

## **Transformational Relationships in Youth Work: The Case of Roca**

By Kay E. Sherwood

Across the helping professions, people engaged in the work understand that creating relationships with the people they are trying to help is necessary in order to encourage those needing or wanting change in their lives to take their own steps toward their own change goals. In many of the helping professions, the challenge and the reward is that workers cannot succeed by “doing to” or “doing for” the people they hope to help, or even by “showing how.” Instead, workers must create the opportunities and make a path for each individual to undertake his or her own change while using themselves in relationships to push, pull, persuade, educate, support, stand beside and consistently show up. Few service organizations have been as intentional and focused on what such practice entails as Roca, an 18-year-old youth service organization based in Chelsea, Massachusetts. And few have been as bold as Roca in naming this as the work of “transformational relationships,” or as committed to defining what the work entails, and tracking its advance, relationship by relationship. At Roca, a system is emerging that enables frontline youth workers, their supervisors, the organization’s managers and young people to communicate about the process of transformation in terms that everyone understands.

Roca’s approach to engaging disadvantaged young people in transformational relationships deserves the attention of organizations in the youth development field and beyond because it works in situations where traditional youth programs have failed. By traditional, I mean programs that rely on parents to enroll young people, or other agencies to refer them, and most important, programs that rely on the young people to comply with this process and actually attend. Traditional youth programs end up serving the “willing.” Roca succeeds in engaging young people who are out of school, street- or gang-involved, possibly court-involved, disaffected from and/or in conflict with their families, generally distrustful of adults, unlikely to respond to offers of help, and disinclined to cooperate with authorities even when it is clearly in their best interest – e.g., to avoid being locked up. At Roca, the staff have long focused on creating relationships because this is what eventually enables very disadvantaged young people to learn to act in their best interest – to live healthy, happy lives, out of harm’s way as Roca describes its goal for them.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Roca also works with young people who want to learn, participate, and achieve in mainstream terms, but who have barriers such as family problems, immigration status, poverty, early parenthood, illiteracy or social isolation. Roca staff create transformational relationships with these young people as well, but the model for this work was first articulated and developed with older, disaffected youth because they are the most challenging and the least likely to be targeted for help by other service organizations.

## **Engaging the Unwilling**

Zaida was a 12-year-old middle school student when Roca staff started coming into her school to recruit and work with students identified by their teachers as at risk of not making it into high school. Zaida was skipping school a lot, and when she was in school she was defiant, argumentative, and seemingly determined to fight with her peers and her teachers. She was also very bright.

Angie, Director of the Roca program then working with in-school youth, decided immediately that she would do whatever it took to draw Zaida into Roca's program. The process of engaging Zaida took more than a year of making offers, being rebuffed, showing up over and over, learning about Zaida's difficult family situation, and, on Zaida's part, on-again, off-again participation. By age 16, Zaida was on her way to high school completion, she was a paid youth member of the Roca staff, she was using Roca to help her sort out her family issues, and she had enrolled her two younger siblings in Roca's programs.

The chronicle of Roca's effort to engage Zaida – with tactical changes on Roca's part, but no change in the goals for Zaida to learn how to live a happy, healthy life in spite of her family issues and to achieve her dreams – included these events:

- Angie did not take “No” for an answer in her many interactions with Zaida at school; eventually Zaida stopped trying to evade Angie and started to talk to her, defiantly sometimes, but still slowly opening up about her troubles.
- Angie showed up at Zaida's court hearing on a truancy petition, offering to Zaida and the court the option of Zaida's participation in Roca as a disposition. After this meeting, Angie took Zaida to breakfast and started asking her about what she wanted for her future.
- During the first two years of her involvement with Roca, Zaida went back and forth between her street life and the path of school + Roca. Once, Angie went looking for Zaida on the streets, found her in a dangerous situation, and took her home, which caused a temporary rift in their relationship.
- Zaida's mother was also living a street life and drug-involved, leaving her youngest children to fend for themselves. Once, Angie went to Zaida's home, found the two younger children alone, and filed a child neglect petition against the mother. This caused a major rift in Angie's relationship with Zaida, who was worried that Angie and Roca would break up her family and cause her siblings to be sent into foster care.
- When Zaida was angry at Angie for interfering in her life and her family situation, other Roca staff stepped in to connect with Zaida and keep Roca's offer on the table.
- Roca mediated family healing for Zaida, her mother, siblings, and stepfather, bringing them into regular “circle” discussions of what each was feeling and experiencing.
- Angie put together paid work responsibilities and a work schedule for Zaida designed both to keep her busy after school and give her development and leadership opportunities.

