

## Children's Section on Giving Youth a Voice: the Reciprocal Motivations of Service Providers and the Youth they Serve

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This portion of the Journal of Juvenile Law and Policy highlights the reciprocal relationships of motivation that are created between service providers and youth "in the system," including both delinquent and dependent children. Journal staff interviewed several different practitioners to paint a picture of the youth, the hardships of maintaining available services, and the people who devote their careers to this field of social service.

The Children's Section focuses on a San Francisco based production, the *Beat Within*, which provides detained minors an opportunity to communicate their emotions and experiences with those outside their facility walls. The publication serves as an emotional and creative outlet for children, and thus a source of uninhibited expression of the realities of their lives. This section includes the life stories of two current, adult staff members who received inspiration from the *Beat* during their own times of detainment and incarceration. They now provide that same support and encouragement to minors going through similar experiences.

This section is followed by two more interviews, one with the founder of *Linkage to Education*, a program that focuses on the educational attainment of emancipating minors and youth being released from the delinquency system. The final interview focuses on the experiences of a Sacramento area dependency attorney, who advocates on behalf of youth dependents of the state. Here again the interview naturally

flowed to the inspiration and great resilience of children to succeed, with a little guidance, despite their troubled starts.

### ***The Beat Within***

The production office of the *Beat Within* is hidden in a small corner of a busy newsroom loft in a non-descript building two blocks off Mission Street in San Francisco. Yet the message of its paper reaches countless delinquent youths in California and beyond. Referred to as the “Beat,” the *Beat Within* is a compilation of writings by currently incarcerated youth offenders. *Beat* staff members hold 50 weekly writing and conversation classes inside the facilities. The works then get published in the weekly magazine. In a recent issue the contributions easily fill over seventy-five powerful pages.

David Inocencio co-founded the *Beat* in 1996 with the help of Sandy Close of Pacific News. Inocencio met Close during the three years he spent at the Center on Juvenile Criminal Justice, where he formulated release plans for juveniles awaiting final judgment in their cases. While Inocencio decided to leave that position he did not want to relinquish his connection to juvenile hall. Despite the stereotypical profile of delinquent youth, as focused only on criminal activity, Inocencio recognized that they too have hopes and dreams. Through his relationships with the administrators of several juvenile facilities, Inocencio gained permission to build his own program around the need to teach the kids effective communication skills.

Absent any formal curriculum, Inocencio began teaching writing and conversation classes inside the facilities. The printed *Beat* sprang from a desire to provide the kids with a tangible work product, representative of their efforts to communicate and educate others. Each published article has a response written by a *Beat* staff member that speaks to the emotion expressed in the piece. Staff member Matt Melamed notes, “The kids often look through all their pages to find their article and go straight to the comment.” He expressed that the comments are important because they provide the young

writers with knowledge that someone is reading their work and taking them seriously.

The published works speak volumes about the successes of the program. Incarcerated youth communicate the difficulties of life on the “inside” through their writing. Through the workshops they forge personal connections with staff members that really care. Inocencio attributes much of the staff’s ability to connect with kids to the *Beat*’s separation from the formal system. The *Beat* is 100 percent funded by donor contributions. Inocencio remarks that it makes a difference that the *Beat* is not run by the juvenile detention facilities, the probation officers, and the institution’s schools because the kids often do not trust those places.

*Beat* staff believe that the trust they experience is built on mutual respect. The *Beat* invites its contributors to be careful to illuminate their feelings and viewpoints, but to be careful not to risk incriminating themselves. The staff is also sensitive to the reality that some of the kids they work with are serving long sentences for serious and violent crimes. Mervyn Wool, whose interview follows this article, got to know the *Beat* staff when, as a fifteen year-old, he faced a sentence of 55 years to life for his participation in six gang related shootings. Jason Treas, also interviewed below, began writing Inocencio from solitary confinement in Pelican Bay prison. He had met Inocencio during a stint in juvenile hall, when the *Beat* didn’t yet exist.

Treas is an example of a growing class of contributors the *Beat* now features in the back pages, under the title “the Beat Without.” These are contributions from adults serving time in the penal system. Many of these adults, like Treas, spent time in the juvenile system. Recently the *Beat Without* featured work from George Mosely who wrote, “When I arrived at San Quentin in 1981 as a 10-year-old youngster, it was just another stop on my journey through the penal system.” Contributions are not just limited to California prisons and come in from all over the country.

