

VOICE OF THE CONSUMER

The Foster Care System and Beyond: Self-Advocacy for Teens

Getting Beyond the System (GBS) is a 12-week Self-Advocacy Seminar designed to help teens in foster care begin preparing themselves for an independent and self-sufficient future. The program, which was developed by the Youth Advocacy Center, is based on two stark and simple assumptions:

First, that the foster care system is not adequately preparing teens for future success and, if they want to survive and thrive, they need to take responsibility and control for their own future;

Second, that teens in foster care can and do understand this fact and, if given respect, information and opportunity, they will act in their own best interests and develop realistic and achievable plans for their lives.

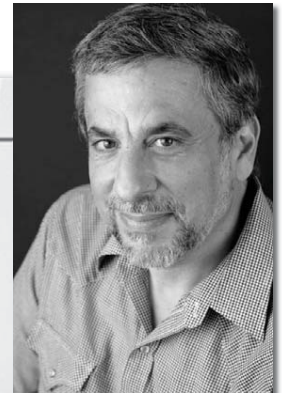
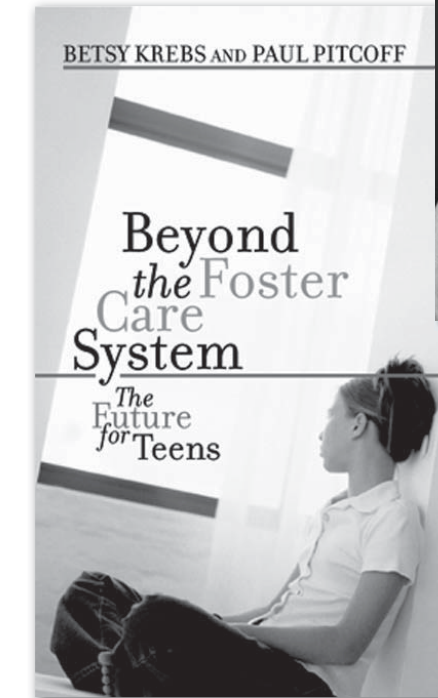
In *Beyond the Foster Care System: The Future of Teens*, Betsy Krebs and Paul Pitcoff, YAC's co-founders, lay out the history and philosophy which led to creation of the GBS seminars. In doing so, they make a strong case for restructuring the foster care system's priorities, policies and practices when it comes to preparing teens for adulthood.

Krebs and Pitcoff begin by describing their own introduction to the child welfare system as law guardians attempting to represent the legal rights of children in foster care. "Frustration is an understatement for anyone who works in foster care," writes Pitcoff at one point in the book. This frustration is a consistent and almost palpable theme which runs through the anecdotes which make up much of this book. Krebs outlines her struggle to assist Carlos, a young client, find in a high school which will recognize both his actual grade level and his hunger for an education. Pitcoff tells of Theresa's failed effort to leave the RTC where she has been raped in favor of life with family members, first her grandfather or then her sister.

Getting Beyond the System is premised upon tapping into the natural strengths, resilience, coping skills and judgment which teens must have to survive in foster care. The book shows how, along the way, the authors learned many of the key lessons for GBS from foster care youth themselves. For example, Krebs, a Harvard-trained lawyer, watched as Carlos demonstrated the art of self-advocacy in practice. "Most often in life, you have to make some effort to get people interested in helping you," writes Krebs. "Carlos was a star at this...he had articulated his goals and presented strengths...he made an effort to understand my needs."

Jenny, a young woman in care and one of YAC's first Youth Advocates, helped translate regulations into a Rights and Advocacy Guidelines booklet that spoke to teens on issues they cared about in language they could understand. And, all the while, Krebs was being warned by Jenny's caseworker that the young woman "could be trouble." Jenny's peer-led advocacy workshops would help to form the basis of YAC's use of Socratic method for teaching teens – once again letting them find their own correct answers to the critical questions about their lives.

YAC's respect for the foster care teens' own goals and aspirations expresses itself in the Informational Interviews which are key to the GBS seminars. Teens are asked to indicate a profession or field in which they would like to make a career. YAC then arranges an "Informational Interview" with an appropriate working professional, regardless of whether it is a lawyer or an NBA basketball player, a rap star or an accountant. "Every teen we have sent to a NBA star has come back telling us they need a back-up plan or that they are going to pursue a different career," the authors state. "They respect information that is unbiased and is accurate and they do listen



and can make good decisions."

Unfortunately, there is ample statistical evidence showing the failures of the foster care system in preparing teens for independence. The book itself, however, offers relatively little in the way of numbers. Rather, Krebs and Pitcoff use their anecdotes, which are depressingly real, to convey the obstacles which foster care youth face and the difficulties of trying to improve the system. Foster care agency staff, as a rule, do not come off well in this book. They are typically por-

trayed as remote and resistant. However, the authors lay blame not on the people but on the system itself. "The majority of professionals care deeply and they struggle daily with ways to help their teens," they write.

The greater problem, they argue, is that a system originally designed to provide short term safety for abused or neglected infants has never adequately addressed the very different longer term needs of teens for whom going home is not a real option. Key is "higher expectations for what teens in foster care can achieve...a greater focus on education for teens in foster care is a logical and important start...one possible goal is to expect that some large percentage of teens, if not all teens, should graduate college or complete advanced vocational training and the system should expect that all are given opportunities to prepare for meaningful careers."

"We are hoping to use the book as a way to start a dialogue about these issues and open up a broader policy debate about how to do this," said Krebs. "We are really pleased that the Open Society Institute had a policy forum the week the book came out."

In New York, YAC is currently working with Safe Space which offers the Getting Beyond the System seminars at three locations. It will be expanding to a fourth location this year, says Krebs. "We are going to begin working with New York Foundling, Episcopal Social Services and Inwood House later this year," says Krebs.

For information about YAC and *Beyond the Foster Care System: The Future of Teens*, visit www.youthadvocacycenter.org.

