

Homes for Teens, Not Lock-Ups

New York City experiments with keeping young lawbreakers in the community.

BY KENDRA HURLEY

IN THE HUNTS POINT SECTION of the Bronx, Jackson Watts*, a small boy who looks younger than his 13 years, slouches over his homework in the barebones offices of Cayuga Home for Children, an alternative to incarceration program for young delinquents. Jackson misses his neighborhood, his friends, his father and his mother. “This place is kind of twisted,” he concludes with adolescent bravado, but in a voice that sounds like a child’s. “This place is ridiculous.”

Jackson, who has been arrested three times in his short life, was referring to Cayuga Home’s boarding home program, which arranges for juvenile delinquents to live with specially trained host parents instead of in juvenile prisons. Jackson has been living with Donald Franklin, his host parent, for only two weeks. Though the program is nine months long, he already wants out.

Jackson’s thick file at Cayuga Home traces his problems to his being a follower, too eager to impress his friends. The first time Jackson got arrested he was only 10 years old. That arrest, records indicate, was for gang-assaulting and injuring a “mentally limited” person. According to the victim, Jackson slammed his hand in a door. “I was bleeding all over the place, all over clothes, and all over the floor,” the victim said in a statement.

The second was attempted robbery. According to the victim, Jackson grabbed her cell phone and sang out, “I got me a new phone!” The woman told police she tried to hold Jackson down but he bit and punched her and caused her to fall on some stairs.

While on probation for attempted robbery, Jackson was arrested a third time for robbery with a gun, court records indicate. Cayuga Home staff say the weapon was later determined to be a BB gun.

Jackson himself claims the first arrest was only a misunderstanding—the victim’s finger just got caught in the door. As for the third arrest, Jackson says the gun was really a magic marker.

The city’s Family Court didn’t buy it. A prosecutor labeled him “at high risk of committing serious crimes.” But officials also took note of the fact that Jackson had a caring, involved father, who, at 66, admitted to not knowing how to manage his teenaged son. That counted for a lot. In a move that would likely not have happened a few years ago, the court decided that instead of sending Jackson to a juvenile prison, he would get another chance. This time, he was placed in an alternative program designed to work closely with Jackson and his father in the hopes of preventing the boy from committing any more crimes.

Jackson’s program is just one in a rapidly growing collection of alternatives to juvenile prison on which the city is depending more heavily than ever, in order to keep delinquents in their homes and neighborhoods and out of trouble. Rather than considering law-breaking children as problems that can be isolated, treated and reformed, these fast-growing programs aim to have a far more positive impact on young people by working with them amid the complex system of influences that shape their lives—their families, friends, relatives and communities.

Such programs have already helped spur a dramatic reduction in the number of youth admitted to state institutions, from 1,938 in 2000 to 813 in 2007. They work with teens who have been adjudicated for both violent and non-violent crimes, ranging from turnstyle jumping, graffiti and vandalism to assault, theft and robbery. Jackson was lucky—if he had been one year older when he was charged with armed robbery, he would have been tried as an adult—and ineligible for Cayuga Home and other alternative programs that help young people and their families navigate the destructive impulses and other factors that drew them into trouble in the first place.

For more than a decade, innovators in juvenile justice and family therapy across the United States have experimented with methods to teach young people self control while also transforming the family unit, inculcating greater discipline where before there had been little or no structure. Many of these initiatives have taken part in an intensive national effort to document success and establish the parameters of proven models that strengthen families’ capacity to keep kids out of trouble.

Today in New York City, modified versions of these tested programs are growing quickly. It is a grand experiment, one with potential risks. Young people, some who have committed violent crimes, are staying in the city’s neighborhoods, fortified by the work of therapists and others who know with certainty that sending youngsters to juvenile correctional centers is usually a recipe for lifelong failure. Judges and attorneys representing victims are cautious but willing to let these models develop, and to send more and more young people home instead of locking them up.

