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## VOICES: A Model of Support for and by Youth Aging Out of Foster Care

By Caitlin Krutsinger

Nick Murrieta entered the foster care system on Christmas day, 1991. He was just two years old. He had been taken from his mother after her boyfriend beat him so severely he ended up in the hospital. Murrieta, along with his twin brother and two older siblings, were placed with an uncle, where they lived for eight years. But the uncle developed a drug problem, making it impossible for him to continue caring for Nick and his three siblings. They were then sent to live with a family friend who became their legal guardian.

Murrieta went from a difficult childhood to a troubled adolescence. He was arrested for the first time at 13, after he pulled a knife on his twin brother. In high school, he spent four weeks in jail for gang-related fighting, and then another month and a half for causing more than \$1,000 worth of damage to a car. Murrieta began drinking heavily. Alcohol eventually led to drugs like “ecstasy,” and, finally, “crystal meth,” Murrieta said. In July 2005, he ended up at Walden House, a residential alcohol and drug treatment center in San Francisco, CA. He spent 13 months there.

“I didn’t trust too many people... I was teaching myself everything,” says Murrieta, now 18. “And I learned the hard way.”

Now a part-time employee at VOICES (Voice our Independent

Choices for Emancipation Support), Murrieta – described by his co-workers as focused, and a “total ham” – is using his hard learned lessons to help his peers.

“Right now I am just trying to be a role model,” he says.

### VOICES

Viewed by many youth advocates as a national model of collaboration and youth empowerment when it opened in November 2005, VOICES is so far living up to its image. It’s the nation’s only foster youth-run support center, providing youth “aging out” of the foster care system with “family support,” as well as the practical tools they need to live independently - housing, education, healthcare, employment, and parenting skills.

When Murrieta left Walden House in 2006 at age 17, he was placed for the first time with a foster family and without his siblings. He had heard about VOICES through friends, and began visiting the center. VOICES helped Murrieta with little things, like creating a budget and a resume, and looking for a job. Most of all though, he said, VOICES was “a place to get away,” a place that he trusted.

### Confronting the Problem: Collaborating with the System

Child welfare advocates cite the lack of collaboration between county services

and private support organizations as a major obstacle to getting youth the services they need. VOICES attempts to confront this problem head on by bringing together under one roof a group of 20 national and community support agencies, including Planned Parenthood, Catholic Charities, and the Napa County Probation Department. This collaborative effort allows the center to serve as a one-stop resource, where youth connect with agencies and programs that can help them.

“We guide them through it instead of leaving them to do it on their own... We bring it all together,” Murrieta says.

California has the largest foster care population in the nation, with about 80,000 youth in care. Every year, more than 4,000 of those youth leave foster care at age 18.<sup>1</sup> Nearly one-third are homeless within a year after leaving the foster care system, and more than 40 percent are unemployed within two to four years of emancipation. Both male and female former foster youth are 10 times more likely to be arrested at some point than youth of the same age, race and sex.

Napa County has about 118 children in foster care,<sup>2</sup> with 25 exiting the system every year.

The foster care system is “a complete abysmal failure” in terms of youth realizing their potential and

1 Cost Benefit Ratio of Investing in Foster Children, California Foster Care News, April 24, 2007 ([californiafostercarenews.blogspot.com/2007/04/cost-benefit-ratio-of-investing-in.html](http://californiafostercarenews.blogspot.com/2007/04/cost-benefit-ratio-of-investing-in.html)).

2 California Child Welfare Services: Outcome & Accountability County Data Report (Child Welfare Supervised Caseload), Napa, January 2007 (<http://www.childsworld.ca.gov/Res/CtyReport/Jan07/Jan07Napa.pdf>).

becoming independent adults, says Dan Corsello, former director of the Napa County Department of Health and Human Services, and a grant consultant to the Gasser Foundation.<sup>3</sup> Corsello was instrumental in getting the center off the ground, and the Gasser Foundation provided the funding.

Corsello says he and other county officials knew that the system was failing to help foster youth transition out of care and that something needed to be done about it. Corsello helped develop the model for VOICES, and Gasser provided more than \$100,000 a year for three years as a start-up grant.

Corsello sees VOICES as representing a significant step towards reform. He says the center is doing “wonderful things” within the county system of services.

Staff members from agencies such as Napa County office of Education, Napa Health and Human Services child welfare division, and Medi-Cal are paid by their organizations to work in the VOICES office part-time – anywhere from two hours per month to 30 hours per week. This keeps youth from having to look in multiple places for needed information and care, and allows VOICES to consolidate efforts.

