



CASE STUDY #1: JERRY (San Quentin Resident)

Jerry was a standout in the "I CARE" program. We would find him standing out in the parking lot where his parents dropped him off. When confronted he would enter the group, but his agenda was always to get thrown out.

He was a puny little runt possibly related to the steady diet of illegal and controlled substances he consumed on a daily basis (according to scuttlebutt from his peers in the group). It would be safe to say that Jerry had elevated getting thrown out to an art form.

Before his high school career was cut short he had been invited to leave every high school in our district (5 to be exact) plus the continuation school.

In a supportive situation like "I CARE" it can be difficult to get yourself kicked out, but Jerry was persistent. Since most of our work is accomplished in small teams within the larger group and teamwork being key to that process, he was able to alienate his team members to the degree that they would demand that I switch his group for the next session.

Even people who really needed the credits to graduate would issue the ultimatum; "he leaves or I do." (I never miss a chance to remind people that life is filled with such choices but I did feel for them.) I was only able to convince one group that this was Jerry's game and that they needed to call him on it.

We talk a lot about personal power and how we give it away too easily to people who use Jerry's tactics. They accepted the challenge and refused to buy into his game of "I'm a jerk so you've got to kick me out so I don't have any control (responsibility) for what happens". Victim much? Jerry almost made it to the end of the session but a desire to sabotage anything good and productive in his life won out as usual.

Jump ahead about 15 years and find yours truly working out at the local gym. A tall, well-developed physical specimen approached me and questioned "Fred"? That is always my cue that our relationship began in "I CARE" since other students address me as "Mr D" or "D man" or other names not so printable...(mostly from the assistant principal career time slot). I'm always expected to recognize these people because we did indeed share some significant time together in most cases.

After the customary "Do you remember me?" and my canned "If you don't remember who you are, how am I supposed to..." (little attempt at humor that I employ to deflect attention from my pathetic memory for names which is tragically combined with an uncanny memory for faces...) "You saved my life", he blurts out introducing himself as Jerry with adamant reflection about how critical his time in "I CARE" had been. (I hesitate to take any credit for the choices our group members make because I don't want the blame if they continue with self defeating behaviors !)

I'm speechless as he relates his story. "I was sitting in "Q" (San Quentin for those of us with little history in the justice system) when I remember something that you said in "I CARE". You said that "we put ourselves where we want to be"; But I didn't want to be in prison! So the next day I talked with a trustee and got going on my GED. In a few months I started classes in San Francisco City College which led to my bachelor's degree from San Francisco State. After release I got a job in business which led me to becoming a stockbroker."

Needless to say I was astounded at Jerry's success story. His next question was the kicker however. "Do you have anybody like me in class now?" As politely as possible I responded that people like Jerry don't come along just every day! (The obvious "Thank God" was left unarticulated.) He then said that he wanted to put something back into the program that had "been there for him".

He asked if he could volunteer with the most challenging kid we had. I called the mom of a good candidate and asked her permission for an ex-con to work with her son. She jumped at the idea and four Saturdays were launched; a "don't end up like me" type reverse big brother encounter.

They went to ball games, ate at Jeff's favorite health food places and went for beach excursions in Jerry's Mercedes. A few days later, I've pretty much forgotten about the whole thing when I got a call from a lady's voice I didn't recognize. She was crying saying that her son had been hanging out with Jerry. (Immediately I went to a dark place in my brain thinking what might have gone wrong...Did Jerry blow it some way? Did he take the kid out drinking or something?... this mistrust is a side effect of dealing with former addicts and students...I guess it's because I've seen a lot of relapses and each one breaks my heart a little. When this mom regained her composure she said "I want you to know that my son has been being so much more respectful around me. Last night he told me he loved me for the first time in years!" When I shared this feedback with Jerry he cried.

Analysis:

So what does it all mean? In terms of statistical predictability probably nothing but what I took from this experience is that we must never give up on anybody. In a support group situation our responsibility includes not accepting clients giving up on themselves. Jerry freely admits that he "blew off" most of the "I CARE" experience choosing instead to continue his personal game of "help me be a victim" (which is easy to do when you are being obnoxious).

Many other success stories follow this same pattern of no immediate progress leading to kids pulling themselves out of the program and then sometimes returning months later willing to work. We make it a point to avoid "teacher speak" phrases like "Look who decided to gift us their presence" or "So it looks like Mr. _____ has finally come around". Sarcasm is a poor choice for communication with this, or any, population...best saved for the straight "A" types that take themselves much too seriously. Bottom line?...people take to a support group at their own individual pace.

NOTE to facilitators: To last in this highly rewarding profession we must let go of any residual need for immediate gratification we might be carrying around.