So far, there is no guarantee these new variations of proven programs are working as well as the originals, which

**The names of Jackson and his host father have been changed to protect their identities.*

were designed, implemented and tested in other cities and states. For the moment, alternatives to youth incarceration in New York are still a work in progress, part of a justice system eager to test the waters—and a city still waiting for assurances that this is the answer.

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There was a time not long ago when those working in the city's juvenile justice system believed the best way to reform young people who had committed crimes was to isolate them in costly institutions and treat them apart from the influences of the streets and people that had led them to trouble. It's a belief that Edward Myers Hayes, chief executive officer of Cayuga Home (which used to provide purely residential, in-

stitutionalized care for juvenile delinquents) now recalls with a grimace. He remembers it as "faith-based work," meaning he and his colleagues once had great faith in what they were doing, but no proof it was effective.

Back then, adds Laurence Busching, chief of the Family Court division of the New York City Law Department, judges had only two options for young people charged with crimes—either keep them at home and put them on probation, or send them to a juvenile lock-up. More often than not, when judges had trouble deciding between the two options for particular young people, they opted to remove the young person to prevent them from committing further crimes at home. "The system tended to err on the side of placement when there were grey areas," says Busching.

Keeping it in the Family

Evidence-based models depend on parents and communities.

NEW YORK CITY'S FAMILY COURT judges are increasingly sending juvenile delinquents to alternative-to-placement programs rather than to juvenile lock-ups. Some of these alternatives are based on three "evidence-based" models—that is, rigorous research studies have shown that the models have been significantly effective in reducing youth violence. All three keep children in their own communities and work directly with parents to help them manage their children more effectively and to reduce antisocial behavior. Each program costs significantly less than the \$140,000 or more that it costs to incarcerate a child for a year. The city's Administration for Children's Services (ACS) has adapted all three models as part of its Juvenile Justice Initiative, launched in 2007 to try to keep children out of foster care and institutional placement.

Functional Family Therapy

In Functional Family Therapy (FFT), a therapist meets with each family, often in their own home, once a week for three to five months. The therapist seeks to establish goodwill among family members and to persuade them that change is possible. The therapist helps family members trust one another's intentions and motivations before attempting to change a

child's behavior. Practitioners are trained to reframe a child's problematic behavior in more positive terms. For instance, a therapist might help a family see how the child arrested for dealing drugs had "noble intentions" of helping the family financially, even as he or she acknowledges the act as criminal, says Sylvia Rowlands, director of Blue Sky, which is part of the Juvenile Justice Initiative.

FFT was designed for a population that therapists traditionally did not know how to help—families and young people who'd already received a number of interventions and did not believe they could change. This model has been proven to work well with families that have significant family violence, says Rowlands, including children who have assaulted parents with weapons.

Studies have found that young people enrolled in FFT are far less likely to be placed in foster care or an institution than a control group, and one 2000 study at the University of Utah found the program reduced recidivism to about 20 percent, as opposed to nearly 90 percent for the comparison group. FFT is the least intensive of the three evidence-based models. Each therapist has a caseload of eight families.

Multi-systemic Therapy

In Multi-systemic Therapy (MST), case-workers meet with family members two to four times a week for four to six months. The therapist will sometimes work with parents without the child present. MST is more intensive than FFT. Each therapist

has a caseload of about four families. The therapists are available by cellphone to the youths and their families 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

The therapist's goal is to create a healthy "circle of influence" in a child's life when a parent's influence has broken down, says Edward Hayes, chief executive officer of Cayuga Home for Children. Hayes compares this circle of influence to the solar system, with the child at the center. "The therapist's influence is like the ring where Pluto would be," says Hayes, suggesting that ultimately a therapist has very little influence over a child. The goal of therapy is to make the parent's influence central to the child, so that they can continue to manage a child's behavior for years to come.

Developed in the 1970s, MST has been the subject of several research studies. Studies have found that long-term rates of re-arrest for MST participants were 25 to 70 percent less for program participants than a control group, and participants had 47 to 64 percent fewer out-of-home placements.

Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care

One criticism of both the MST and FFT models is that because they are family-driven, they can not engage young people without family members who are willing and able to participate. In Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care (MTFC), the most intensive of the three models, children live with a specially trained "host

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parent” for about nine months, instead of in their own homes. The host parent sets clear rules and boundaries for the young person and monitors the teen closely and constantly. Meanwhile, one therapist meets with the teen regularly, helping the young person learn skills and attitudes to avoid crime, and another meets with the teen’s parents to support them and teach them how to set rules.

The program is tightly structured. A young person’s positive behavior is rewarded through a point system, and as teens receive points they move to higher levels with different rules and privileges, including home visits or unsupervised

time with friends. These privileges increase in length as the program progresses, giving the teens more freedom and, with it, more chances to practice their new skills in the real world. Both Cayuga Home and the Juvenile Justice Initiative use MTFC.

Youth who participated in MTFC were found to have spent 60 percent fewer days incarcerated within a year than a control group, and had significantly fewer arrests. They also ran away from the program about three times less often than youth in a control group and had better school attendance.

New York City’s foster care system is exploring the possibility of using MTFC

with young people who do not have families with whom they can live and who need this kind of intense structure. Cayuga Home has applied to create 30 beds for this population, which, if approved, could be up and running as soon as June 2010, says Troy Brathwaite, director of Cayuga Home’s New York City MTFC program. One potential model would use MTFC with young people living in foster care who are preparing to live independently. Another is to adapt the model to work with foster youth who have a goal of returning to their biological families. In the latter, the model would help prepare their families to manage their behavior even after they’ve left the foster care system. —Kendra Hurley

Proof of the system’s failures arrived with a damning 1999 study by the state’s Division of Criminal Justice Services, which found abysmal recidivism rates of young people released from residential programs. More than 80 percent of young men locked up in New York’s juvenile correctional centers during the early 1990s were re-arrested within three years of their release, the study found.

Hayes, judges, and many others in the juvenile justice system began viewing incarceration not as a necessary move to give a young person a fresh start, but as an interruption, a respite from their usual lives and pressures. They recognized juvenile justice institutions as schools for learning criminal behavior from peers. And they interpreted the 1999 study to suggest that the bond between young people and their parents is only weakened by time spent apart, making it even harder for parents to exercise authority over their children after they return home.

Meanwhile, national researchers rigorously studied programs intended to prevent youth violence. They were in search of promising program models. Blueprints for Violence, a research center at the University of Colorado, determined that some popular programs, like Scared Straight—which tried to scare young people into staying on the straight and narrow—actually did more harm than good. The center deemed other less well-known models to be truly “evidence-based,” the social science field’s jargon meaning they had demonstrated, through high-quality evaluation research, that they reduced youth violence.

For a program to be considered evidence-based, Blueprints required that participants improve not only during the program, but also for several years after. Program models also had to achieve the same positive results when replicated at other organizations.

From a pool of more than 700 programs emerged three

family-centered models, each of which would eventually heavily influence the juvenile justice landscape in New York City. One of them, Multi-systemic Therapy (MST), was a three-to-five month intensive program for delinquents and their families, developed at the Medical University of South Carolina. A study found that a year after treatment began, only 20 percent of participants had been re-arrested, compared to 68 percent of non-MST participants. The effects lasted, though they were far from perfect. About two and one-half years after the program began, 61 percent of participants had been re-arrested, compared to 80 percent in a control group.

Studies found that young people enrolled in Functional Family Therapy (FFT), a model developed in the early 1970s at the University of Utah, were far less likely to ever be placed in foster care or in an institution for delinquents, compared to a control group. One study also demonstrated that siblings were still reaping the benefits of the family therapy three years later. (See “Keeping it in the Family,” page 15, for more information on each of the models.)

And a study of Multi-systemic Therapeutic Foster Care (MTFC), developed at the Oregon Social Learning Center and the model used today at Cayuga Home, found that one year after treatment, young men had significantly fewer arrests and were incarcerated less often than boys in institutional care.