A filing cabinet in the *Beat* office is a testament to the sheer volume of the correspondence received, sometimes 300

letters a week from incarcerated adults. These adults provide their youthful readers with a glimpse of where they are headed. Contributor Gerald Chavez writes, in a poem entitled *The Devil's Playground*, "For those who exceed in learning to hate, he gave them their own cells, nine by eight, where the summer heat would rise to a hundred and eight. Almost too hot for the devil himself." Sometimes they give advice to scared youth who are headed to prison. Much of the work cannot be published, but the regular writers are often published. Copies of the *Beat* spread throughout the prison system, being passed inmate to inmate or found at their website, "www.thebeatwithin.com".

Not all California's incarcerated individuals have access to the *Beat*. The publication is prohibited in the California Youth Authority (CYA) facilities, which house juveniles up to age 25. *Beat* staff members cut out the individual articles and mail them to youth who write from CYA. Because Santa Clara County officials fear communication between juveniles and are cognizant of the gang tension that transcends county lines and facility walls, they have their own edition of the *Beat* that only includes contributions from their own county. While the *Beat* staff acknowledges that kids do communicate to each other through their work, so far those communications seem to be innocuous in nature and rooted mainly in common fears and feelings.

The words found in the *Beat* express feelings that many on the "outside" may not wish to acknowledge. While incarceration may teach youth to hide their feelings about hardships they've encountered and loss of family contact, etc., the *Beat* encourages presentation of these emotions. The *Beat* is an outlet for detained youth to communicate their feelings under protection from taunting or teasing that might result if he/she were to verbally express these feelings.

Below are two interviews with former *Beat* contributors who have left their cells in favor of life on the outside, supporting themselves by working as editors for the *Beat*. Jason Treas and Mervyn Wool share compelling stories and are testaments to the success of the *Beat* program.

Through connections forged with *Beat* staff, they both have built lives post incarceration while watching many of their friends in similar positions return to their old lives or remain incarcerated.

The Journal of Juvenile Law and Policy wishes to thank the staff members of the *Beat Within* for sharing their time and work. Special thanks to co-founder David Inocencio, Matt Melamed, Mervyn Wool and Jason Treas. For more information visit their website at "[www.thebeatwithin.com](http://www.thebeatwithin.com)".

## JASON TREAS' STORY

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November of 2003 marked the seventh month of freedom for Jason Treas after just over ten years of incarceration. Treas, now a full time staff member at the *Beat Within*, has had a veritable tour of California's prison system beginning in the group homes and juvenile detention facilities in his hometown of Richmond. Treas stated that his home was typical of his area, a single parent home with an absent father who had a history of heroin addiction.

At age fifteen Treas was sentenced to fifteen years in prison for his participation in a robbery "with great bodily injury." Three days after his eighteenth birthday, he was taken to San Quentin, and later transferred to Pelican Bay prison, a notoriously violent and difficult facility. Two of his seven years there were spent in solitary confinement for his alleged involvement in the leadership of one of the prison gangs. However, Treas adamantly denies any such involvement.