## **What is a Transformational Relationship (and What is it Not)?**

A transformational relationship in the Roca context begins and is built over time with the intention of encouraging and enabling personal change. It is sought out rather than entered into accidentally, and the intention is to use the relationship to improve the well-being of the people in the relationship. Roca staff attempt to engage young people who are in trouble in constructive activities and, ultimately, life-changing experiences by using themselves – their minds, their energies, their emotions, their spirituality and all their capacities – to connect personally with the young people. They, the Roca staff, become the instruments for personal change on the part of young people, at least initially, until young people have developed their own competence, independence and new directions to transform their own lives.

There are not close proxies or parallels to Roca’s practice of creating transformational relationships in the youth development literature,<sup>2</sup> so further description is essential to communicate what is intended and what are the actions involved in this process. Essential features of transformational relationships include:

- Transformational relationships are a means of Roca’s work with young people and are, thus, usually relationships between an adult staff member and a young person – but not necessarily. Transformational relationships can be between two adults or between two young people.
- Transformational relationships are two-way: Both parties experience personal change as a result of the relationship and *are expected to*. This is one of the aspects of transformational relationships that distinguish them from some forms of therapy and other work in the helping professions. Transformation is “experienced with” someone. Typically, Roca staff find themselves trying to behave differently in their personal lives because of the challenging changes they are encouraging in their young program participants. Often, in order to show up consistently for a young person, a staff person discovers that she needs to handle issues in her own life.
- The “use of self” in a transformational relationship is disciplined – and intentional. The practice draws from many of the helping professions, as well as from roles in daily life, such as friendship and parenting, especially those that emphasize active listening, empathy, sharing stories, and giving respect. But Roca staff also use themselves in ways that would be unusual in other youth service programs, as noted next.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> There may be parallels in other human services fields, particularly in the field of disabilities where sometimes a teacher is the means for a person with disabilities to connect with a world previously not accessible. Roca staff suggest that youth ministries with a spiritual focus may be closer in practice to the Roca model than most human service agencies. One aspect of Roca’s practice, the use of peacemaking circles, is associated with healing, which is consonant with a spiritual focus as well.

<sup>3</sup> Because of the lack of precedents, Roca has made a significant investment in documenting its work with young people, including the central role of transformational relationships. In addition to a variety of

- Establishing a personal connection with young people in the Roca context demands the investment of self in ways that are sometimes extreme because young people who do not trust adults do not respond to the typical invitations of youth service programs; something more attention-getting is often required. Transformational relationships in the Roca context demand a high degree of commitment that typically requires staff to go where the young people are, initiate conversation in unwelcoming situations, persist in reaching out when these efforts are met with hostility, be available to young people in trouble at all hours, and be thinking all the time about “What does this individual young person need to be able to take a step out of harm’s way and toward a satisfying future?”
- Once a personal connection with a young person has been established, the work of transformational relationships has only begun. These relationships are intense and often rocky both because the Roca adult in the relationship with a young person is intent on challenging how the young person has been making choices for himself or herself, and because the Roca young people are subjected to all kinds of unhealthy, unsafe, and difficult-to-control conditions and pressures in their lives. Challenge, in order to stimulate personal change, has to occur in the context of safety, which most of the Roca young people have not experienced, at least consistently. Challenged young people who have a history of feeling unsafe often react with anger and/or fear and/or flight. So, the adult practitioner of a transformational relationship has to learn a dance of “push and back up.”
- Transformational relationships are necessary but not sufficient for personal change on the part of young people. They are the “hook” and the “support” for everything else that Roca does to enable young people to cope successfully with difficult circumstances and make the most of their potential and find their place in the world. Roca’s programming – which most of the young people it targets would not participate in on their own initiative – is designed to offer opportunities for them to explore and grow and acquire skills. Roca staff see their strength and their niche in youth development work as helping very disadvantaged young people get ready to do the things that more privileged, safe, and secure young people are expected to do naturally as they mature. This might mean acquiring proficient English or a high school equivalency, learning how to plan, show up every day, make good judgments in difficult or dangerous situations, ask for help, and move outside familiar social and physical territories.<sup>4</sup>