Although the three evidence-based models have many differences, each of them subverts the usual paradigm for rehabilitating young people. “They’re family-focused, with a recognition that young people don’t live in a vacuum,” says Mishi Faruquee, director of the Youth Justice Program at the Children’s Defense Fund-New York. “It’s about not only building strengths of young people, but also strengths of their family and their community.”

Unlike conventional therapy, which can drag on for years, these evidence-based models are time-limited. The goal is for counselors to help families—many of whom are regular recipients of social services and supports—to become self-regulating. They focus on behavior rather than insight, teaching young people to better navigate the challenges of their daily lives—including “negative peer influences,” which are considered in these programs to be contagions, sometimes compared to viruses.

At the same time, the counselors try to empower parents to become authority figures capable of enforcing rules and helping their children stay out of trouble even after the program has pulled out. All of the programs rest on the notion that children learn these skills not in an institution, but in the community, where teens and parents learn through experience, through trial and error. The threat of being sent away serves as an incentive to keep the young person engaged.

“The real work is trying to really put the internal fortitude in the family and the young person so they don’t get in trouble again,” explains Felipe Franco, associate commissioner of community partnerships at the state’s Office for Children and Family Services (OCFS) juvenile justice division. “The real work happens in the ecology of the community.”

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Barely a month before he met Jackson, Donald Franklin prepared to say goodbye to another young man he’d taken into his home. The boy, Jason, was a 16-year-old with braids, a shy smile and a charge of assault. He had lived with Franklin for the full nine months of the Cayuga Home program. He officially graduated at a ceremony filled with balloons, tearful speeches, and a home-cooked meal of collard greens, beans and rice, baked ziti, macaroni and cheese, and fried chicken. That week, at a meeting where a group of host parents received coaching from a Cayuga Home counselor, Franklin got misty-eyed as he spoke about Jason, whose rough background reminded him of his own.

“He did just great,” Franklin said. “We had a ball. I learned a lot from him. I think he’s going to do great. I’m going to monitor him all summer. My household is his.”

“See? We can reform a criminal, right? In nine months, right?” joked Antoinette Dawkins Grant, the therapist who coordinates all the elements of each case—the host parent, the parents’ therapist and the young person’s therapist. “So in two weeks you’ll take another kid, right?”

Franklin paused for a long time. “I’m thinking about it,” he finally said.

“Don’t think too much!”

“I learned a lot from him,” Franklin continued. “You really need your parents. I was showed how much he loved his mother.”

“You’re going to miss him?” the therapist asked.

“Yes,” Franklin said wistfully. “I’m always going to check

On the Same Page

A family-focused approach gets one young mother-to-be in synch with her parents.

Shayla Gomez* is a soft spoken young woman who is six-months pregnant. When she was 13—the same year her brother was murdered—Shayla’s uncle began molesting her. Soon, she began acting out, and Shayla says the Family Court sent her to the residential campus of Leake and Watts in the Bronx following charges of fighting and robbery. Shayla does not remember getting any therapy there.

Eventually, Leake and Watts sent Shayla to a group home in Staten Island where she began therapy. It was good to talk to somebody, she recalls, but she doesn’t think it helped improve her life. Back then, she adds, she had two modes of communicating with her parents—one was to shut down, and the other was to curse them out—and the therapy did nothing to help break the silence and anger that had come to define her relationship with them.

“She never really did anything with the family,” Shayla remembers about that therapist. “She just spoke to me.”

Eventually Shayla went to live with her father, but she had not been home five months before things escalated. Shayla got pregnant; her mother threatened to get the baby’s 19-year old father beat up and arrested for statutory rape; and her father kicked Shayla out of the house.

Once again, the court got involved, this time sending Shayla to Cayuga Home, where she began living with a host family.

