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GrowingChange: Media Products as Therapy for Adjudicated Youth

Abstract

GrowingChange is a grassroots organization dedicated to improving the futures of teenage males in the juvenile justice system. The group is working to reclaim an abandoned prison in Wagram, North Carolina in order to convert it into a sustainable farm and agricultural center for the local community. If successful, *GrowingChange* hopes to institute a national model for converting closed prison sites into community centers across the country. Youth involved in the program undergo unique forms of therapy to reset their paths toward more promising futures. A core therapeutic component of *GrowingChange* is teaching youth in the program about ways to provide food and food-related products to impoverished populations in surrounding communities. As the fledgling organization grows, its founder, Noran Sanford, has discovered that promotional media endeavors provide additional therapeutic benefits for the adjudicated youth of *GrowingChange*.

Keywords

media, therapy, prison, juvenile, justice

GrowingChange: Media Products as Therapy for Adjudicated Youth

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On the outskirts of the small town of Wagram, North Carolina rests the crumbling ruins of the former Scotland Correctional Center. Abandoned since 2001, it resembles a set from the television series *The Walking Dead*. Windows are broken out. Doors and hinges are covered in rust. Rubble litters the cracked concrete floors. Portions of walls are ripped open where scavengers have stolen copper wiring that once fed power throughout the facility. It is not the kind of place that inspires hope. However, one local man had an altogether different vision for this macabre setting. If he gets his way, the abandoned Wagram Correctional Facility will soon be the headquarters for *GrowingChange*, a youth program that helps troubled teens and their surrounding communities.

OVERVIEW OF PROGRAM

Noran Sanford is a licensed clinical social worker and mental health therapist who helps troubled teens that have made their way into the juvenile justice system. In 2009, he began conceptualizing an idea that would help adjudicated youth find a path away from criminal activities. He works with a select group of young men specifically chosen to get a second chance outside of the juvenile prison system. The selection process is based on several criteria. Young men chosen for this program are all at what the North Carolina justice system refers to as a Level 2 Disposition, meaning they are one step away from entering the juvenile prison system (North Carolina Department of Public Safety, 2015). Each member of *GrowingChange* has been, for various reasons, kicked out of their homes, removed from school, and placed on probation. “These three conditions are the holy

trinity of risk factors,” Sanford says. “Without intervention, there is the highest probability that these individuals will either enter the adult prison system or have worse outcomes” (N. Sanford, personal communication, July 7, 2015).

Sanford helps these young men by offering them a place in *GrowingChange* as an alternative to other forms of correctional measures such as incarceration. The nonprofit organization is working to convert the abandoned prison site in Wagram, NC into a sustainable farm and community center. Historically, prison construction was promoted to communities as an opportunity for growth and development, given that they would introduce new jobs to the regions where they were to be built (Badger, 2012). However, as has happened with many closed prison sites, the shell of the now closed facility presents new challenges for the community as it searches for a way to salvage the huge, wasted space and the uniquely built structures that stand upon it. Sanford looked at the Wagram prison site and envisioned reclaiming it as a facility where he could open an agricultural school designed to help young men like those in his program. In addition to the potential benefits for the community, he was especially drawn to the symbolism of converting a prison into something new and useful, and how this could be applied to the efforts of getting troubled young men to similarly repurpose their lives. He coined the phrase “flip your prison,” and uses it as a mantra, of sorts, for the team as they work to turn their lives in more positive directions.

GrowingChange uses a holistic approach that helps troubled teens address their issues in ways that not only work through individual

problems, but does so by giving back to the surrounding community. The organization began by securing areas where the select group of young men could learn about the basics of agriculture. They tend to a local greenhouse and several plots of land in Scotland County, growing a variety of fruits and vegetables throughout the gardening season. As harvests are ready, they give away crops to elderly, disabled, or other community members in need.

