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# **Positive Environments to overcome Adverse Childhood Experiences**

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This presentation is based on a proposal to the Corporation for National and Community Service for an AmeriCorps Program to focus on “Healthy Futures,” an AmeriCorps Funding Priority for 2010. Most of the program interventions are already occurring at the Troy Housing Authority in some format, but would be enhanced and expanded with new AmeriCorps Members.

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Essentially, we propose to promote **Positive Environments** within our communities as a way to address **Adverse Childhood Experiences**. **The PE/ACE Project**, as we are calling it, will be implemented in various ways with different populations. Specifically:

- PE/ACE for Children: Positive Encounters to overcome Adverse Childhood Experiences.
- PE/ACE for Adults: Peer Empowerment to overcome Adverse Childhood Experiences.
- PE/ACE for Families: Parenting Education to overcome Adverse Childhood Experiences.
- PE/ACE for Seniors: Patient Emissaries to overcome Adverse Childhood Experiences.

During the remainder of this presentation I will share examples of how each of these service components is actualized to help you to more fully understand the rationale behind each approach. The presentation will include real life examples, with client names changed to protect their privacy.

**PE/ACE for Children: Positive Encounters to overcome Adverse Childhood Experiences.**

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Adults that have experienced adversity in their childhood, of the magnitude expressed in studies by Vincent Felitti and Robert Anda, often develop maladaptive and unhealthy coping strategies. Studies of resilient children, that is children who succeed despite complex challenges in their early lives, have found several “external protective factors” that are sources of support and structure in the child’s environment. These include the presence of non-parental caretakers, informal sources of emotional support, peer relationships and access to services. (*“Resilient Children: Literature Review and Evidence from the HOPE VI Panel Study Final Report,” Elizabeth Cove, Michael Eiseman and Susan J. Popkin for The Urban Institute Metropolitan Housing and Communities Policy Center*).

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These “external protective factors,” which were well portrayed in the movie “Precious,” help children develop healthy and adaptive coping strategies instead of the unhealthy and maladaptive coping strategies that were found in Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) studies by Vincent Felitti and Robert Anda. By strategically providing children who have a higher likelihood of experiencing Adverse Childhood Experiences, for example children living in poverty communities, with Positive Encounters with caring adults we help them to develop more healthy and adaptive coping strategies.

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A recent example of a Positive Encounter offered to children at the Troy Housing Authority is a dance program that was initiated in the Fall of 2009. Nadine Medina, an accomplished dancer with over 21 years of experience as a dancer, teacher and choreographer was working at the Troy Housing Authority as part of her day job as an engineer with Barton & Loguidice overseeing a project involving an upgrade of our underground utilities.

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Nadine offered to share some of what she learned at the Broadway Dance Center in New York City with the children of the Troy Housing Authority. She had previously volunteered for a post-Hurricane Katrina fund raising effort put together by several dance studios that included instructing participants in a collaboratively choreographed hip hop routine.

On January 1, 2010 we received a Community Art\$ Grant from The Arts Center of the Capital Region through the New York State Council on the Arts, a state agency. (We have to tell them we are using the money to create and promote art, but really we are doing so much more than that).

With this funding we were able to purchase dance outfits and other materials for performances. In early January, Nadine and I worked with the troupe on a name. They wanted to acknowledge their diversity and came up with the name “The Skiddlez.”

On January 20, “The Skiddlez” held their first performance. I arrived at the dance studio a little bit early to get ready to hand out the dance outfits that they helped to design. Much to my surprise, most of the children were already there and I told them we would have to wait for Nadine to get started. They then told me that she was on her way. I asked how they knew this, and they said they just called her on her cell phone.

Imagine that. Nadine Medina, an accomplished dancer and professional engineer, had given her cell phone number to kids she hardly knew and was only working with once a week in a dance program. As clinicians we are often careful about maintaining boundaries, but can you imagine the message of caring and respect that this small gesture conveyed to these children.

