Mentors and Computers
Developing work and life skills in the Boys and Girls Clubs of Bellevue Washington

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Evidence Narratives at the Center for Information & Society

The ICTD field is filled with individual success stories extolling the benefits of ICT access and fluency. These stories are often highly influential because they are rhetorically powerful, memorable narratives that create lasting frames to contextualize and interpret other data. Unfortunately, they are often driven by the demands of public relations as opposed to rigorous analysis.

When the goal is to share the story of a super star and tug heart strings, important details can be omitted. To understand how ICT programs work for *typical* trainees, to spread narratives that illuminate deeper dynamics and to amplify broadly useful lessons, stories should be researched and constructed with intention and rigor.

CIS is developing a methodology and story series that attempts to tap the rhetorical and qualitative explanatory power of detailed, contextualized, and personalized ICT case studies. While tension may sometimes exist between an organization's desire to feature certain cases and the critical researcher's commitment to rigor, a methodology built on intensive questioning and storytelling rich in the right details can uncover and communicate evidence of successful programs.

By crafting exemplary stories, by developing and disseminating useful methodological tools and by promoting these techniques among NGO managers and grant makers, CIS aims to shape a research framework that can fulfill the needs of NGOs and donors with stories that accurately represent realities in underserved communities. Properly constructed, evidence-based stories can serve the ends of rigorous analysis while publicizing good work.

This paper is an example and an experiment in this methodological landscape. It is supported in large part by a grant from Microsoft Community Affairs.

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At an earlier point in Brian Hughes' life, it might have been difficult to predict his current success. As a middle school student living in Bellevue Washington's Hidden Village public housing project and moving between abusive, alcoholic homes, he had a reputation for trouble making. On one occasion, he drove a teacher to tears sitting on the hood of her car, laughing and harassing her as she tried to leave. He refused to move.

Today, Brian won't stop moving. He laughs easily, warmly encourages the children he's teaching and openly shares stories about his future goals. Not only is he a successful college student with aspirations to teach high school science and math, he also runs his own technology consulting business while holding a full time job managing the Bellevue Boys and Girls Club. While many forces have influenced Brian's path, technology access and training at Boys and Girls Clubs have played a pivotal role.

From Bellevue to Chicago and back again

Born in Chicago but raised in Bellevue with his mother and stepfather, Brian hardly knew his biological father. As turmoil at his Hidden Village home increased due to the alcoholism and abuse of his stepfather, he got into trouble. He had earned a bad reputation among staff members at the newly formed Hidden Village Boys and Girls Club—a partnership between the Bellevue Boys and Girls Clubs and the King County Housing Authority. "I was kicked out of the club a lot. For lots of reasons. I was kind of out of control," Brian recalls. "We would climb up on the roof and drop stink bombs into the vents." Eventually the situation at home and in the housing project grew intolerable and Brian moved to Illinois to live with his father.

The grass was not greener in Evanston, Illinois however. The alcoholism and abuse were worse. He endured violent binges at the hands of his father. "He used to make me stay up with him and drink a fifth of vodka on school nights and if I was slow to get out of bed he'd yell and threaten me." One of the final straws was the "time when he was with his friends, he shot me with a BB gun, just for fun. I still have the pellet in me today." It was more than a twelve year old should bear. After several months Brian hopped on a Greyhound Bus and headed west on I-90 for Washington.

The return was slightly bittersweet for Brian: he was not looking forward to his Hidden Village home life and he was going to miss

Brian was initially regarded as an unruly trouble maker at the Hidden Village Boys and Girls Club. Eventually, technology and personal relationships drew hime into productive pursuits. He is now a trusted staff member and mentor with his own technology consulting business.

his new school. "The school in Chicago was really amazing. There were so many things to learn and there were teachers that helped me follow whatever interested me." His appreciation for education and mentors foreshadowed the path his life would follow.

Safety, learning and mentors in the Hidden Village Boys and Girls Club

Returning to Bellevue was not easy and once again, violence followed. He was trapped between the trials at home with his stepfather and the challenges of re-entering the Hidden Village adolescent pecking order. As a middle-school student, he now felt "too old to hang out with the younger kids" but not quite old enough to mesh with the teens. On two occasions he was the victim of other teens that "used to be my friends" who kicked him into submission. "They took turns kicking me. I was balled up on the ground trying to protect my head and stomach. I was crying and they kept kicking me." They eventually stopped when he lost control of his bowels. "I crapped my pants. They literally kicked the crap out of me." Brian wanted a safe, social alternative to the terror and violence.

Mark Haines, at that time the new director of the Hidden Village Boys and Girls Club, knew Brian as one of the kids that made regular stops at the Club after school to check e-mail and play games on the computers. They would scatter when it came time to participate in other organized club activities. Mark knew of Brian and his buddies' unruly reputation and history. He knew he needed to establish rapport and that their interest in the Internet and gaming was an entry point. "In order to get kids to give up that kind of unfettered freedom and open up ... you have to build relationships," he said. Boys and Girls Clubs are founded on the notion that attending a club is a privilege; kids cannot be compelled to stay. The flip side is that they can be kicked out. This creates leverage with parents to get them to behave and incentives for the staff to make it inviting and interesting. "They come here because they want to. But if they don't act appropriately, with respect, then they need to go," says Mark. Mark made a point of engaging Brian by offering more computer and video game opportunities, always with a healthy dose of required respect and good behavior. "The Xbox can be really persuasive" according to a club staff member.