The program is not just about farming. Personal growth and development of participants are key components as well. Their daily routine incorporates therapy sessions where, as a team, they help each other deal with the challenges that have led them to make poor decisions. Group and individual therapy sessions are common with the young men. Family therapy sessions are also incorporated when needed. “The knowledge that young participants gain—whether it’s growing food or working out a dispute peacefully—will serve them throughout their lives...” (“GrowingChange,” n.d.).

Each young man in the program comes from a unique background, but collectively they have a lot in common. Some are from unstable homes, having been shuffled across numerous foster families. Others have grown up in environments where it is all but impossible to avoid trouble, such as low-income areas where gangs exercise a great deal of influence and control. Some have encountered terrible abuses by their own families. The group’s commonalities lie in the bad cards that life has dealt them combined with poor choices made as a result of their individual circumstances.

While traditional therapy sessions are a portion of how *GrowingChange* strengthens these young men to overcome obstacles in their lives, the organization employs plenty of nontraditional methods as well. Each member of the team is given a leadership role in the organization. They work together using a largely democratic process to determine the programs that they will undertake to make meaningful

changes not only for themselves, but also for others facing difficult challenges.

There is an entrepreneurial spirit to *GrowingChange*. The idea is to provide the young men with a mindset of accomplishment. Thus far, three of the group’s members have launched their own businesses. One young man produces and sells vermicompost. Another has taken to merchandising food-related projects such as locally made jam, chow chow, and produce. A third started a business installing niche landscaping and home gardening spaces. Each young man is challenged to develop his own business model while participating in the program. These business interests often overlap with the organization’s focus of sustainable agriculture. For instance, the group recently made plans to expand their enterprise by delving into aquaculture. In order to facilitate this, they met with experts in the field and began to detail plans for how they would undertake these progressive farming practices at the abandoned Wagram prison site. As another example, members of the group expressed an interest in beekeeping and harvesting honey, so the team began working with a local beekeeper to learn how to accomplish this goal.

As the organization grows and word of their work spreads, members find themselves being offered speaking engagements and presentations of their work at community groups and universities. This, too, is part of the power of the program, as *GrowingChange* gives its participants the opportunities to see themselves differently. The chance to engage schools, churches, courts, families, and other power structures in affirmative contexts allows them to model positive behaviors and interactions with these entities. It affords them the opportunity to improve their image with these outside entities. Further, self-efficacy can be improved by engaging the young men in business and planning exercises that demonstrate how change can be planned and orchestrated for organizations as well as individuals.

USE OF MEDIA AS PROMOTION AND THERAPY

One of the primary strengths of *GrowingChange* is its ability to empower its members in ways that traditional juvenile incarceration cannot. As the organization has grown, it has found new ways to permit its youth to deal with their individual situations. Art and media development have been growing forms of narrative therapy (Gaines & Villarroel, 2010). Thompson (2012) stated that “The turn to narrative as a form of therapy has become a common practice with individuals telling their stories in private and public forums in hopes of finding healing and recovery for a wide variety of mental health disorders” (p. 88).

Therapeutic engagement and the communication of stories through professional forms of digital media are showing promise in the development of troubled youth within the program. While this form of engagement was not initially on Sanford’s radar as he conceptualized the organization, he has seen tangible benefits as it has been incorporated into the group’s activities. *GrowingChange* has embraced varying types of media creation as narrative therapy to give its members alternative ways of tackling their problems. In 2012, the group began working with artists and writers to help them create a series of comic books that the organization plans to use to illustrate their personal challenges. The stories being prepared for publication will not be literal interpretations of their struggles. Rather, they would metaphorically tackle incidents in their lives that have been difficult to overcome. For instance, rather than telling literal tales of drug abuse, the comic might characterize substance abuse as a demonic entity or monster that taunts the main character in a story until it can be overcome. While the comic books are still in development, the group has established *Prison Flip Comics* to be the branded name for the series that will be published through *GrowingChange*.