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evaluation and descriptive projects, Roca has developed a series of coaching manuals to describe and explain Roca practices for staff.

<sup>4</sup> For an overview of Roca’s history and approach, see Lynne Dovey. *Achieving Better Social Outcomes in New Zealand Through Collaboration: Perspectives from the United States*, Working Paper No. 16, State Services Commission, New Zealand, September 2003 (available at [www.ssc.govt.nz](http://www.ssc.govt.nz)). This is a study of human services collaboration that uses Roca’s development of community partnerships as an exemplar.

- There is a planned trajectory for a transformational relationship that starts with the initial engagement stage of an intentional personal connection between a Roca staff person and a young person. This engagement stage is managed by the staff person. The relationship then develops into a broader connection between the young person and the whole organization and all that it has to offer; this connection is co-managed by the Roca staff, especially the one with the initial connection, and the young person. Finally, a transformational relationship develops into a still broader connection with the wider community that is managed by the young person, possibly with Roca’s continued involvement and assistance.

This planned trajectory is not meant to suggest that the development of young people or their relationships within the Roca context are linear, following a regular sequence of gains, or predictable. As noted above, and illustrated by Zaida’s experience, transformational relationships can be rocky and the progress of young people toward healthier, happier lives can happen in fits and starts – or sometimes not at all.

- Transformational relationships initiated by Roca staff are focused on the young person, not the adult, and are not meant to serve the emotional needs of the adult, even though they may be the impetus for adult personal change. Thus, there are boundaries between the young person and the adult, limits on staff behavior, and a strong emphasis on staff thinking about “What am I trying to accomplish in this situation with this individual young person?” If staff are doing things in the relationship with the young person because they want to be liked, for example, or sharing personal information because they are seeking agreement or sympathy, they are not playing the necessary Roca role of “the other adult” in the young person’s life.

## **The Beginning of a Transformational Relationship**

Menil is a 17-year-old young man who has been ejected permanently from the Chelsea Public Schools for bringing a weapon to school and has been given probation by the juvenile court. He is hanging on the streets with his gang friends, smoking marijuana regularly, unemployed, and trying to stay away from his house because both of his parents are upset about his choices and nagging him to get a job. The boardwalk at the Revere town beach is where he spends most of his time and where two outreach workers from Roca spot him frequently.

Ana, an outreach worker in Roca's VIA program for out-of-school youth approaches Menil week after week. She says Hi, gives her name, introduces herself as being from Roca, and asks how he's doing. The first few times, Menil brushes her off very rudely, cursing, calling her names, and telling her to leave him alone. But each time, Ana adds a bit of information and a question to her conversation, ignoring his rudeness and trying not to take it personally. She asks if he knows where Roca is located, if he's in school, if he needs a job, what he likes to do. She tells him that Roca has a Thursday night basketball league he might enjoy, that Roca has GED classes and helps young people train for and find jobs. At first, these are very brief encounters. When Menil refuses to engage, Ana says, "OK, but if you change your mind, you can always call me at Roca." Sometimes she moves on to try to talk with the other young men Menil is with; she gives them the same information, asks the same questions.