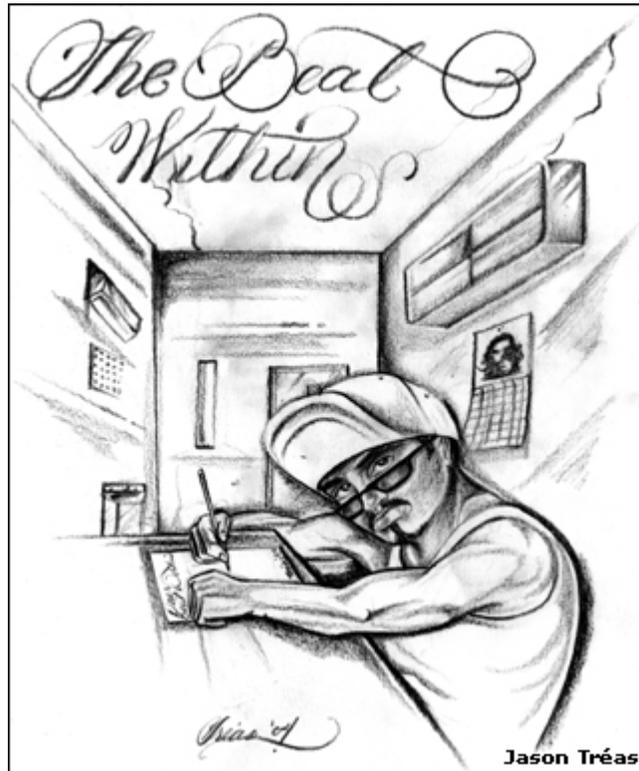
Treas first crossed paths with Inocencio as a youth in juvenile hall. In 1997, Treas obtained a copy of the *Beat* from a fellow inmate at Pelican Bay and started writing and sending in his artwork. A steady stream of correspondence followed and Treas showed his talent for sharing his feelings about his incarceration through art and writing. Treas says that writing to the *Beat* was a "vehicle for redemption" for him. Other prisoners knew that he would eventually get out, and they encouraged him to educate himself. They helped him improve his writing and reading skills and spread the message to other youth that prison was not a glamorous or desirable option. Treas gained confidence, he says, by sharing his skills in drawing with other inmates.

Just prior to his release from Pelican Bay, Inocencio invited him to work on a mural project and had the grant funding waiting for him. The mural covers an entire wall of the office and Treas is now working on three community murals with children of the Boys and Girls Clubs in the Mission District of San Francisco. Although he is not yet allowed to work in the juvenile detention facilities due to his

status as a convicted felon, he runs six workshops per week at drug rehab facilities. He is also working on a grant-funded project through the San Francisco Juvenile Probation Department to determine which programs offered are effective at both rehabilitating offenders and deterring juvenile crime.

Treas describes his artwork as a vehicle for “uniting us in our diversity and using culture as an incentive to promote relationships,” rather than keeping people separated. In addition to his murals and editing work at the *Beat*, Treas also corresponds with inmates who contribute to the *Beat Without*. He says, “These guys want me to tell their little brothers not to do what they did, not to get here. That’s what we’re trying to do.”

-- Edited by Brandy Christensen



## MERVYN WOOL'S STORY

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Mervyn Wool immigrated from China to the United States when he was seven years old. By fifteen, he was facing a sentence of fifty-five years to life for his involvement in a gang related shooting in Chinatown. He served four years and now works at the *Beat* as a staff writer and editor. This, he says, is the first legal job he has ever had.

When Wool came from China, he found life difficult because of teasing and taunting from classmates. His accent, strange clothing and broken English made him feel like an outcast. He lived with his mother who worked long hours as a housekeeper in a hotel to provide for them. They didn't have a lot of extra money for the "cool" clothes kids wore. He says kids made fun of him in the classroom, but when he began hanging out with gang members it felt comfortable and family-like. Many of his fellow gang members were recent immigrants. That gang involvement escalated into a shooting spree to avenge the death of a friend killed by a rival gang.

Wool met Inocencio while in juvenile hall, awaiting his final sentencing. Though Wool says his lawyer only met with him once, Inocencio kept coming back, encouraging him to write and share his experiences. His first *Beat* contributions were only three or four sentences. His reading skills were weak but he says that he wanted to learn, if only to see what *Beat* editors had written in response to his piece. He got "props" from the other kids and he says he developed a reputation for his writing and started to look forward to the weekly classroom sessions. He says, "The *Beat* didn't judge you by your police report". They got to know him.

After he was transferred to a California Youth Authority facility, first in Stockton, then to Sacramento, Wool was no longer able to participate or even get a copy of the *Beat*. Currently, C.Y.A. does not allow issues to circulate within their facilities nor are workshops offered. However Wool kept writing and staff members would clip out his pieces and send them to him with letters and other encouragement. This helped Wool who, despite a strong relationship with his

mother, had little family contact and few visitors while incarcerated. His mother doesn't drive and had to miss an entire day of work and find rides in order to visit during prescribed visiting hours.

