

BOOK REVIEW

by Marisa PolICASTRO

Beyond the Foster Care System: The Future for Teens

Authors: Betsy Krebs and Paul Pitcoff
Rutgers University Press 2006

Each year, thousands of teenagers age out of foster care across the United States, insufficiently prepared for an independent adult life. Many of these young people end up homeless, in the criminal justice system, or on public assistance.

In their new book, *Beyond the Foster Care System: The Future for Teens*, attorneys Betsy Krebs and Paul Pitcoff describe this as a needless and tragic waste of potential. Through individual stories of teens aging out of foster care, they show many of these teens to be talented and ambitious, with aspirations to become educated and lead productive lives. These young people want to be connected to a family and a community, and to raise healthy children of their own. The authors say that depriving these youth of the tools and support they need to plan for their futures while in temporary foster care is short-sighted and unethical.

In response, Krebs and Pitcoff co-founded the Youth Advocacy Center in New York City in 1992. They say their experience with teens and the foster care system as attorneys led to the creation of the *Getting Beyond the System Self Advocacy Seminar*. The class is designed around a model that integrates professional and community resources to help teens develop independent living skills and gain control over their futures.

The book tracks the progress and transformation of foster care teens as they work through the seminar, and learn to take responsibility for their visions of a future unlikely to be achieved within the current foster care system model.

"With 20 years of higher education experience, I still remain impressed with the intellectual curiosity and strengths of teens in care and their overriding desire to make good lives for themselves," Pitcoff said.

The authors argue in their book that while many young people in foster care face enormous psychological

challenges and need mental health care, those services need to be provided in conjunction with training and support in life skills and independent living:

The foster care system is based on the assumption that the children and teenagers are mentally ill or too fragile to take on the responsibility of preparing for their future. The trauma of separating from biological parents and living in foster care is formidable, and certainly teens need support from mental health professionals. But is there too much focus on a mental illness model in child welfare? If so, does the presumption that teens in foster care suffer from mental illness or incapacity eclipse the fact that they need to prepare for their future? Can the system integrate a commitment to promoting teens' mental and emotional health with a priority on education and future planning?

Krebs and Pitcoff contend that the low expectations of policymakers and professionals in the system contribute significantly to bad outcomes for foster youth. Therefore, a critical component of their seminars is to raise expectations and essentially demand success and achievement.

The Self-Advocacy Seminar

The Self-Advocacy Seminar is loosely based on law school teaching methods. The facilitator uses the Socratic Method to encourage students to discuss and analyze realistic cases of teens negotiating difficult life choices and situations.

To bring the lessons closer to home and allow the teens to shine independently, Krebs and Pitcoff said they developed the idea of an informational interview for each teen with a professional in the field of their stated interest. The interview, which concludes the teens' experience in the seminar, allows them to apply their new skills to a situation tailored to their individual needs, wants, and

ambitions, helping them gain a sense of accomplishment and motivation for the future. The authors write:

We cannot underestimate the importance of teens visualizing themselves as future professionals. For many students, the informational interview is the first time they physically enter a work or college setting outside the foster care and public high school systems. Impressive strangers greeted them and treated them as potentially belonging to a new group, a group of professionals. The professional shows them around, gives them tours, and brings them to an office, all in the context of this future identity. They pass and often meet or see people that look like them and recognize that they can fit into a professional setting too. Their sole identity within the community is no longer as a foster child, but as a future colleague.

Betsy Krebs is co-founder and executive director of the Youth Advocacy Center. She is the recipient of Open Society Institute and Ashoka fellowships, and serves on the advisory board to the commissioner of the New York City Administration for Children. A graduate of Harvard Law School, she worked for four years as an attorney representing foster children in Manhattan Family Court. **Paul Pitcoff**, also an attorney, is co-founder and director of education of the Youth Advocacy Center. He was founding chair and professor of the Department of Communications at Adelphi University for 20 years and is now Professor Emeritus. Paul has produced award-winning documentaries about social service organizations.

Marisa PolICASTRO was a Summer 2006 intern at Youth Advocacy Center, based in New York City. She is in her final year at Boston College Law School.