

Youth On Their Own

by Jan Henrikson



Photo courtesy of YOTO

YOTO students celebrate their graduation.

Look at Mary Gruensfelder-Cox clapping, hooting and whistling at nearly every high-school graduation in town every May. How many kids does she have, anyway?

"I'm going to bring an air horn next year," says Gruensfelder-Cox, executive director of Youth On Their Own (YOTO), a 22-year-old nonprofit that supports the high-school graduation of youth who, through no fault of their own, lack a stable, permanent home and a parental or long-term legal guardian physically involved in their lives.

"I got these huge hugs from kids who said, 'Thank you,' and I realized I was the only person there for them," says Gruensfelder-Cox. Typically, five volunteers and five staff, who serve 89 high schools in a community of nearly a million, split up to attend the high-school graduation of every single YOTO kid.

"As they walk across that stage, they look like every other kid," she adds. "Nobody knows except for the people who supported them that these kids had every barrier in front of them."

Like Danielle, who graduated with honors last May. When she came to the attention of YOTO, she had a baby and was living with her drug-addicted sister and the sister's drug-dealer boyfriend.

"They were not safe," says Gruensfelder-Cox, who was obligated to call Child Protective Services. "It got her out of the situation. But I'm not the hero here because it could just as easily have gone badly. It didn't because Danielle is tenacious and smart."

Today Danielle's baby is three. Gruensfelder-Cox considers her "one of the most fiercely protective and best mothers in spite of being pregnant at 14." After working as a receptionist for one of YOTO's board members, Danielle began college at Pima in January.

While her life may be dramatic, YOTO teens like Danielle tend to be unseen, unnoticed. "These are kids who aren't going to identify themselves

through behavioral referrals," says Gruensfelder-Cox. "They're plugging along. They're under the radar."

It takes training to recognize that the girl slumped quietly in her seat in biology class doesn't hate biology. Or the guy asleep in the back of the room with his head on the desk isn't recovering from a night of too much fun with his friends.

It's possible she is juggling two or three jobs to feed herself. He might be struggling to keep his brothers and sisters together, and running a household on top of trying to finish high school.

That's why all 89 high schools have trained liaisons that work with YOTO. That's why Gruensfelder-Cox is also passionate about sensitizing everyone who comes into contact with kids on a given day, from the faculty to the security guard to the cafeteria lady: "You know that kid you sneak that extra meal to because you know he's really hungry? Let's be aware of his circumstance. Get him to the person in school who can get him to us."

Fortunately, 9,000 students have made their way to YOTO since it launched in 1986. Once students are connected with YOTO, they are eligible to receive a \$125 monthly stipend, depending on school attendance and grades of C or better.

"It's not going to make them able to pay the rent," says Gruensfelder-Cox, "but the kids themselves, even the ones that are the most economically challenged, have said that knowing it's there is like 'I know somebody is looking; there is acknowledgement.'"

For some kids the \$125 might buy a new set of CDs. "For a lot of them it takes the edge off their poverty. It might make the difference between eating over the weekend or not. High-school kids typically don't sign up for free lunch because it's embarrassing," she says.

YOTO, which is completely community funded, provides \$450,000 a year in

stipend money for between 550 and 625 kids. The Mini Mall tucked in their headquarters is stocked with basic necessities donated by the community — gently used clothing, hygiene kits, household goods, food.

They also offer special needs assistance. "Whether it be a set of brakes for a car, an occasional rent payment, a utility payment, a pair of shoes for the basketball team or going on a debate trip. That's really important," Gruensfelder-Cox notes. "I just signed a check for a kid who's on the student council and he's going up to Phoenix for a conference. That's building leadership skills. That's the kind of thing I would pay for for my kids and nobody's going to pay that for him."

Gruensfelder-Cox makes it clear that YOTO's services are not for the teen who is simply tired of following rules at home, or wants to hang out with what she calls the "Pool Mom" down the street — the one who wants to be more friend than parent.

"That's not the (YOTO) kid who says, 'I'm sorry I don't believe I should have a curfew.' These are kids whose most favorite wish is they could have a real family and could trust adults."

Their parents are either drug addicted, incarcerated, self-centered, deported or experiencing such excruciating poverty that they have to choose which kids to keep and which to let go on their own. Kids live with various relatives, in cars, motels, shelters, on their own or with significant others. Because they have been out there on their own for up to 10 years, unparented, self-sufficiency is a survival mechanism. They may prickle at intervention as much as they long for it.

"We have to be very gentle with them, but standards-based services is what is fair," Gruensfelder-Cox says.

Currently YOTO is exploring ways to maintain standards while working with charter and online schools. If stipends are offered for grades of C or better, how do you handle an alternative school that doesn't give Ds or Fs? How do you evaluate attendance at an online course?

Still, online schools are lifelines to students who live far from bus lines. Other kids tell YOTO that alternative schools are the best choice for them because they are able to do their work without the distraction of dressing and acting a certain way.

While YOTO celebrates each and every graduation, it is also giving an extra push to students making the leap from high school to college. What can they do in the realm of dropout prevention and education preparedness? How can they help teens set educational goals and build relationships with whomever they are going to be educated by next?

Equally important, who is going to cheer them on? With practical hands on help and emotional support? Whistles, hoots and tears of all kinds.

The tears were a good thing at last year's annual signature fundraiser, Talk of the Town. Three YOTO teens shared

their stories. Tabettha Bruns, the third speaker, had been abandoned by her mom when she was 14 in favor of her mother's latest boyfriend. She'd lived on her own for two years and was only two months shy of graduating with honors from Flowing Wells High School.

She practiced her speech with Gruensfelder-Cox and started sobbing halfway through. "By the time she was done, I was sobbing," says Gruensfelder-Cox. "We walked through what to do when that happened."

What Bruns didn't realize is that she'd be crying through the first two speakers' stories. When her turn came, she was a puddle.

"But she was so incredibly eloquent," says Gruensfelder-Cox. "I had a pang when she was speaking. I thought, 'Are we just abusing these kids by getting them up there and having them do this? It's so hard for them.'"

Afterward, Bruns, who is studying at Arizona State University with the intent of becoming a doctor, sent her an e-mail saying, "The whole experience of telling my story at Top of the Town allowed me to put it away. I had a pretty big chip on my shoulder and I tossed it off that night and I'm free."

In December, YOTO, as a small nonprofit, received the Non-Profit and Corporate Responsibility Award, which pays tribute to nonprofit organizations that make a positive impact on the community and continue to do so under difficult financial constraints. The award was presented by *Arizona Business Magazine* in partnership with the Alliance of Arizona Nonprofits.

Youth On Their Own's 14th Annual Fundraising Gala, is Saturday, March 7, 2009, at 5:30 p.m., at The Westin La Paloma Resort & Spa, Tucson, Arizona. An auction, dinner and dancing support the high-school graduation of local homeless youth. Event proceeds provide homeless students in schools throughout metro Tucson with financial assistance, basic needs and guidance as they pursue their high-school diplomas. Cost: \$125 per ticket and \$1,150 per table of 10. To purchase tickets, visit www.yoto.org or call the office at 293-1136.

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