The day Wool was released, first on his agenda was a trip to Burger King. Second was to call Inocencio from the parking lot. That was on a Thursday. By the following Monday, he was at work at the *Beat* and has been there two years now. He and his mother live together but have moved from Chinatown to help Wool keep his gang ties severed. He has taken the S.A.T., classes at San Francisco State and hopes to continue at Heald College. Eventually he would like to work in the criminal justice system. But for the time being he plans to keep working for the *Beat* to encourage kids who are where he was just a few years ago.

-- Edited by Brandy Christensen

**Excerpts from, "Return of the Dragon: The Real Thing"  
by Mervyn Wool (aka Pure Dragon), posted Feb 28, 2002**

Finally, after almost four years of incarceration, I have made it back out. I have waited for this day, and I have also thought this day would never come. But it's here, and I'm not dreaming. I am actually not in a classroom full of other wards, with people that wear the same thing as you wear. No, I'm wearing my own clothes. I'm wearing my own boxers, my own socks, etc . . . Freedom has never tasted so good. Isn't it funny that it seems that one doesn't know how important one little thing is to them until they have lost it? I think a lot of us take a lot of thing for granted and don't realize what we have going for us until we have it taken away from us.

It was weird to sit in my homeboy's car and listen to the sweet melody of the Asian music. It felt weird to step in Burger King and order what I wanted and have money in my pocket. It felt good to be able to buy a pack of gum and pay for it myself -- I mean, actually take money from my pocket and pay for it. To you guys, these might be little things, and a lot of us have always taken these so-called little things for granted, but to me, it's gold, it's diamond, it's happiness, it's

life, and I am cherishing every second, every minute of every hour and day of these “little” things.

## FINDING INSPIRATION DESPITE THE HARDSHIPS OF SERVING "TROUBLED" YOUTH

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Daren T. Maeda, Director of Linkage to Education

Since 1988, I've operated a non-profit program called *Linkage to Education*. This program helps transition into post-secondary education high-risk 17 to 19-year olds who are exiting institutional custody and care in Sacramento. One unique aspect of our efforts is the outreach-based nature— we bring the program to the youth instead of waiting for them to come to us. Our operations depend on the needs and location of the youth. ON behalf of juvenile offenders, we work within the institutional settings in Sacramento (Boy's Ranch, Juvenile Hall, etc.). In the case of foster youth, we often work at group homes. Our attention follows youth to college, as we provide on-campus support for each student we enroll into school.

My work has a two-fold focus: 1) to provide educational outreach to a population of students that tends to be ignored by the institutions of higher education, and 2) to make the transition into higher education easier for those students. Upon release from institutional custody and care, the first year out is a roller coaster ride for both juvenile offenders and foster youth. Both groups are at high risk and headed down a path that either ends with newfound stability or a return to the criminal justice system, welfare system, homelessness or worse. It is precisely this roller coaster effect that *Linkage* addresses with each youth.

I graduated from CSUS in 1985 with a degree in criminal justice. Upon graduation, a friend helped get me a long-term substitute teaching position inside Sacramento County's juvenile detention facilities. I got a firsthand look at the revolving door of kids entering and leaving the system and was surprised to learn that many of the older kids had tested at or near the 12th grade level in reading and math, even though many had never attended high school for a variety of reasons.

I thought this was such a waste of potential for the kids and a major waste of time, energy and resources by the system.

In 1985, I was showing a film as part of the lesson plan for one of my classes inside juvenile hall. One of my students was a young lady named Kim, who cycled in and out of the system. During the film, she approached me and mentioned she wanted to go to college but had no idea what to do. I pulled out a pencil and paper and scratched out the necessary steps she needed to take to enroll in American River College. The light bulb went on for her, and she beamed as she headed back to her seat. A few seconds later, I understood, too -- I figured out that this is what I should be doing with my life. Three years later, the first four *Linkage* students were on their way to college.

*Linkage to Education* has several targeted goals. The primary one is to turn former dropouts, foster youth and youthful offenders into college students who are pursuing positive goals, by strengthening their ability to climb the social/economic ladder through improving academics and upgrading training skills. Our organization also seeks to provide necessary mentoring for students who are in transition from "Crisis" status to "Stable and/or Thriving," as defined by criteria used by Sacramento Employment and Training Agency and the State of California's Department of Community Services.