Ana knows the relationship with Menil is changing when he starts to tell her a little about himself, stops being rude, and accepts her card with her phone number. This is the first step in the transformational relationship. In Roca's terms, Menil is "choosing in" at this point. Ana has hung in long enough to arouse Menil's curiosity. He asks, "Why do you keep coming here? What do you want from me?" Ana is ready for this. What she needs to do is demonstrate that she does not have any agenda except helping Menil find a new path. She says, "I can see that you have a lot of potential to make a good life for yourself, you're smart, you know what's up. Roca can help you make some changes. If you have court trouble, we can help with that. It doesn't have to stop you from moving on with your life."

Ana uses two methods for reinforcing the budding transformational relationship with Menil. Whenever he tells her a bit about himself, she brings the information up in their next conversation to demonstrate that she is listening. And she always lights up a smile when she sees him and says how happy she is that he is to see him. She is demonstrating that Menil matters to her. Although this confuses him because it is so different from his life experiences so far, it also disarms him. Ana is also teaching Menil his first lesson in a core Roca value – everyone matters.

## **The Power of Showing Up**

Roca describes its outreach efforts to young people as “relentless.” Extreme persistence is one element of an overall strategy for creating transformational relationships that is more broadly described as “showing up for someone until they can show up for themselves.” A pivotal method of practicing transformational relationships, “showing up” in Roca parlance means being present to a young person with intention and attention consistently and especially at important moments (court appearances, funerals, and celebrations, for example), whenever these occur, regardless of whether young people invite the Roca staff or seem to appreciate their presence. In these showing-up encounters, Roca staff make offers to help with whatever difficulties young people are experiencing and bring a clear idea of developmental goals for each individual young person, whether it is a tiny step toward trying something unfamiliar or a major step toward self-sufficiency, such as getting a job.

As a practice method, showing up is the active demonstration of the Roca belief that everyone is valuable. It is also the principal action taken to encourage young people to trust the Roca adult in a transformational relationship. Roca staff tend not to rely on “trust-building” as the description of what they do in transformational relationships, however. This is partly because the term has been overused and underexplained in youth work. But Roca staff understand that trust builds because Roca’s commitment to a young person is unconditional – whether or not they welcome and comply with a program, for example.

At the beginning of a relationship, showing up in a young person’s life with consistency and offers of help can be attention-getting when other adults have rarely done this. It can also be disarming and curiosity-provoking, as is reflected in Menil’s question about “What does this person want?” Later in a relationship, showing up in a young person’s life with consistency can provide the safety net for the young person to take a step into the unfamiliar. At Roca, the staff also say they “walk with” the young people to describe this version of showing up.

“Showing up” is also Roca shorthand for the commitment and emotional competence required of Roca staff to succeed in transformational relationships. A staff person who is able to show up for someone else has to have resolved the major issues in his or her own personal life that might interfere with the staff person’s ability to be present and focused on someone else. Sometimes distractions for staff are logistical, but usually they are emotional – for example, issues or relationships in their personal lives that raise the same conflicts and responses for them that the young people experience. In Roca language, the staff can’t be bringing their own unresolved “stuff” to their interactions with young people. Often, it is in the context of a transformation relationship that a staff person recognizes unresolved personal issues and, often, this is how the transformational relationship becomes two-way: The staff person has to change and grow in order to help the young person. (Forgiveness, anger management, and control are frequently at the center of staff’s personal development in transformational relationships.)

“Showing up” describes a goal Roca has for young people -- i.e., that they should be able to “show up for themselves.” This means that as young people gain self-esteem and a sense of their place in the world, they should be able to make choices that are in their own best interest. “Showing up for yourself” means being able to stop doing things that undermine a person’s chances for health and happiness. It also means being able to say yes to opportunities that are not necessarily accepted or understood by former associates, friends and family members.