As specified by Cayuga Home’s multi-systemic therapeutic foster care model, it is no longer just Shayla doing the hard work of therapy. Her parents are now required to meet with a therapist as well, and to stay involved in Shayla’s life. Cayuga Home actually loses money from its contract with OCFS if one of its therapists does not make contact with a parent each week. For Shayla, this family approach has worked wonders. Now she says she feels less like a problem child, and more like part of a family—something that is especially important to her as she imagines becoming a mother. Now, when Shayla feels herself getting so angry at her mother that she wants to shut her out, she writes her a letter, instead.

“Now me and my mom, we just got back on the same page,” she says. “Now I speak with her every single day. When I have the baby, I can’t shut down.”

Meanwhile, Shayla’s mother has begun talking with the father of Shayla’s baby, preparing for the baby’s birth. And perhaps most significant, Shayla’s two parents now talk, as well, often conferring about their daughter. Shayla sees that as nothing short of amazing. —Kendra Hurley

*Not her real name.

up on him. He wants to be an accountant and I think he can do it. He's very good at math."

Now, Franklin hopes he can be as successful with Jackson as he was with Jason.

Jackson, two weeks into the program, does not consider success to be likely, though he knows that if he messes up he may be placed in a juvenile lock-up—something he desperately wants to avoid. Already he has been pegged for "giving lip all day" to Cayuga Home staff, Grant says, and he's gotten in trouble for taking change off a table to buy a sandwich while Franklin was in the shower. That would have been perfectly acceptable behavior in his father's Bedford-Stuyvesant home, but not in Franklin's. In my home, Franklin explained, you have to ask for permission to come and go. You can have whatever you want, but you have to ask. Rules are different here.

Jackson had been in a therapeutic program before, and so far the Cayuga Home staff seemed no different from all the other counselors who had tried to help him. Records show Jackson had a poor track record in a previous, more traditional program he attended sporadically for about three years following his first arrest. "It was a waste of time to me," Jackson shrugs. "Being there got me madder, so the more I showed I didn't learn, the longer I had to stay there."

At least there, he says, he could leave anytime he wanted. Not so here. Franklin logs every phone call Jackson makes or receives, and at school Jackson has to get signatures from each of his teachers to prove he attended class. Jackson—who quickly earned the nickname of "Dennis the Menace" at Cayuga Home for being hyper and disrespectful—can't gain privileges, like the right to hang out with friends, without first proving himself responsible by abiding Franklin's rules.

Jackson and his father talk almost daily on the phone, which is expected of all the kids and parents in the program to help maintain family bonds. But they see each other only at the Cayuga Homes office. When Jackson earns more privileges he will spend every other weekend at his father's house, where the two of them will put to practice the skills they are learning. Jackson can't wait for home visits to start. "I want to sleep in my bed," he says. "I want to step in my shower."

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The juvenile justice system is historically more concerned with public safety than with the ability of parents to support and guide their teenage children. Seeing the value in directing services to caregivers has been an adjustment for some judges, who are the ones ultimately responsible for deciding which kids are locked up and which stay home. It is asking them to think like social workers.

"Although it's nice for judges to hear that the parent is responding to support and services, what they really want to know is whether the kid is doing what they're supposed to be doing," says Leslie Abbey, executive director of the Juvenile Justice Initiative, which is the largest alternative-to-incarceration program in the city and is based at the city's

Administration for Children's Services. "Bridging that gap is challenging."

This is exactly the reason why the Cayuga Home's boarding home program is underutilized, suspects Troy Brathwaite, its director. Though it is small, with the capacity to work with only 20 young people and their families, only 12 teens were enrolled as of early this year. By October, the number had risen to 18. Brathwaite says that even convincing OCFS, which funds the program, to take the chance of sending young lawbreakers here has been an uphill battle.

Cayuga is the most expensive of the alternative programs, costing about \$60,000 per child when at full capacity. Other less comprehensive programs are far cheaper: the Juvenile Justice Initiative estimates its cost at about \$17,000 per child, and another program, Esperanza, based very loosely on the MST model, is somewhat less for a six-month program. By comparison, the annual cost of housing a teen in an OCFS facility is at least \$140,000, according to city officials.