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> *Mark Haines, on the role of technology and gaming to attract kids and build rapport*

Initially Brian was skeptical of "the new guy who was strict, but seemed cool enough." He and his friends gradually popped in more often, for longer periods of time, to hang out and use the technology. Though they still largely shunned organized activities, they gradually developed a relationship with Mark.

Fixing the computers, getting a job

Over time, Mark recognized Brian's interest and skill working with the clubs' computers. It started by helping other students and staff members when they had questions and continued whenever computer problems arose. Brian had a knack for fixing things—he loved broken appliances because they were a great excuse to take them apart and tinker. Once, Mark gave him permission to fix a computer. After several hours it was working again. Another time, Jim Foster, director of technology for all the Bellevue Clubs, came to fix a couple of the computers. Brian spent the afternoon watching him and was soon volunteering as the computer lab manager, which allowed him to hold a valued job and work with the computers when the other kids had to participate in structured club activities. Brian was becoming more

engaged and more confident.

Brian's aptitude for troubleshooting computer problems was apparent to Mark. Brian helped him "solve many problems without calling Jim Foster for official technology support." Mark was aware of Brian's difficult family life, which had not improved despite the positive relationships he was building at the club. Brian was trying to move out and a paid position might make the difference. Mark offered to pay Brian as the lab manager on the condition that he did well in school. Soon after starting his job, Brian moved into a group home and started working to catch up with his graduating class. Brian was sixteen. He had only four high school credits with barely two years left if he wanted to graduate with his class.

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> *Brian, reflecting on how BGCA mentor Mark Haines helped motivate him to get his high school diploma and enroll in college*

Linking technology skills, positive socialization and a job were critical for Brian. He started taking education seriously. "Mark helped me understand that I needed to start life or I'd be too late. I needed to get in the mix, get my high school diploma or else I'd end up like everyone else" in the housing project. That's not what I wanted. I couldn't deal with that. It helped me realize that: 'Dude you got to get a high school diploma, you don't have any credits.' We started looking at Running Start [an alternative route to completing high school and transitioning into college] and things like that." Eventually, Brian enrolled at Lake Washington Technical College.

"Somebody was always calling me for help"

At roughly the same time that Brian began managing the lab, the club received a grant from Microsoft for new computers and software. "I had never opened a new computer before. I was trembling taking it out of the box," Brian recalls. Due to space limitations, the older, displaced computers needed to go. Mark Haines allowed Brian and select other students to take the old ones home. Brian was thrilled to have his own computer to use, take apart and explore. Brian's computer was highly valued in the group home where he lived and gave him invaluable hands-on technical experience. He was becoming "the guy you call when your computer doesn't work. Somebody was always calling me for help."

Under the positive influence of Mark's mentorship and his own initiative, Brian was on track to graduate. During his final years of high school he went from working at the Hidden Village club to holding a part-time position at the main Bellevue Boys and Girls Club. After graduating he worked for Best Buy's Geek Squad before returning to Bellevue's Main club full time, where he took on the large responsibility of maintaining the Bellevue BGC web site as well as working out all the bugs of the network and online payroll system. Mark Haines played a key role in this lucky break as well.

Brian, age 16, managing the lab and installing new computers: "I had never opened a new computer before. I was trembling taking them out of the box."

Brian recalls with pride: "At the time they paid this guy to do it, but he was really sloughing it. Mark said, 'Hey Brian you have one weekend, if you can get

> *"Mark said 'Hey Brian...if you can get this all up and running, they'll drop that guy. If you can do it, as one our club kids, we'd love for you to get paid instead of him.' So in one weekend I went over everything that they did--the whole back end. I gutted it and rebuilt it. It worked beautifully."*
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> *Brian, on his growing technical support role at the Bellevue Boys and Girls Club*

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Various shades of success: Making a difference at Boys and Girls Clubs

One of the hallmarks of the Boys and Girls Clubs of America movement is the fierce dedication and ongoing commitment of alumni to their club and the larger BGCA community. Alumni that return to work in clubs are called lifers. "We feel the connection to the club long after we're so-called 'boys and girls.' Lots of staff could get better paying jobs, but you know there's more to a job than money. We love it here," one lifer reported. The situation is similar for Brian: "When the kids come here and they can't wait to see you and talk to you and tell you what they did, I feel like I'm really changing their lives. It's amazing to be a part of it. I really enjoy this job. I love coming here."

Brian has his own IT consulting business, but wants to keep his full time job at the Boys and Girls Club for now. He recently turned down a large consulting offer at a local construction company, opting to stay on at the clubs while he completes his degree. "People like me because I'm good at learning whatever needs to be done. I'm resourceful. I've found that it's easy for me to find jobs, the only thing holding me back right now is the piece of paper." And that piece of paper is no longer approval to move into a group foster home or a high school diploma; it's now a college diploma.

While technology served as an important entry point into the club and piqued Brian's interests and opportunities, the relationships that Boys and Girls Clubs nurture have proven fundamental. To echo the praise he expressed for Mark Haines' mentoring style, Brian is proud to play the role of the approachable yet strict guy: "I love to be able to be the cool teacher, the one that they like to come to even though you're strict, because I've learned you've got to be strict. They'll listen to you as long as you're fair."

> *"When the kids come here and they can't wait to see you and talk to you and tell you what they did, I feel like I'm really changing their lives. It's amazing to be a part of it."*
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> *Brian, on mentoring in Boys and Girls Clubs*

The importance of positive relationships is the bedrock for his future aspirations: "I can't wait to be a teacher. Middle school math, science and computers are what I want to do. I'd like to be able to establish myself financially before I do that, but if not, it would be worth it to have a job that I love. As long as I'm making it."

AUTHORS

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