In other words:

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**PE/ACE for Adults: Peer Empowerment to overcome Adverse Childhood Experiences.**

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To demonstrate how Peer Empowerment can help overcome Adverse Childhood Experiences we will share a “Great Story” that was written by Aminata Diaw, one of our current AmeriCorps Members who works in our Neighborhood Networks Computer Learning Centers. Ami worked for the University at Albany between 2003 and 2004 in the Department of Languages Literatures and Cultures and is currently an adjunct instructor at Schenectady County Community College. This story, which Aminata will read verbatim, was written for a periodic program report that we submit quarterly to the Corporation for National and Community Service:

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*“Troy Housing Authority is one of many community service sites where people of all walks of life team up on a daily basis to either serve, and/or take advantage of the many services and opportunities AmeriCorps offers.*

*Tamika, 33 years old, mother of two, is one of the brave high school dropouts who decided to come to our Neighborhood Network Center to improve her skills in math, social studies, and language arts. She eventually hopes to get her GED.*

*On Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays, Tamika and I spend three to four hours studying and preparing for the GED test; as a result, Tamika has shown tremendous progress since I met her.*

*Tamika’s success illustrates what Kaleel Jamison defined in the Leadership, Self-empowerment, and Personal Growth book as “the candle theory,” which is a win-win for all parties involved. Jamison explained: “When you give away some of the light from your candle, by lighting another person’s candle, there isn’t less light because you’ve given some away, there is more.”*

*Similarly, Tamika is currently helping light her children’s candles. In her own words, Tamika said: ‘Right now, my children are doing great in math. My children’s teachers’ and you Ms. Ami are amazingly covering the same lessons at the same time; therefore, I am passing on to them what I am learning at Neighborhood Networks.’*

*As an AmeriCorps member, I also have learned a lot from my peers, supervisors, and students. Indeed Tamika’s motivation inspires me every day, and I would be glad to continue to work with her, as well as work with future new comers. “When everybody grows, there isn’t less of anybody; there’s more of and for everybody.” This, in itself, is great and rewarding! I am very fortunate to be part of a mission that strengthens communities.”*

**PE/ACE for Families: Parenting Education to overcome Adverse Childhood Experiences.**

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This is probably the most obvious intervention to address adverse childhood experiences. However, with adults who have lived through adverse childhood experiences as children the mere conveyance of parenting information is usually not enough. Many of these parents were never nurtured adequately as children. As parents they may not have the capacity to nurture their children until the void deep inside of them is adequately filled.

This was described by Kempe and Helfer as the **World of Abnormal Rearing**, or the WAR Cycle, in their 1972 book, “Helping The Battered Child and His Family.” When working with these families, the authors propose that, because the parents were raised in dysfunctional households, they never experienced the nurturance needed to become positive and effective parents. They suggest that the parents need to be “re-parented” by another caring adult.

This was the basis for the Parent Aide Program that I coordinated at St. Catherine’s Center for Children and is a component of the AmeriCorp Program which I now oversee at the Troy Housing Authority. While she wasn’t providing formal parenting education, the relationship Ami established with Tamika, described previously, helped Tamika to become a better parent.

## **PE/ACE for Seniors: Patient Emissaries to overcome Adverse Childhood Experiences.**

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With Senior Citizen's, in addition to helping them age in place with dignity by providing them with the services and supports they need, we strive to help them achieve **generativity** and **ego integration** (the successful outcomes of middle age and older adulthood according to Erik Erikson).

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This was accomplished on a broad scale during our "**Piecing It All Together**" Project that was also funded by a Community Art\$ Grant from The Arts Center of the Capital Region through the New York State Council on the Arts, a state agency. During this project, Senior Citizens created jigsaw puzzles based on pictures of Troy from when they were growing up. They then shared stories about their childhood with children as they worked on the puzzles together.