Finally, “the way we show up” is a central theme for Roca’s work with young people and their families that compresses many ideas about human services as well as some of Roca’s own history. First, this expression captures an attitude of humility on Roca’s part in the face of the extraordinary difficulties that many young people and their families have experienced and the extraordinary courage that many have mustered to make their way and make a place for themselves in their communities. This attitude of humility leads both to practices that recognize the strengths of the young people and their families and to practices designed to empower them to make their own decisions, such as peacemaking circles.<sup>5</sup>

“The way we show up” is also shorthand meant to distinguish Roca from some traditional social service agencies that take a power position in relation to young people and their families and see themselves as fixing the problems of the young people and their families. The shorthand is also distinguishes Roca now from its own early stance in the community, a stance as the righteous defender of young people from the actions and decisions of other community agencies, including the police, the schools, and the child welfare authorities. Now, Roca actively works with a host of community partners on creating a whole community that can better provide opportunities for disadvantaged young people to thrive.

### **Tracking the Development of Transformational Relationships**

Roca offers young people opportunities for development and sets expectations for behavior and interactions in ways that are similar to other youth development organizations. But, in addition, Roca staff see themselves as directing their relations with young people day-to-day, in a planful way, and in the context of a carefully articulated philosophy about how very disadvantaged young people can heal, become whole, rounded people, and begin to act in service of their dreams. Roca staff resist comparisons with therapies, but they are clearly in the business of helping young people live healthier lives. Their touchstones of health are embedded in a philosophy that describes four

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<sup>5</sup> Peacemaking circles as implemented by Roca have been studied extensively by Carolyn Boyes-Watson. See, for example, *Holding the Space: The Journey of Circles at Roca*. Center for Restorative Justice, Suffolk University, October 2002. See also, Boyes-Watson, *Restorative Justice in Community: Transforming Systems Through Building Community*. Ft. Lauderdale, FL: Florida Atlantic University Community Justice Institute, 2001. Other works describing the peacemaking circles approach include Kay Pranis, Barry Stuart and Mark Wedge, *Peacemaking Circles: From Crime to Community*. St. Paul, MN: Living Justice Press, 2003, and Rupert Ross, *Returning to the Teachings: Exploring Aboriginal Justice*, Toronto: Penguin Canada, 1996.

values or goals for young people: belongingness, generosity, independence, and self-sufficiency.

In transformational relationships and in organized activities, Roca's practice objective is to be working on each of these goals with each young person all the time. Belongingness is a need that a young person may have met through a street or gang culture, but is gradually shifted to a Roca staff person and to the organization as a whole in a successful transformational relationship – and later, possibly to an educational institution, employer, family, and wider community. Generosity is the ability to give of oneself, which many disadvantaged young people can come to only after experiencing the recognition and attention they receive in a transformational relationship. Independence builds on skills – learning about how the world works, concrete information, self-management, and social interactions, all of which require practice, reinforcement, and feedback in addition to direct teaching and teaching by example. Self-sufficiency is achieved when young people are able to choose well for themselves and make their choices reality.

How do Roca staff know that this development is happening for each of the young people they work with? First, Roca uses a case management approach, without using the distancing language of “cases,” but focusing instead on who among the staff has the primary relationship with a young person. Second, Roca has developed a case data collection and management system to develop and track indicators of transformational relationships and young people's progress toward the four core goals of belongingness, generosity, independence and self-sufficiency. Third, there is a Roca system of supervision that involves regular review with frontline workers of the progress of their relationships with young people, and a baseline set of expectations for staff actions. Roca staff strive to understand the status of each young person in terms that fit with the Roca mission and its theory of how transformational relationships promote personal change.

For example, how do Roca staff know what's going on with Zaida? First, Angie will be able to say how often she has made contact with Zaida during a given time period and what those interactions were like. At the point when Zaida begins to respond to Angie's offers – for example, when she agrees to start coming to Roca as the disposition of her truancy court case – Angie will work with her to complete a baseline intake interview that informs Roca's picture of Zaida's sense of belongingness, generosity, independence and self-sufficiency as well as providing basic information about her living situation, her goals and her difficulties. Over time, Zaida will add to the picture of her status both through her interactions with Angie and by participating in semi-annual interviews. Meanwhile, Angie will be documenting her contacts with Zaida from week to week and discussing with her supervision team her plans for helping Zaida stay on track in school, cement her gains in leadership and her progress toward her goals, and deal with the difficulties in her home life.

