

Fostering Families Magazine, July, August Issue, 2016
by Lark Eshleman and John Queen

Mentoring Teens to Become Part of Their Community.

This column is inspired by, and written with, John Queen, Founder and President of Bayside H.O.Y.A.S., Inc, of Maryland (Helping Our Youth Achieve Success).

Since I have come to know and work with Mr. Queen, seeing the countless hours and undivided attention he spends on helping the children and teens in our community, my respect and admiration for him has blossomed.

I should say, however, that his devotion to the teens involved in the H.O.Y.A.S. is superseded only by his love of his family, especially his amazing fiancée, Mika Johnson, and their children Aria Jones and Peyton Queen.

Leading by Example Is Key!

Similar to so many foster parents I know, John's work in the community of our youth requires that he wears many hats. Like many of you, but without actually being a foster parent, John sometimes helps families of his H.O.Y.A.S teens; maybe the electric bill isn't paid, or they need a ride to get to a DSS appointment, or they just need groceries. Consistently, "Queens," (as the H.O.Y.A.S. youth call him) is a "trusted uncle," "mentor," "teacher," "coach," "OG" (Original Gangster), "Big Homey" giver-of-wisdom, confidante, advise-giver ... often one of the only trusted adults in the lives of many of these youth.

As is true in many communities, quite a few of our at-risk youth live with people other than their biological parents. Whether or not they are officially in foster care, most of them are in need of help to prepare them to be out in the world, to leave the nest, to join the big world of "grown-ups," since now they are adults, at least in biological age.

What is it you most want these teens to master before they are on their own?

When John and I had this conversation recently, I asked him what he wanted for the teenagers in his program to most learn -- or become -- before they left high school. And how does he help them to attain that learning. As I listened to his thoughts flow and his enthusiasm power-up, I understood even more why these teens -- many of whom have little faith in "the system," or even in life itself, and have come to be suspicious and disrespectful of adults in general -- look up to "Queens."

"They see me as someone authentic and who does what I say. Seeing and being able to trust is what makes the difference between someone who says they support the kids, and someone who really does support them. They see it, and begin to trust it."

"Kids need and deserve to know how and why to use community or government resources."

A primary example of what John Queen wants these, youth to learn happens when one of his teenagers need a job, but doesn't know how to fill out a job application. "What is a resume? Where can I use a computer to do a job search if I can't afford a computer myself? Who can help me?"

“Teens aging out of the foster care system – or just graduating from high school – need and deserve to be comfortable with community resources. They need to know where to go for help. This process is not always a learned process; it must be taught hands-on.”

For example: The Public Library.

John says, “We thought about how to “trick” kids into reading books, so we decided to make participation in a [summer reading program](#) for kids to fulfill their [service learning and community hours](#) that they need to be part of the H.O.Y.A.S overall program, [as well as graduation for school](#). We picked a books about things they would relate to, like when people have to go to jail. That first book was [Monster](#). Another book, which was about bullying, caught the attention of many of the kids in the H.O.Y.A.S. group. (That book was [Wonder](#)). [Yummy](#) was a book we used to teach them about the [non-prison side of the judicial system](#). We read it together as part of the summer reading program, and then we developed a mock trial about the book, about a kid who was part of a gang. In the book, this 11-year-old accidentally killed a girl. After reading the books with the kids, at the Library, we have discussions about these topics that are actually part of their lives. [Choosing books that relate to their lives can help youth quickly develop a moral compass on life.](#)

Then, of course, while they’re in the library for the book discussion, we encouraged them to get a library card. We need to keep them involved, by reading books that relate to their real lives. If they read and contribute in the conversation, then they earn “community service hours” which earn the teenagers’ eligibility for [playing in basketball tournaments](#), going to the National Mall and Museums and [paint-balling](#), out for a meal, first-ever canoe trips at the [local land conservancy](#), things we know they want to do and which help them understand what is out there in the larger world.”

The Motto of the H.O.Y.A.S. is simple: “Do your Best, Be your Best.” And yet, this is a way of life that is foreign to many of our children who grow up in lives of chaos and turmoil, often violence.

So, Queens and the H.O.Y.A.S. require certain fundamentals before they can join in the activities that they so want to be a part of. “[Respect, responsibility, discipline, leadership, team-building, self-worth, structure and most importantly a chance.](#) So many come into the world with 3 strikes against them already.

Strategies and actions expected of the H.O.Y.A.S. teens include, for example, community clean-ups, engaging in the book clubs, playing basketball and football, academic check-ins and minimum grade-point requirements, completing homework assignments, and behavior expectation in all environments, not just when they are engaged in H.O.Y.A.S. activities.

What’s Different about How the H.O.Y.A.S. Program Supports Prosocial and Positive Development

Among Our At-risk Teens in Our Community?

Numbers of community groups for teens, and many foster families I have known, have the right idea about expectations. As with the Pillars of the H.O.Y.A.S., expectations include “Academic excellence, community focus, and character development.”

But one major difference between what this program does and what happens in many programs and, in fact, in many foster families, is that the teens may WANT to live up to expectations set by the adults who are showing they care about them. But they don’t actually KNOW HOW to do it! They need hands-on help to get the jobs done. They need what they didn’t get when they were young – someone who will, in effect, walk them through each stage of completing what we expect teenagers to already know, but that these kids didn’t learn.

It Sounds Simple, But Hands-On Help Is Needed

For example, when we say to a 15 year old, “Go do your homework or you can’t go out to dinner with us,” we may be punishing this teenager without even realizing we’re doing it.

Surprisingly, many teens who are still in school have not actually learned HOW to “do their homework.” Starting at the beginning of a project, going through the various steps, finishing and then actually handing in their homework may all be too many steps and too much to expect. They may need you to give them ongoing help.

A program such as the H.O.Y.A.S. takes the embarrassment and self-rejection out of their receiving this kind of help, mainly because it is offered to ALL of the kids in the program, and they need to receive it – and achieve results – in order to continue to be included in the activities that they really do want to be in, such as playing basketball, or going on group trips.

It may seem strange to think that a parent or community mentor would have to help a teenager to finish such simple jobs as homework or even attendance at school. But this is the reality of many of the teens in foster care and in difficult living situations – they have not learned simple, rudimentary tools of life, like finishing projects or jobs. They need someone who is non-judgmental to do it with them, as if they were young kids again.

This is a great deal of the success of a community program such as the H.O.Y.A.S. The adults in this program – as many of you as foster parents – act as the parents they didn’t have when they were younger and when they would have learned these simple things like being responsible, or participating in their community.

No Blame, Just Progress

And this is what the success of good foster parenting and programs such as the H.O.Y.A.S. is built on. Helping to support teenagers as they are close to aging out of foster care, or graduating from high school, can be summed up by saying that these teens have missed many crucial stages of development, which they absolutely need in order to be successful in the larger world.

By being unjudging of them, by being dependable, by seeing that they need things that they didn’t get when they were younger, such as learning how to finish jobs, how to use resources around them, how to

become proud of themselves for getting it right – giving them hands-on help in ways that don't shame them. This is what builds confidence and gives them good skills and tools to meet the expectations that the world will have of them.

And this is what John Queen and his fellow organizers of the Bayside H.O.Y.A.S offer to our community's at-risk youth. Living by example, proving that adults can be dependable, developing expectations and then being hands-on to fulfill their name of "Helping Our Youth Achieve Success." And it's working!