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Sometimes, however, it's not so easy to promote **generativity** and **ego integration** with senior citizens who have a history of adverse childhood experiences, but it can be accomplished. To demonstrate this I am going to share with you the story of Miles, a 76 year old senior citizen who has lived at Kane Apartments for the past several years.

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Each year Social Work interns are assigned to Kane Apartments to provide outreach, information and referral, counseling and other supportive services. Miles has a unique way of endearing himself with the interns while simultaneously aggravating them. In all likelihood, this is how he has lived his whole life, as evidenced by the tattoos he has on his hands: LOVE across one set of knuckles and HATE across the other.

Generally, the interns "loved" Miles because he was so destitute and lonely that he gave them a lot to work with. Every so often, however, he would play his "hate" hand. Never directly; but in very subtle ways. Some examples of this include:

- After telling one Intern that he desperately needed more money for food she helped him complete a Food Stamp application. However, when he learned he was only eligible for \$24 a month, his initial reaction was "don't even bother submitting it." With some coaxing he did submit the application and began receiving benefits.
- After another Intern arranged for Miles to receive a Thanksgiving dinner from Equinox he complained to her about how no one has a similar program for Christmas. He explained that Christmas is the worst day of the year for him and the year before he drank all day and couldn't get drunk. The Intern found a program that provided Miles with a Christmas meal.
- Despite all the help that was offered to Miles by the Interns, each year he would find ways to test them. This typically included talking negatively about other tenants or making racial comments. After the Interns told him that this behavior wouldn't be tolerated, he would sulk and avoid them for several weeks. Eventually he would resume the relationship and refrain from disrespectful comments.

These behaviors also did not make Miles well liked by the other residents in the building. Their disdain for him increased when he began appearing more sickly and rumors that he had AIDS were being circulated among the residents. Jacqueline, the current Intern at Kane did her best to assist Miles and address the rancor of the rest of the residents. When Miles was losing his ability to grasp small objects she helped get him evaluated and fitted for wrist braces after he was diagnosed with carpal tunnel syndrome. He wore the braces for a few days and said they helped. Then he stopped wearing the braces saying he did not want to look like a cripple to the rest of the residents.

Further medical testing later revealed that Miles had neither carpal tunnel syndrome nor AIDS. His diagnosis was ALS or Lou Gehrig's disease, in a very advanced stage. This occurred just before Christmas of last year. The change in diagnosis helped to change the way the other residents acted towards Miles. They had a cake for him at a Christmas party that occurred on his birthday. Miles seemed deeply touched by the birthday cake and showed his appreciation. He also demonstrated care and concern for others. On Christmas Eve he told a long-time friend that he realized his condition was failing rapidly and he didn't want to be a burden to her or anyone else, and he was ready for nursing home placement.

In early January Miles condition deteriorated even further. After a brief hospitalization he was placed in a Nursing Home. Jacqueline has been visiting him weekly and is maintaining contact with his long time friend. Miles, of course, continues to be Miles. When his long time friend told him that she was questioned by several of his neighbors when she was taking stuff out of his apartment, he told Jacqueline he didn't want anyone at Kane Apartments to be updated on his condition.

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Jacqueline came to me for guidance. She has great concern for Miles well-being and she knows that the other residents at Kane also share this concern. That was why they were asking about his property being removed. I told her she should honor Miles wishes and not share any new information with his neighbors.

I then pointed out that there were some things they already knew without her sharing them. They know Miles is not living in his apartment and that he is either in a hospital or nursing home. Jacqueline and I agreed that if the residents wanted to send any cards or gestures of good will to Miles she could bring them on her weekly visits. We anticipate that this will soften him yet again and will help him to make peace with the world before his final hour.

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These are some of the ways we create Positive Environments to help overcome Adverse Childhood Experiences at the Troy Housing Authority, a non-clinical setting. We hope that you can use these ideas to create Positive Environments to address Adverse Childhood Experiences in other settings.

Thank you very much for listening. I look forward to your questions and comments.