

# “EVERYTHING MEANS SOMETHING TO ME...”

By Kim Stevens

“Everything means something to me,” spoke a young teen on the video promoting child-specific recruitment for adolescents.<sup>1</sup> She goes on to say that she watches and listens intently; for signs that she is loved and signs that she is unlovable. Not surprisingly, she tells us that most often the *unlovable* evidence comes out ahead. Another young man relates that the messages in residential settings are often confusing. If cooperative and pleasant, he is seen as manipulative; silence is labeled stubbornness; and honesty, oppositional behavior. A third teen reports that his records are full of terms like Oppositional Defiant Disorder, Bipolar and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, but no mention of poet, athlete, giver of great hugs – all labels he applies to himself.

Child welfare practice is refocused on youth voice these days. Engaging youth in advocacy projects, conference panels and keynotes by youth, adolescent permanency projects, and various mentoring models all evidence this positive shift. As adults we are being asked to look at our practice and habits, honestly evaluating their efficacy. We still have some way to go. As we continue to join with youth on their path to adulthood, they are telling us how we can do a better job in parenting, treatment and permanency work. A universal plea is that we stop labeling youth and truly become more forthcoming about their strengths and positive attributes.

Shortly after my daughters were adopted, the one who had been in care since birth was given a second grade assignment – the dreaded “life line.” We called her social worker who spent hours poring through the records to find mention of first steps, first words, and notable milestones. What she found instead was a chronology of enuresis, suspected “deficiencies,” disrupted placements, and behavioral diagnoses. Not one mention of a tooth coming in, her brilliant smile, or any of the “firsts” that most children have recorded in baby books and in their parent’s memories. Several years ago a group of aspiring young actors and poets put together a revue of sorts for a series of child welfare conferences and training sessions. All participants were adopted or in foster care. In writing the original pieces, themes about labeling and biases against foster kids kept emerging. “I Am, I Am Not” incorporated all the performers experiences of reading their records, attending service plan and educational meetings, or simply moving through the world. “I am strong; I am not your labels;” “I am a dancer, I am not ‘foster trash;’ are only two of the messages these youth shared.

At foster care reviews and permanency planning meetings for teens, it is always concerning to hear the litany of items the teen has to show compliance around. Somehow in the intervening years between coming into care and becoming an adolescent, the adult actions and decisions that prompted the foster care placement in the first place have morphed into an assessment that the youth is the one who now must change.

Further, even within family settings – foster or adopt – kids are often identified in terms of their deficits, even at times to the exclusion of their names! How many times do we hear a parent or caregiver use the expressions “my RAD kid,” “he’s ADHD,” or “my daughter is bipolar.” In these

---

<sup>1</sup> “We Interrupt.” Video, The Homecoming Project, MN Adoption Resource Network



expressions, children lose their identities and we lose our focus on strengths, even as child welfare experts are dictating strengths-based services as best practice.

Children hear the way we speak about them or other children. They read our actions as well. And they are already confused and worried about their genetic and environmental histories. Will they grow up to be like their birth parents? What is so wrong with them that they cause families to reject them? Will they be able to succeed? Will they be happy? Could they ever be parents? Our young people need all the encouragement and support we can give them. For many years, they will need us to provide the positive words and beliefs that they don't have for themselves.

The practice of labeling kids dehumanizes them. As it is, the larger community does not understand what it is to be a foster child. When we use labels to describe and categorize children, whether fighting for the services and supports they need or raising awareness among teachers, neighbors and family, we give tacit permission for others to label them as well.

As people with developmental disabilities have taught us, it is important to put the person before the challenge. Rather than say, “my autistic daughter,” instead try, “my beautiful artist Cassandra, who struggles with connecting to people.” It's not “Ben is ADHD,” but “my soccer star Ben, who tries to find a way to use that same energy in school that gets him cheers on the field” or even “my eldest is living away right now, trying to figure out what adulthood means to her,” for the grown child who has left home for reasons unknown.

The language we use allows others to use it for or against our children. I know having learned from mistakes I made in the past. Being the mom who was willing to believe her kids could do something wrong and know that her kids did need more than other kids, I made it easy at times for others to blame my children, to lower expectations, or to make assumptions. Over time, I came to realize that my children needed me to be their greatest fan and supporter.

Several years ago, I consciously decided to never say anything negative about my children in public. At school conferences, when the teachers and administrators would worry about lack of effort or impulsivity, I stopped colluding with them about the challenges of ADHD. Instead I thanked them for acknowledging how capable my child is and went on to say how proud I am of this child's obvious joy at being in school among his peers and with his athletic abilities. I thanked them for making an environment where he could be happy and enthusiastic and went on to suggest that a more kinetic way of teaching seemed in order. The difference it has made in his schooling, his social life, in me and in HIM, is incredible.