We also seek to address the recidivism rate and the overall likelihood that these groups of youths will be dependent on the system in one form or another. For example, at age 18, foster youth are considered adults and as such are no longer eligible for support. Likewise, incarceration alone cannot help juvenile offenders them overcome their circumstances. Traditionally, these youth leave incarceration facilities without jobs, diplomas, or a means of making their court-ordered restitution payments. They lack the goals and avenues to pursue higher education or vocational training. Upon release from an institution, the streets and peer pressures await them. Without intervention, they are headed to the California Youth Authority, adult systems, or worse.

There are many major challenges that *Linkage to Education* faces continually. One of the most glaring is the public perception that it is too late to help redirect many of these youths. Additionally, it is difficult to secure funding sources that have had a complete appreciation for what we do or how we do it. The criminal justice personnel regard *Linkage* as an education program while the education system views it as a program that should be funded by a social work or criminal justice program. Each views the financial burden as the other discipline's responsibility.

We have to overcome what I call the "blind spots" within higher education. For example, the Criminal Justice Division spends little to no time discussing juvenile rehabilitation and the role its graduates may/should play in it. It is viewed as the responsibility of social workers, education professionals or psychologists. Yet these kids spend the bulk of their time passing through the criminal justice system again and again. Granted, much of the Criminal Justice focus should be on custody and security, but there is also an obligation to broach the issue of rehabilitation. Those who are trained to work in the Criminal Justice Division leave their education with a blind spot, unable to see their future clients in any sort of rehabilitative light or as college material.

Health and Human Service Divisions and some group homes also fall into this trap. The lack of any long-term goal planning or discussion of college for clients points to their shortcomings as program service providers. They have a responsibility to prepare kids and plant the seed of desire for a higher education as kids prepare to exit their systems. However, many do not see these kids as college-bound so there is no discussion/preparation for college. As the clients leave, they don't go on to higher education, and a self-fulfilling prophecy is born.

*Linkage to Education* strives to overcome these challenges in many ways. The first is through public relations. The second is a fellowship program that is being established to provide financial assistance and support to those *Linkage* students who pursue a graduate degree in a "helping"

discipline, such as teaching, social work, criminal justice or psychology. In turn, the student agrees that upon graduation they will “give back” by working in a professional capacity to help address some of the problem areas they faced coming through the foster and/or juvenile systems.

In order to encourage student interest in the aforementioned disciplines, we have set up a program with California State University, Sacramento (CSUS). Interns are chosen from the psychology, social work, education and/or criminal justice departments. These interns work directly with incarcerated juveniles providing help with case management and mentoring. The interns are given a valuable, hands-on work experience, which reinforces their educational major. Most importantly, these interns are close in age to the program participants, and their presence underscores the importance of higher education.

The results that we see in our students re-enforce the notion that education can help an individual ultimately rise above their circumstances. It seems that despite the occasional attempt, criminal justice agencies continue to have short-sighted approaches to rehabilitation. The issues and problems are too large in scope for one agency to address alone. I am trying to do something more than accept the current climate of inaction and neglect because that’s “just the way it’s always been done.”

On a human level, helping contribute to a student’s personal resurrection is very rewarding. At times, I am amazed at the dramatic “before and after pictures” of some of the students. Some examples are three former Sacramento County gang members: One is a former Boy’s Ranch student starting UC Davis this fall after transferring from Sacramento City College. Another was accepted to Berkeley, UCLA and UC San Diego. He finally chose UCLA because of his interest in the communication field. The third is another former Boy’s Ranch student who completed one semester at Sacramento City College and then dropped out to work. I run into him on occasion, since he is now an assistant manager at a

major clothing store in Sacramento. He has bought a house and started a family.

The young people that *Linkage* assists are in a key position that enables them to recognize “the diamonds in the rough” and make an impact by helping other young people like themselves rise above their circumstances. Their “high-risk” background thus becomes an asset rather than a liability. Our participants often return as facilitators who can create great changes in the lives of the young people coming along behind them – and in the system itself. All of these youth underscore what we’re trying to do; not turn our participants into Ph.D. candidates, but help them successfully and permanently transition out of the criminal justice system and open the door to college as part of that process.

