



by John Ward, Roca

Giving At-Risk Youth a Chance

In 1988 in Chelsea, Massachusetts, Molly Baldwin founded a nonprofit called Roca to help urban youth cope with the challenges of entering adulthood. An experienced case worker, Baldwin knew that the transition was intensified for young people who lived in under-resourced communities like Chelsea, where youth disengagement and disenfranchisement were rampant. Baldwin saw disenfranchisement as a threat to the nation's future as a prosperous, just society. So she and her staff began a process of intensive community engagement, reaching out to the most high-risk youth and offering them a safe place to spend time and talk about their problems.

Building a Dream

Unlike many observers at the time, Baldwin believed that solving the problems facing urban youth was possible. Today she believes just as deeply, but she also has learned that for maximum impact, the grassroots approach to community and youth development must be complemented by institutional and financial partnerships with government and business. Additionally, she and her staff have refined Roca's intervention model, adopting a codified theory of change and targeting a distinct population. To date, Roca has helped more than 17,000 young people from Chelsea, East Boston, and Revere. In 2010 alone, it served 705 Boston-area youths while launching its first full-scale replication in Springfield, Massachusetts.

The goal to help youth move out of violence and poverty has not changed, but as Roca deputy director Anisha Chablani explains, the means have become increasingly deliberate and sophisticated. Starting in 2004, Chablani says, Roca engaged in an intensive learning and development process. "We weren't getting bad outcomes, but we wanted solid, proven, positive results across the board. At about the end of 2005 we had an Ah-hah moment. We realized that in order to get better outcomes, we needed to establish a sound theory of change which would drive every aspect of the work." Roca also saw the need to rigorously track staff efforts and participant outcome data.

Roca drilled down into cognitive-behavioral intervention research, field-tested youth-development strategies, and the theories of restorative justice, and

synthesized the components into one cogent model. What emerged is Roca's Intervention Model for High-Risk Young People.

The Intervention Model

The intervention model is a two- to three-year, comprehensive, cognitive-behavioral approach based on the Stages of Change framework. Stages of Change incorporates five phases of psychological and behavioral progress toward a goal: precontemplation, contemplation, preparation or planning, action, and sustaining. For at-risk individuals, it is not uncommon to relapse and require repetition of earlier phases to reach sustained behavior change.

Roca's model applies the framework to 16- to 24-year-olds living on the streets or involved in gangs, drugs, or the court system. Participants may also be

high school drop-outs, young parents, immigrants, or refugees. Initially, Roca had attempted to accommodate many ages, starting with middle school. As staff members increased their understanding of cognitive restructuring, they realized they would have more impact targeting the late-teen and early-adult population.

The Roca model uses a systematized set of stage-based programming, combined with intensive case management to move young people through the stages toward sustainable change. It has four major core components: 1. relentless outreach and follow-up, a strategy for engaging young people wherever they may be; 2. transformational relationships (Roca's long-term case-management model uses positive, consistent personal relationships with adult staff as the primary vehicle for effecting change); 3. stage-based programming, which offers programs for life skills, education, and transitional employment to address each individual's behavioral and developmental barriers to economic and social success; and 4. relationship building with the agencies and public entities that have roles in young people's lives, including the courts, the probation department, the Department of Children and Families (formerly Department of Youth Services), law enforcement, and local governments.

Roca's model is particularly unusual in helping young people who struggle to remain engaged. Most programs dismiss high-risk youth at the most difficult moments. But Roca's Intervention Model was built to support those who relapse multiple times. Staff do not wait for the young people to reengage on their own. They go out and find them wherever they are and bring them back.

By establishing a systematized model for intervening in high-risk young lives, Roca has seen an unprecedented level of success with a previously hard-to-serve, neglected, and over-incarcerated population. In Massachusetts alone, it is estimated that in 2007 roughly 60,000 youths between age 18 and 24 were disengaged—unemployed and uninvolved in any educational programming.¹ Roca's ability to reengage the roughly 1,000 young people it works with annually has made it a vital resource for the Commonwealth. It saves government money by improving public safety, offering a viable path away from crime, and helping youth get jobs and become economic contributors.

Among Roca's recent graduates, there is a 79 percent rate of employment retention, a 98 percent rate of no new arrests, and a 90 percent rate of no new pregnancies. A cost-benefit analysis shows that Roca's \$5,000 average annual per-participant programming cost beats incarceration costs by far, which average \$45,000 per inmate per year in Massachusetts. With *The Journal of Criminology* putting the lifetime public costs of high-risk individuals between \$250,000 and \$2 million, organizations like Roca can be critical to saving resources.²

Although the National Transitional Jobs Network, the U.S. Department of Justice, and the Gates Foundation have all touted Roca's work, it was a more local fan who pushed Roca to replicate its model outside of Greater Boston. In 2008, Hampden County Sheriff Michael Ashe asked Roca to train his department in a transitional-employment program for young offenders. Roca's leaders were thrilled to work with Sheriff Ashe, who has been nationally recognized for his jail management innovations and his efforts to reduce recidivism. And as the training progressed, Ashe became increasingly interested in bringing Roca's full model to the City of Springfield.

The second poorest Massachusetts city—with high levels of gang violence and sky-rocketing teen pregnancy—Springfield was struggling with an unemployment rate nearly 5 or 6 points higher than the state average. Baldwin could see both the potential and the risks of fully replicating the model. "At first," she admits, "we thought it was crazy. We didn't know if we were ready for such a big undertaking. But thinking about it more deeply, we realized that it was not only possible, but that it was a perfect match."

Replication in Springfield

There were challenges. The complexity of Roca's model demanded a high level of institutional coordination, staff development, and training—plus significant funding and broad-based community support. But with Sheriff Ashe as champion, the pieces fell into place. Baldwin's fundraising and development experience and Ashe's connections in politics, government, criminal justice, and the community helped Roca gain support from key players, including the police, Mayor Domenic Sarno, and city hall. Roca also garnered significant start-up funding from Boston-based Strategic Grant Partners, among others.

Ashe helped to find Yusef Id-Deen, a local activist with experience in social work and youth development, who became Roca's Springfield program director. Having a leader with strong community ties, familiarity with the streets, and social work experience was a tremendous asset. Launched officially in July 2010, Roca Springfield is now serving 50 high-risk young men, all with felony records. By 2014, the program is slated to help 200 young people annually and expand services to Holyoke.

Importantly, the replication project demonstrates the potential viability of Roca's model as a national solution to violence and poverty in urban communities. Though an evaluation by the Crime and Justice Institute in partnership with Abt Associates and Brandeis University is not complete as of this writing, Roca's Springfield work strongly suggests that the model is a replicable, scalable system for addressing high-risk young people's needs.

The next few years will be important for Roca and the future of the model. But with the help of partners from local politicians and criminal justice organizations to federal and state government agencies and private corporations and foundations, the organization is well positioned to expand its success serving high-risk youth.

Twenty-three years since its founding, Roca has inspired leaders throughout Massachusetts to reinvest in the state's most disengaged young people and to recalibrate the Commonwealth's commitment to community development. As Sheriff Ashe said in 2010, "I want everyone to know that Roca has a full partnership in western Massachusetts and that we stand ready, willing, and able to stride together, arm in arm, toward a shared vision of a community, where every youth finds his or her best future as their hearts and minds and spirits take wing in our belief in them, our hopes for them, and our efforts with them."

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Endnotes

¹ *The Case for The Road to Opportunities Initiative* (Boston: United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley, 2010).

² Mark A. Cohen, "The Monetary Value of Saving a High-Risk Youth," *Journal of Quantitative Criminology* 14, no. 1 (1998).