The project began as an exercise where, with the help of a comic book artist, members of the

group storyboarded a difficult time in their lives. The team liked the exercise so much that they asked Sanford to make it part of their business plan so that they could expand it to a series of published comics. Sanford was initially cool to the idea as he felt it might detract from some of their other goals, but as part of the democratic model the young men unanimously voted in favor of creating comic books of their stories, and it became an ongoing part of *GrowingChange*’s endeavors.

The end goal of the comic book project is to connect with other youth who may be experiencing difficult obstacles in their lives. Each edition of the comic is planned to focus on a specific story of an individual who has overcome a unique struggle such as substance abuse, gang involvement, complicated grief, and so on. *GrowingChange* hopes that the comic books will have a stronger appeal to youth than the mundane pamphlets dealing with topics such as mental health, cannabis use or STDs that can be found in offices of human health or juvenile justice. The group believes that young people will be more apt to pick up a comic book and peruse it in those environments, and if the lessons are presented in the modern, gritty style of comic book storytelling, it may just stick with the reader more than a threefold pamphlet about dealing with anger that is likely to be ignored by a young teenager. *GrowingChange* also plans to utilize multimedia strategies to engage audiences beyond their comic books. They plan to include QR codes or other forms of easily linkable media that, with the use of a smart phone, can take readers to important online resources where they can seek help for a variety of issues covered in the comic stories.

As *GrowingChange* evolves, its members find themselves more deeply involved in forms of practical media therapy. For instance, they liked the idea of creating a promotional video for their organization that featured them talking about their plans for developing the abandoned prison site. They partnered with a local filmmaker to

draft a script of their promotional video. It was shot over a period of two days at the prison site. In February of 2015, it was previewed to members of the group who had starred in it prior to a more public launch planned later the same year. They were ecstatic with the results. The group asked to see it several times, and conversation buzzed about the potential that it had to promote their program. There was a strong sense of pride in the room as they grew eager at the thought of being presented in a cinematic format to external audiences.

Status Conferral Theory purports that attention by forms of media yields a sense of importance to audiences (Lazarsfeld & Merton, 2000; Vivian, 2013). As the young men in *GrowingChange* see themselves in the context of professional media coverage, they also begin to consider that they might not be just a bunch of guys who got busted. Instead, they begin to weigh the possibilities of their own importance and the meaningful roles they play in the development of something special that gives back to the community.

OUTCOMES AND FUTURE PLANS

GrowingChange's use of media development has shown therapeutic value through both the process and product of media content generation. The team worked with media professionals to create a promotional video that details the organization's goals for the prison site (Hutchens, 2015). Youth in the program were able to initiate a script and negotiate with professionals on how to execute it. This endeavor proved to be a positive challenge for the team. It forced them to let go of some of their initial ideas of what the script and outcome of the project would look like based on the suggestions of a seasoned media professional who agreed to produce the video for them. Beyond practicing the art of creative negotiation, the outcome of seeing themselves in a positive framework within the video became a part of the clinical process. This positive reinforcement elevated

progress elsewhere in their lives. For example, they were able to share their promotional video in their own social media networks and with friends at school. It allowed them to present a different image of themselves to others. It also had the added impact of allowing numerous community members a safe and accessible portal to reconsider their own ideas about youth in the *GrowingChange* program. Sanford believes the video project has been effective both internally and externally in terms of re-imagining these young men.

The video has had other positive effects, which were never imagined during the inception of the idea. In June of 2015, they met via Skype with an international practice group based out of the Netherlands called *Young in Prison*. *Young in Prison* works with troubled youth in countries such as the Netherlands, South Africa, Columbia, and Kenya. The organization discovered *GrowingChange's* promotional video online and contacted them to learn about their prison reclamation project. *Young in Prison* asked *GrowingChange* to join their international practice group, so the members of both programs are currently working to engage an international partnership as a result of the promotional video.