Directors of Esperanza and the Juvenile Justice Initiative say they sometimes struggle to convince judges that sending young people to their programs rather than juvenile correctional facilities will not lead to an uptick in criminal activity. "Sometimes the court feels as though they gave the youth enough chances, and they have to react to certain bad behavior or else lose their credibility," explains Abbey.

Esperanza, started in 2003, works with up to 216 kids a year. The Juvenile Justice Initiative (JJI), launched in 2007, diverts about 280 young people from incarceration. Both work with teens initially recommended for placement in a juvenile correctional facility. Their crimes often involve harming other people, sometimes violently. About 57 percent of the young people participating in JJI in 2007 had been arrested for committing a crime against a person, such as assault or robbery, and one-third of Esperanza participants had been charged with a violent offense. Most of these were misdemeanor-level crimes, not felonies. But they are often serious offenses nonetheless.

The Juvenile Justice Initiative is a collection of programs using different evidence-based models. When the Administration for Children's Services (ACS) first created the initiative, the agency sought to reassure stakeholders in the system, including Family Court judges, that they would use evidence-based programs that were scientifically proven to reduce youth violence. Judges and the City Council agreed to work with them, but said they thought the MST model's three-to-five month timeline was too short, and that kids diverted from jail needed more time in a program. So program developers tweaked MST to make it last as long as seven months for each young person.

"It's great to find options on how to keep the young people in the community as long as it's consistent with public safety," says Busching, who oversees the city's prosecutors in Family Court. He adds that these programs are especially appropriate for young people charged with misdemeanors, who make up a fast-growing percentage of the number of young people brought to court each year.

Photo: Arpan Munier



A host parent oversees the homework of her daughter and a Cayuga Home participant, who will be part of the household for nine months.

As acceptance of the programs has grown, judges have begun permitting a few very young people suspected of committing crimes with weapons, such as 13-year-old Jackson, to participate, so long as they are confident that parents or caregivers will closely monitor the young people along with program staff.

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Not everyone is convinced these New York experiments will reap the same results that evidence-based programs have in other cities. On the surface, extending the length of the MST model was a small concession. But practitioners of much-tested models warn that small changes can have serious consequences; these models are only proven to work if programs stay faithful to the original. Hayes compares it to a cookie recipe. “You may come up with something better, but you may come up with a disaster,” he says.

When ACS added an extra few months of therapy to assuage judges and victim advocates, there was no guarantee

they would get the results they wanted, warns Sylvia Rowlands, director of Blue Sky, a program at New York Foundling that is part of the Juvenile Justice Initiative. “All of the models operate on getting families [to be] independent of services,” says Rowlands. “Letting them stay too long means they can build reliance [on the program].”

Officials have tracked participants in Esperanza and JJI since the programs started. Nonetheless, the city has shared only general statistics to show how well the programs are performing. Only Blue Sky is planning a close evaluation of outcomes, and that won’t be available for some time.

In the absence of such a thorough assessment, there’s always the danger that a single bad story could derail the work. “All it will take is one major disaster, one case that blows up in the media, and this could come apart,” says a city official who supports JJI but would only speak anonymously.

In fact, one recent case came close, raising concerns voiced by Judge John M. Hunt of Queens Family Court when he reviewed a teenage boy’s probation violation in July.

Ronald B., a 17-year-old young man, had first been arrested at age 15 for assault and menacing a witness. Instead of sending him upstate, the court put Ronald on probation. When he violated probation for not going to school the following year, the court sent him to the Juvenile Justice Initiative. In January 2009, while still enrolled in the program, he and an accomplice wrapped T-shirts around their faces, forced their way into an apartment and threatened a woman with handguns. After they forced her to the floor, they robbed the apartment and fled.

By the time Judge Hunt reviewed the case, the teen had been arrested, convicted and sentenced to an adult prison upstate.