Systems such as county welfare and probation refer youth to VOICES, confident in the center’s ability to help. Reciprocally, VOICES refers youth to county programs for which they qualify or organizations which can best serve their individual needs.

“We would be dead in the water without them,” says Mitch Findley, 20, assistant director and co-founder of VOICES, referring to the center’s relationship with the county. In addition to referrals, VOICES recruits youth by visiting skateboard parks and other youth hangouts, making school presentations, and generating “a little buzz around town,” Findley says.

### One-Stop Shopping

VOICES, which opened in November 2005, aims to serve every youth who seeks its help. So far, they have been successful. The center has served 180 current and former foster youth, probation youth, and group home youth ages 16-24 in Napa County. The center employs seven full- and part-time employees who are former foster youth. Each staff member is paired with one of five adult staff members who help them develop skills like public speaking, fundraising, and management.

VOICES provides six intensive life skills training and support programs, such as SOURCES, a job-finding program, and PLACES, a housing program (*See chart this page*). SOURCES has placed 50 youth in jobs – and 30 of them now earn a living wage.

PLACES is funded predominantly by California’s THP Plus (Transitional Housing Placement Plus) - a housing program administered by the Department of Social Services to help foster youth achieve stable housing, living wage employment, and higher education.<sup>4</sup> PLACES participants have access to food aid, a living and moving expense loan, and monthly subsidies in amounts up to 80 percent of their total rent. The youth develop a post-program independent living plan, meet individually with a life skills coach, receive mental health services, money management training, and college, vocational and job placement counseling. Participants are responsible for an increasing amount of their rent and living expenses over the course of the two-year program. The VOICES housing program provides housing for eight youth, and the center has helped 30 other young people find stable housing.

The VOICES education program (CHOICES) has awarded 10 scholarships – from \$1,000 to \$4,000 – for youth to attend Napa Valley College, and will award up to 10 more in fall 2007. Assistant Director Findley,

3 The Peter A. and Vernice H. Gasser Foundation funds local Napa projects and organizations, ranging in focus from the arts to health and human services, creating change by identifying local problems, gathering community focus on those problems, and applying resources.

4 For more information visit: <http://www.dss.cahwnet.gov/cfsweb/res/pdf/THP-PlusBrochure.pdf>.

VOICES Programs	
<b>PLACES</b>	Subsidized housing and other support, funded through THP Plus
<b>SOURCES</b>	Employment
<b>CHOICES</b>	Post high school education; offers scholarships to attend Napa Valley College
<b>CHANGES</b>	Healthcare, including mental health and reproductive health care, and substance abuse recovery
<b>FAMILY FINDING</b>	Connection with biological or chosen family members
<b>PACES</b>	Education and support for pregnant and parenting youth
VOICES Youth Staff Positions	
<b>Assistant Director</b>	FT
<b>Program Coordinator</b>	PT
<b>Special Project Coordinator</b>	PT
<b>Performance Coach</b>	PT
<b>Education and Employment Intern</b>	PT
<b>Wellness Intern</b>	PT
<b>Event Coordinator</b>	PT
Select Co-Staffing Organizations:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Catholic Charities</li> <li>• Napa County Health and Human Services, Child Welfare</li> <li>• Legal Aid of Napa Valley</li> <li>• Medi-Cal</li> <li>• Mental Health Systems Navigator</li> <li>• Napa County Office of Education</li> <li>• Napa County Probation</li> <li>• Napa County Department of Rehabilitation</li> <li>• Napa Valley College</li> <li>• Planned Parenthood</li> </ul>	

who was removed from his home three times during high school (twice placed with relatives and once with a foster family), works full-time at the center and is a scholarship recipient.

VOICES staff members help youth write resumes, apply for college financial aid, and provide bus passes for travel to and from work and school. The administrative heart of the center is the resource cabinet, with three drawers filled with DMV forms, health care information, college financial aid applications, Planned Parenthood brochures, and other forms and information.

### “Nothing About Us Without Us”

Michele Byrnes, project manager of the John Burton Foundation for Children Without Homes – founded by John Burton, who has served as both a US Congressman and California State Senator, to help foster youth find housing and other support services – believes youth involvement is crucial to the success of VOICES and other similar organizations. “Nothing about us without us,” is the motto of many youth-run organizations cropping up across the country, she says. Byrnes calls the VOICES model impressive because it “is really youth run. They definitely walk the walk.”

