

FOSTERING RESILIENCY IN NEW YORK YOUTH BY SARA ALGASE AND DELANO DAVIDSON NEW YORK CORRESPONDENTS

On Oct. 30, social workers and youth counselors from throughout the New York City area gathered at the SGI-USA New York Culture Center to discuss topics ranging from fostering resiliency in youth to cultivating personal assets in young people.

The Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies sponsored the all-day conference. Sean Grover, a program administrator with Brooklyn Psychiatric Centers and SGI-USA member who helped facilitate the day, noted that the conference was almost canceled due to the devastating events of Sept. 11. "Staying true to the theme of resiliency, we decided to let nothing stand in our way," Sean commented.

"Too often adults do all the talking and young people are supposed to listen," added Brian Moriarty, coordinator of the conference and the federation's Youth Services Network. "This is a day when young people do the talking and adults do the listening. I'm very proud that 80 percent of the presenters are young people."

The day started out with an introduction of the SGI-USA, a celebration of African dance and poetry by SGI-USA members Afua McKinney and Dru Barnes, and a powerful performance about youth challenges by four teenagers from United Community Centers.

"The compassion of one person can make a tremendous difference in a young person's life"—this theme appeared again and again throughout the day. "Youth can excel when given the skills," said Gessy Nixon of Youth Communications, an organization for children in foster care.

A highlight of the day was a panel of young people who shared incredible stories of overcoming adversity. Julian Kurita, a SGI-USA member, told his story of being diagnosed with Schizoaffective Disorder. He attributed his complete recovery to his mother's faith, tireless compassion and endless search to find the right treatment for his illness. "My mother never gave up on me, even when I had given up on myself," he said. Julian, 25, is now a student at New York's School of Visual Arts and a junior high/high school division leader.

Alex Abrolleile spoke about growing up gay and the strain of living with a father "who found new things to hit me with every day." By the age of 17, Alex was homeless and a prostitute. He credited his remarkable turnaround to one caring social worker from the Green Chimneys organization, who "was the first person to ever tell me everything was going to be okay," Alex said. "That was the moment everything changed for me." Alex is now a student at Hunter College.

Jessica Kramer, who was a runaway at 13, had some advice for adults: "You need to tell young people that they can achieve their dreams. No matter how crazy their dreams may sound, encourage them to do it. Help them move forward."

Giselle John, abandoned by her mother at age 14, regaled the audience with stories of running away from police and child welfare workers. A teacher saw Giselle as a diamond in the rough and encouraged her to succeed at her goals. Giselle is now a student at John Jay College of Criminal Justice. She stressed the importance of being a role model. "You never know what seeds you're planting," she said. "You never know who's looking up to you."

Brannon Woodfin, whose life was consumed with committing street crimes, recalled how he blossomed with the help of his counselor, Barbara Silverman, and her program called Let's Talk About It. Brannon stressed the need to keep a close watch on

impressionable youth. “The worst thing you can do is let them stray,” he said. “If they think you don’t care, you’ll lose them forever.” The stories of these courageous young people inspired the participants to give them a standing ovation.

The afternoon consisted of lively and informative breakout discussion groups on everything from drama-therapy to youth trauma.

Brian Moriarty closed the day by thanking the “staff and members of the SGI-USA, for without your commitment and vision this day would not have been possible.” As participants departed with new insights and tools for fostering resilience, Youth Case Manager Teresa Richardson noted: “It was a great day. It made me proud of what I do for a living; proud to be a part of positive change for young people.