*“I learned that there are people willing to help others no matter what their past was like, giving us a better chance at getting somewhere in today’s society. Without this program, I would not have had the opportunity to straighten my life out and become a better human being.”*

--James, a former *Linkage to Education* student.

--Edited by Jose Castillo

## INTERVIEW WITH JENNIFER KELLEHER, ATTORNEY AT SACRAMENTO CHILD ADVOCATES

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I work at Sacramento Child Advocates (SCA), a non-profit organization created to represent abused and neglected children in Sacramento County. The juvenile court of Sacramento County appoints our agency to represent children in dependency proceedings. We advocate for our clients in areas such as education, delinquency, and immigration. SCA also recently formed a project called Advocates for Young Adults that works to provide legal assistance and support to youth who are preparing to transition or have already transitioned from foster care to adulthood. I work with children of all ages. Our clients can be as young as a day or two old up to age 25.

My focus is primarily on courtroom advocacy. I spend much of my day in court representing children. My job is to advocate for the child's wishes and for what I have assessed to be in the child's best interest. The issues we litigate surround whether or not the court should take jurisdiction over a family based on allegations of abuse or neglect. Once a court determines that the abuse occurred, the court and attorneys monitor the parents' progress towards reunification or the progress that Child Protective Services is making towards finding a permanent home for a child.

Our main goal is to make sure our clients are safe. Our clients typically come to us having experienced serious abuse at the hands of their families, and our first priority is to ensure that our clients are in a safe place. Once safety is obtained, we can build on serving the other needs the children have. We specifically focus on trying to place our clients with a family member that has a protective or supportive role with our client. We try to ensure that their educational needs are being met. Education becomes especially important because a large majority of our clients qualify for special education services. As many of our clients have experienced neglect, we strive to obtain prompt medical and dental care. One of my focuses as an attorney for Advocates for Young Adults is to

prepare older youth to enter adulthood with individualized plans and goals for their future well-being. This usually entails a referral to the Independent Living Program for counseling and life skills training. Continued education is always a goal.

Unfortunately, the challenges in this line of work are many. First and foremost, the attorneys in my office have to maximize the limited resources we have to serve a large number of clients. Sacramento County has a very large population of children and youth in foster care, and it is always difficult to manage a large volume of cases. Another challenge is finding safe, stable and lasting placements for our clients. Many of the children in foster care experience placement change at an alarming rate. Multiple placement changes increase educational deficiencies and exacerbate or create mental health problems. My biggest frustration as an attorney for children has been my realization that even the best legal advocacy can't fix what many of the children want most; to return to their families regardless of the abusive or neglectful environment they came from. I can't work miracles and make parents stop using drugs or attend visits more consistently. Watching a child be repeatedly disappointed by their parents can be heartbreaking.

Sometimes it is very difficult to determine what might be in a child's best interest. At SCA, we use a team approach to advocacy by utilizing a social worker staff to assist the attorneys. I work with well-trained and dedicated social workers who assist me in directing the case. Our social workers also provide an additional support system and connection to our child clients. The social workers bring a crucial perspective to child advocacy.

I keep working with children and youth because it is the most rewarding work I have ever done. Even child victims demonstrate to me on a daily basis how resilient they are. Working with young clients every day is also refreshing. As an adult, I always enjoy seeing what a child's perspective brings to the table. My clients inspire me every day. Some of my clients who have experienced the worst abuse have a remarkable capacity for forgiveness and can be very

determined. One of my clients, who was going to have a child, told me that she knew she was going to be a great mother because her mother taught her exactly what not to do. Today, that young lady is an excellent young mother and high school graduate working in the medical field.

I think that testifying against a parent is probably the most difficult and inspiring act that my clients undertake. I especially remember when a seven-year old client testified against her father and described in detail the sexual abuse she experienced at his hands. I remember her image clearly because she was sitting in the witness chair and she had brought a stuffed animal with her. The judge allowed the stuffed animal to have its own chair sitting next to my client and the stuffed animal sat taller in the chair than she did. She told me later when the court ruled in our favor that she was really happy that the judge believed her because no one else in her family did.

--Edited by Judy Schwartz-Behar