Roca has recently refined its articulation of transformational relationships in order to facilitate identifying them, developing them, and tracking their progress. This re-articulation involved setting minimum expectations for staff activity in such

relationships, describing the actions needed on the part of staff, and describing indicators of progress based on the responses of young people. The following is a slightly edited version of Roca's concept of what happens during a transformational relationship.

### Actions of Transformational Relationships

#### Choosing In

- Young person decides to be “in” (relationship, programming, opportunities, etc.)
- Referral of young person from a partner system (school, DSS, DYS, Probation, Parole, etc.)
- Youth worker decides with his/her supervisor that a young person is “in” (relationship, programming, opportunities, etc.)

#### Staff Time and Focus on the Task of Engaging Young People

- Minimum staff contact with young person of 3 times a week
- Staff work on really understanding where young people are at
- Intentional planning and purposeful interactions
- Commitment to work with and engage a young person who has chosen in or been chosen in by others for at least 1 year

#### Move toward mutuality

- Young person reciprocates more voluntarily
- Young person initiates contact, involvement, etc.

#### Staff promote and young people move through these Stages of Change:

- Pre-contemplation -- The young person is not thinking about or has explicitly rejected change.
- Contemplation – The young person is thinking about change, perhaps seeks out Roca or some other program, perhaps responds to an invitation.
- Planning – The young person and Roca staff talk about what it would take to make change happen and what the young person wants in the future.
- Action – Practice, trial and error in the context of a plan that has been discussed in detail between the young person and Roca staff.
- Maintaining – Continuing staff support during difficult times and new cooperative efforts.

#### More relationships with other adults

- Youth worker intentionally introduces and engages young person with other adults in Roca and community.
- Youth worker uses the transformational relationship as a model for possible relationships between the young person and other adults.

Roca's new description of indicators of transformational relationships is:

Indicators of Transformational Relationships

- Young person is responding to youth worker.
- Young person is moving toward mutuality and initiating.
- Young person has moved to the Contemplation Stage of Change or beyond, which can be seen in attitude, knowledge, and or behavior changes on the part of the young person.
- Young person is in more positive relationships with other adults.
- Youth worker is actively working through the Actions of a Transformational Relationship as seen through the evidence of supervision, case notes, and worker's own development and growth plan.

**Next Steps for Roca**

The process of reflection, clarification and self-evaluation that Roca has undertaken during the last few years to arrive at the understanding of transformational relationships reflected in this paper continues – with some new ideas about how to structure and manage the organization in ways that can assure a focus on transformation for the young people that Roca targets. First, Roca has articulated a two-part theory of change to guide its programming and its organizational development. This has resulted in decisions to re-structure the programs, target a slightly narrower age group (14- to 24-year olds), create staff caseloads of no more than 25 young people in transformational relationships, put more emphasis on job training, and set a goal of moving young people through the Stages of Change (the active engagement period) in three years in most cases. The process of articulating a theory of change included defining short- and long-term outcomes for young people that can be measured.

Second, Roca has identified a web-based information tool that will enable the organization to track the steps in the development of transformational relationships more closely and track the defined measurable outcomes for young people. This tool will become the basis of a new management system focused on outcomes for the young people.

Third, following from the definition of measurable outcomes for young people and a technology and management system tied to these measures, Roca leaders have committed to major organizational culture change – shifting from a culture of dedication to a culture of success. This is unfinished work and a long-term effort because it requires a subtle shift to reorient a staff focused on being *in* relationships with disaffected and

disadvantaged young people toward using those relationships intentionally to help young people make concrete, measurable positive changes in their lives – particularly to acquire the emotional, social, and self-sufficiency-related skills they need to succeed.

These steps might all be encompassed within a wider goal of aligning the organization's methods with its mission. But, beyond this, what Roca is doing with regard to transformational relationships is learning how to turn an understanding of intentional interaction with young people into consistent, universally understandable, and professional practice in youth work.