“When standard probation supervision failed, Multi-systemic Therapy through the Juvenile Justice Initiative program was implemented. Unfortunately, for reasons which may never be known to this Court, the juvenile’s criminal activity progressed to the point where he committed an armed felony offense which ultimately led to his incarceration in a correctional facility,” Judge Hunt wrote about the case. “While this juvenile delinquency proceeding has reached its conclusion, those administering the JJI/MST program are encouraged to thoroughly review the circumstances of this case so that structural and programmatic problems can be identified and changes implemented where necessary.”

Recently, JJI determined that about 35 to 40 percent of its participants were rearrested while participating in the program in 2008. The vast majority of these arrests were for minor offenses, like rollerblading on a subway platform or jumping a turnstile. Abbey views such arrests as one element of the participants’ learning processes. “The rehabilitation trajectory is not going to be straight with kids,” she says. “Perfection is not going to happen on day one or month one or month two. The important issue is progress.”

Rowlands of Blue Sky agrees. “We know how bad placement is,” she adds. “We know kids are coming back madder and doing more stuff.”

Similarly, Esperanza reports that among young people who have been enrolled in the program, 55 percent have avoided incarceration for at least the following two years. While these results are far better than for young people who are sent to institutions in the first place, many young people still fail the program.

For his part, prosecutor Busching would like to see more data. “In evaluating the success of the programs and in determining which respondents are appropriate for them, a key factor in making those decisions will be a review in data. And we need to have as much data as possible in making these determinations.”

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At Cayuga Home’s weekly meetings, host parents often complain about the young people’s parents. “He just loves to speak to his moms,” Franklin tells the group about Jackson at one

recent meeting. “It makes his day.” But too often when Jackson calls his mother, who long ago lost her legal right to be a parent to her son, she can’t be bothered, says Franklin. She says she’ll call back, then doesn’t. “It just kills him,” Franklin says, shaking his head, as other host parents murmur support. “It gets him down,” he says.

Yet Franklin has nothing but praise for Jackson’s father, who has quickly become Cayuga Home’s model parent, never failing to travel from Brooklyn to the Bronx for his weekly therapy sessions. Sometimes he takes his son to lunch. “He’s a real gentleman,” Franklin says.

After two months in the program, Jackson is doing well. Though Franklin and Cayuga staff think he needs to keep working on communicating respectfully with adults and staying away from “negative peers,” Jackson abides by Franklin’s house rules without complaint and has even started doing chores without being asked. Whenever there’s a dirty plate lying around, he washes it, basking in Franklin’s praise.

Clean dishes might sound trivial when the task at hand is the rehabilitation of a young teen accused of robbery at gunpoint. But Franklin and the other host parents describe their work as strong parenting, centered around the kind of mundane details that many parents of teens must grapple with: how to get a young person to do their chores, stop cursing, or start dating nicer boys or girls. At Cayuga Home, instead of one or two parents mulling endlessly over these details, it’s an entire team, with lots of support.

Jackson, for his part, says he now likes the program and its structured approach. He’s bonded with Franklin and has started reading *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* at his host father’s suggestion. On weekends back home, he’s eager to show his father all he’s learning, surprising his dad by taking out the trash or making his bed.

Jackson has noticed that his father is learning new skills, too. In the past, the two would have yelling matches that led nowhere. On a recent visit, when Jackson came home past his 8 p.m. curfew, his father tried something new. He stayed calm and reminded Jackson that there were consequences to breaking the rules. At the suggestion of Cayuga Home staff, Jackson’s father has also begun drawing on the support of his siblings who live nearby, enlisting them to help keep Jackson on track.

“We’re both changing,” says Jackson. “He’s trying to work with me. I think it builds a better relationship.”

What if someday his friends try to lead him into trouble? “I’ll walk away,” he says. Then he adds, “Or go to the other side of the street.” Then, with a moment of reflection, he settles on a remarkably realistic answer. “I would have to be in that position,” he says. “I would say I would walk away now, but I would have to be in it to really know.”

Franklin prefers optimism, imagining only bright things in Jackson’s future. “If he stays away from negative peers,” he says, “he is going to shock everyone.” ❀