GrowingChange has more plans for utilizing media in both therapeutic and promotional ways. The group is preparing to embark upon social media campaigns to spread the word about their organization. Social media use has been found to improve both self-determination and perceptions of self-representation in youth (Hynan, Murray, & Goldbart, 2014). Group discussions about using social media to promote the organization led to a wide range of learning opportunities for those in the program. Sanford believes it may also provide a springboard for reflection, as conversations about their personal social media pages led to critical thinking about image and the way the young men present themselves in society. During a heated group discussion, one member pointed out to another

member that pictures on his personal Facebook page of him making gang signs would look bad to potential donors or volunteers because the purpose of *GrowingChange* is to establish that young men in the program are changing their lives and moving away from negative influences. After further discussion, other members agreed that they would, in turn, need to be more careful about how they present themselves on their own social media pages.

One counterargument that can be made to this type of media-centric approach to helping troubled teenagers is the potential negative outcomes of how youth interpret ways of presenting their image to outsiders. Certainly, popular media of modern times is adept at modeling bad behaviors. Reality television programming, in particular, has a reputation for modeling social aggression. Stars in these programs frequently work to damage the self-esteem, social status, or inflict other forms of social aggression upon co-stars (Martins & Wilson, 2011; Wilson, Robinson, & Callister, 2012). It is possible then that these or other improper behaviors might be subsequently imitated by troubled youth being featured in media, as they could assume that these interactions are how one is supposed to act within the frame of media. Of course, there is always an inherent danger that this type of outcome could reveal itself through the course of engaging troubled teens through media content development. However, it is a possibility that is kept in mind throughout each project, and it is handled early in the process by extensive coaching to the youth about the goals of each media product and what developmental opportunities lay within each project for them as individuals.

The types of insights and self-reflection occurring with the teens in *GrowingChange* are invaluable for the youth of today. Developing an understanding of personal image projection via media outlets is something that is taught in many colleges and universities. These young

men are beginning to understand this in a practical manner at a far younger age. Due to the circumstances that have led to their involvement in the program, it is difficult to negate the value of these important lessons.

CONCLUSION

In 2009, Noran Sanford envisioned an abandoned prison site as the home base for an organization that would help troubled youth while simultaneously supporting the local community. At the time he did not consider that media development would become part of his therapeutic program to help reform young teenagers in the juvenile justice system. In the time since, he has come to see the benefits of undertaking these forms of therapy with the population he serves. His largest media projects to date have been the ongoing comic book series and participation in two video projects. The first video project was the group's inclusion in a regional documentary film titled *Voices of the Lumbee*, which detailed the group's work and purpose within the region (Dolasinski, 2014). The second was a short, online promotional video, which his team conceptualized and created to promote their work and solicit donations or volunteers to help achieve their goals. In each case, Sanford has witnessed improvements in self-efficacy with members of his team. He has also watched excitement build at the prospect of adding new forms of media content to the organization's repertoire of communication tools.

The next phase of media development includes finding ways to complete the comic book project. They continue to explore grants and other financial options to pay for the costs of publishing and distributing their comic ideas. The group is also working with a local media producer to be profiled in a documentary film about their efforts. In the fall of 2015, small film crews began shadowing the group as they progress toward acquiring the Wagram prison site and redeveloping the land into a farm

and education center. As media development continues to define how the external world sees *GrowingChange*, Sanford and the young men on his team are embracing the benefits of having a media presence. Thus far, the outcomes have been overwhelmingly positive. Visible changes in the self-efficacy of team members have been noted by Sanford. The team's excitement continues to build at both the prospect of being showcased in a short, documentary format and at developing their own series of comic books. Their media development efforts have also opened doors to an international organization with similar goals. Momentum is building and *GrowingChange* appears to be transitioning from a small group with big ideas, to a tangible organization with a home base and defined processes for prison site reclamation and development. The next harvest for *GrowingChange* will likely be its most significant, as this story will be told with more cameras and media presence than they have ever known in the past. If past experimentation with media development is any indicator, having the organization's next major steps documented for audiences to see will solidify the pride these young men will develop as they guide their grassroots idea to the next level.

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