VOICES youth leaders work with the media, conduct outreach and recruitment, train service providers how to better serve foster youth, and systematically collect feedback from VOICES members in order to improve the program.

Although state-funded programs, such as PLACES, have specific eligibility requirements, “there are other ways to serve youth,” says Alissa Gentile, 27, VOICES’ program director. If a youth does not qualify for a certain program, the center works to find him or her an alternative, serve as a resource, and most of all provide crucial social support. If youth demonstrate a commitment to helping themselves and supporting their peers, the center

will assist them in any way it can, Gentile explains.

“That’s just who we are,” explains Mitch Findley.

### Fostering a Family

Findley says that for many youth, VOICES is “a chosen family.”

Before VOICES, “I had never met another youth in foster care,” Findley says, “It was cool to be able to connect with someone who had been through what I had been through.”

If the youth involved with VOICES represent a family, then the “Make Your Mark Art Wall” is their refrigerator door, proudly displaying original song lyrics and poems, artwork, and a few photographs of smiling children snapped by their proud young parents. The wall, centrally located within the VOICES Napa office, showcases youth creativity, and adds to the feeling of familial support, which, for many, blood never quite provided. All the spaces, desks, and computers in the office are communal. There is a pantry stocked by the local food bank, and a washer and dryer for all to share.

Murrieta says that the community created by VOICES provides an outlet for youth.

“We get into each others lives,” he says, helping each other change, and keeping each other from going back to old ways. Murrieta works full time – about 20 hours a week at the center, and another 20 hours at a Napa elementary after-school program. A self-proclaimed “sports maniac,” he plans to attend Napa Valley College and go on to work in sports management. Throughout his 16 years in the foster care system, and five years in the juvenile justice and probation systems, Murrieta says he never let his education slide.

“I never really had anyone in my family that had stuck to education. I wanted to be the first,” he explains. Murrieta graduated from high school in April 2007 with a 3.5 GPA.

### The VOICES Path

The VOICES concept began to take shape in 2005. The Gasser Foundation along with Auction Napa Valley and Napa Community Foundation formed a steering committee which created a three-year initiative to improve access to services for youth transitioning out of care.

“Somehow, at 18, we expect them to be self actualizing,” and successfully independent, says Corsello of the Gasser Foundation.

The committee partnered with On the Move, a non-profit organization that works to train and develop young leaders. On the Move and the Progress Foundation, a non-profit mental health agency whose clinical director was on the original steering committee, now serve as the center’s two fiscal agents. The steering committee still plays a largely advisory role in the workings of the center and its ongoing program development.

“It became evident very early on that we needed to get kids involved,” Corsello explains. “They have got to run it. What the rest of us have to do is support it.”

Findley, his 16-year-old sister Katie, and eight other current and former Napa foster youth formed the original founding team. With insights informed by their backgrounds in the foster care system, the team held focus groups and visited foster group homes in order to determine the most pressing needs facing emancipating youth, recruited agencies to locate staff members in the VOICES office to provide necessary services, and spread the word about the new center to local youth.

During its development phase, VOICES looked to organizations such as the California Youth Connection (CYC), which first emerged in 1988 and really “paved the way” by creating a model of advocacy and support guided, focused, and driven by foster youth working through policy development and legislative change.<sup>5</sup> CYC does not currently have a Napa chapter, a fact

<sup>5</sup> California Youth Connection (<http://www.calyouthconn.org/site/cyc/section.php?id=90>).

that VOICES' staff said they hope to change.

Although Gasser pledged only a three-year monetary commitment, the foundation worked with the center to help it become integrated into the Napa community, build relationships with individuals and organizations, and develop a network of support and, thus, financial sustainability. In less than two years, the center has built a support network of more than 20 funding organizations, consisting of foundations, government funders,

and private donors. Including state funding provided specifically for the housing initiative, the center's annual budget is now \$850,000.

This fall, the VOICES office will more than double in size. The center is preparing to make a much needed move from its small office park space in a business district to a large Victorian style house across from a 10-acre park on the edge of Old Town Napa. The house has 2,800 square feet, compared with the 1,300 square feet provided by VOICES' current office.

Without VOICES, Murrieta says, "I would still be looking for a job, still doing the same dumb stuff around town ... I would still be that same person I was two years ago."

"People know the old me, so I tell them what I am doing now," he says.

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