying and engaging people and resources in the community. I also heard that you found a way to reduce the practice of restraining children when their behavior was perceived as dangerous.

SM: From the beginning, I strongly opposed the practice of physically restraining children. Soon, I was asked to be part of an interdisciplinary team at SVH to look for alternatives to physical management and to help all staff get on board with reducing and eliminating the need for this practice. SVH consulted experts in the field who offered educational workshops to all staff. Physical restraints have decreased, and they are working toward a zero-tolerance policy on restraining.

CM: How did you relate to kids when they were distressed?

SM: Let me tell you a story. One day when I was checking tomato plants, I found a 10-year-old boy in his room beating his head against the wall, which was his habit whenever he got upset.. His room was a mess and he felt he could not clean it as he was told to do. Not wanting the situation to escalate further, I directed him on using the vacuum cleaner and stayed with him while he picked up his clothes and trash. Within minutes, he was finished with his room. Then I taught

"I strongly oppose the practice of restraining children...So often, kids just need to be empowered and taught to self-soothe. Physically restraining kids often replicates the abusive situation that landed them (in foster care) in the first place."

him an alternative to banging his head. I showed him a yoga pose called "child's pose." and explained that he could think of it, like he was a turtle, and could go into his shell and feel calm when things began to feel overwhelming. A few weeks later, his social worker reported that he no longer beat his head against the wall. The boy also made up some of his own yoga-type poses to soothe himself. So often, kids just need

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to be empowered and taught to self-soothe. Physically restraining kids often replicates the abusive situation that landed them at SVH in the first place.

CM: What are some other examples of strengths-based practices you implemented?

"I found that by acknowledging the difficulty of line-staff's job duties, and finding ways to support them, it was easier to incorporate better supports for the kids in their care."

SM: We implemented the practice of youth workers engaging with each child on a personal level every day by asking them about something good or bad that happened and documenting it on a log sheet. It made a big difference in connecting the staff and kids relationally every day instead of getting lost in routines.

We switched from a token economy where kids got "points" and punishment for bad behavior to a system where kids got points and rewards called "warm fuzzies," for doing things right. When kids filled a container with warm fuzzies, their whole unit would get a special treat.

CM: That must have really increased children's sense of connectedness and accountability to each other.

SM: Yes, being connected and having a sense of community is key to spirituality. Another responsibility as chaplain was to assist the various programs in envisioning the agency as one community while preparing to move to one campus. The agency was consolidating from separate facilities around Lansing to one large building. In addition to facilitating some managerial workshops to ready people for the move, our agency spirituality committee enlisted additional

representatives from the programs to begin work on a quilt-like agency banner. This required each of the programs to discuss and depict their program strengths and their role within the bigger picture of St. Vincent Catholic Charities' mission. We then had an agency-wide ritual where each program stood up and shared their strengths and focus. It was powerful. The beautiful banner now hangs in the new chapel.

CM: You were able to create a lot of positive change in your year and a half tenure at St. Vincent. Were there any systemic barriers you had to overcome to implement these changes? Did you run into any resistance or skepticism? How did you overcome it?

SM: At first, some staff members were resistant to change. I heard people say, "we don't have time to do this," or just general skepticism about having a chaplain, but overall there was good support. There was great value in being an outsider from the beginning, and not being entrenched in the system. I could observe organizational dynamics from a distance with a fresh eye. Having the full support of St. Vincent Catholic Charities' CEO was also crucial, and in general, agency leadership were invested in a strength-based organization and supporting the chaplain position. I also found that by acknowledging the difficulty of line-staff's job duties, and finding ways to support them, it was easier to incorporate better supports for the kids in their care.

CM: True – line staff need to be supported and empowered as much as the kids do. Thanks Sharon, for sharing your story. I know it will inspire many of our readers. H

Heliotrope's New Address

We moved our office in 2005; only our address has changed:

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Update: What Heliotrope is Working On

SOAR Opportunity Fund. Nancy and Christina are just wrapping up their multi-year staff support for the SOAR Opportunity Fund, a group of private, corporate and public funders that worked together to improve early learning opportunities for children in “family, friend and neighbor” child care. This oldest and most common type of child care includes grandparents, aunts and uncles, friends and neighbors who take care of children while their parents work or meet other responsibilities.

Family, friend and neighbor caregiving. The Opportunity Fund undertook groundbreaking work to find effective ways to bring neighborhood-based resources and supports to these important caregivers, who have largely been overlooked in other early learning and school readiness efforts. The FFN work will continue with an informal group of funders and community leaders, and coordination and leadership by Child Care Resources.

Business Partnership for Early Learning. Nancy is serving as the project coordinator for a group of businesses who are committed to closing the “school preparedness” gap faced by many children living in poverty and who are also students of color and don’t speak English at home. Safeco, Boeing, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Group Health Cooperative, Washington Mutual, the Tabor 100 and ICOS have made lead pledges. The Business Partnership for Early Learning is investing in a research-based home visiting

pre-literacy program for children ages 2 and 3 that was developed in New York. In addition, the group will fund educational Play & Learn groups for the children and their parents, as well as for their family, friend and neighbor caregivers. Neighborhood House and Atlantic Street Center are the provider agencies for the business group, and the City of Seattle is providing funding to Southwest Youth & Family Services to offer similar services.

The Seattle Foundation. Nancy is working closely with The Seattle Foundation on developing an inspiring report for donors and potential donors who want to know more about effective ways to make a difference. The report is framed around seven interrelated elements that provide the foundation for a healthy community.

Powerful Schools. Powerful Schools has recently engaged Heliotrope to help with strategic planning to reflect the organization’s ongoing depth of knowledge and the current educational environment in which it operates.

Christina, who is currently working part-time, just completed work on *School’s Out Washington’s* 2006 – 2008 Strategic Plan and is working on a process evaluation for the *Achieving Family Friendly Schools* initiative. She continues to write grants for *World Vision’s* place-based community transformation initiative, and has also recently facilitated a leadership retreat for the *Seattle Public Schools Alignment Initiative*. H

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