



LEADERSHIP LESSONS

SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITIES

How does the partnership between **Bravehearts** and **The Children’s Village** promote authentic youth leadership?

Q&A with Jessica Grimm, Executive Director, Bravehearts M.O.V.E. New York, Inc., and Warren Kent, Senior Vice President for Community-Based Services, The Children’s Village

[Bravehearts M.O.V.E. New York](#) is a youth-led nonprofit with a mission is to empower young adults impacted by the child welfare system to become leaders in their own lives as they transition into adulthood. Since 2017, [The Children’s Village](#), under the guidance of Warren Kent, senior vice president for community-based services, has mentored Bravehearts as an organization. In this Q&A, Kent and Jessica Grimm, Bravehearts executive director, share their perspectives on the benefits and challenges of their unique partnership and what others can learn from their experience about lifting up and valuing youth voice.¹



How does the partnership between Bravehearts and The Children's Village promote authentic youth leadership?

How was your partnership first established?

Grimm: Four years into our mobilization as a youth movement, we made the decision to become a nonprofit organization. Up to this point, a lot of our opportunities were filtered down through systems, funders, and providers. We wanted to reimagine what it could look like to have young people in the conversation and making all the decisions from inception to execution.

We knew we could not do this by ourselves. When young people are mobilizing, it is extremely important that they have adults in their lives who are walking alongside them in safe and supportive ways. The Children's Village, and specifically Warren, had been that kind of support for the Bravehearts since day one. There was a natural level of trust between our two groups. We had a relationship that was reciprocal, transparent, and provided safety.

Kent: From the first time I heard Jessica speak and saw the Bravehearts in action, I believed this was something that The Children's Village needed to get behind. Our CEO, Dr. Jeremy Kohomban, and I agreed that we should do everything we could to support them. In the early years, that meant allowing them to hold meetings at our offices and giving them funding or other in-kind support when we could. But when I saw that Jessica and her organization were not being treated well by some of their other adult-led partners, we decided that The Children's Village needed to do even more. We initially brought Jessica on board as an employee in another program to give her a salary and stability.

But the ultimate goal was always to support her vision of providing services under the independent umbrella of Bravehearts.

What support has The Children's Village provided?

Grimm: The Children's Village provided the Bravehearts with practical resources that allowed us to offer our programs while establishing trust and relationships throughout the community, the state, and now the country. Their in-kind support has ranged from our beautiful office space, to an agency vehicle and tech equipment, to assistance with staff members' essential needs such as food and professional clothing.

One of their most significant investments has been Warren's time. It's an investment in my development both as a leader and as a young woman who is still on her own healing journey. It is so important for any young leader who has a passion to do this work to have a safe space to learn administrative and leadership skills. We have a safe nest here where we can take risks and fail safely. The Children's Village leads with a strong belief in us, instead of with historical constructs of power. I never feel micro-managed. There have been challenges, moments when we have had to pivot, but Warren is always there to troubleshoot. We're never met with "no"; we're met with "how can we?" And we always find a way.

I can't overstate the importance of the relational support that The Children's Village provides. They

The child welfare system is not going to be healed and transformed solely through the strength of young people. It is not our responsibility to change it by ourselves, because we didn't create it. Adults and young adults need to take shared accountability to transform this system into a space of hope and healing.

— JESSICA GRIMM,
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, BRAVEHEARTS M.O.V.E. NEW YORK, INC.

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committed to supporting me so that I could support the development of Bravehearts. Thanks to their investments in me, I am now able to offer a better version of myself to my team than I could six years ago. In turn, I see improvements in the team's dependability and accountability, programming, and leadership skills. It is a ripple effect.

What is the nature of your relationship today?

Kent: Bravehearts is now both a program under The Children's Village umbrella and an independent organization with Jessica at the helm. Our involvement varies depending on the support required. If an activity does not require fiscal support, it falls under Bravehearts, Inc. When management services are needed — HR, finances, payroll — that comes under The Children's Village, with Jessica as the director of Bravehearts Services. This arrangement allows us to provide backbone support with sufficient flexibility.

Grimm: We sometimes use the term "organizational mentor," but it's more akin to a foster parent/foster child relationship. A foster parent takes a child into their home, gives them safety, builds up their strength and capacity, hears their voice, sees what's important to them, and helps guide them to a place of autonomy where they can launch the best version of themselves. That's what Children's Village has done for Bravehearts. They took us into their home. They give us autonomy, identity, and shared power. The sole goal is for us to be on our own. Six years later, we're closer to that goal than we have ever been before, with approximately



Bravehearts leaders stand in solidarity before presenting at a conference.

Every individual who is part of Bravehearts is an expert in their experience. Any one of them could go to school and get what I have, get an MSW. But I can't go to school and get a degree in foster care. The experience that they have gone through is embodied through their blood, sweat, and tears. That experience has to be valued.

— WARREN KENT,
SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT FOR COMMUNITY-BASED SERVICES, THE CHILDREN'S VILLAGE

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\$600,000 in funding for eight different programs. Two new programs starting this year will add to our sustainability.

What does autonomy and shared power look like day to day?

Kent: It depends. Jessica is one of the most gifted individuals I know. All she needs is a little support to lead an organization. My job is to give Jessica what she needs and nothing more.

Grimm: One thing that often gets in the way of shared power between young people and adults is not having shared expectations. I am very clear about what Warren's expectations are. Because of that, when I find myself stuck, I don't have to feel anxious. I'm able to reach out, work through the challenges, and talk about what I could do differently.

What have been some of the challenges along the way?

Kent: The issue of cost equity has been a big one. I had to help Jessica know her worth and this movement's worth. At the same time, I was having conversations behind the scenes to help funders recognize that they needed what the Bravehearts offered, and they were not going to get it anywhere else. These days everyone wants to work with Jessica and the Bravehearts, but they still have to be reminded that none of us have the authority to dictate to the Bravehearts what their expertise is worth. We have to ask them: What should we be paying you for your experience?

Grimm: Agency culture has been another challenge. Historically, the child welfare system was built to protect the safety of young children. The system doesn't have a lot of expertise in what's best for transitional age youth; that came later.

If a young person is being harmed, or not being heard, or being treated unfairly, we speak on that. We do it with grace and love, but we speak up. Because people fear what they don't understand, some people are intimidated by what we do. But when people give us some time and space to explain who we are and what we do, they usually leave understanding that we're there to help them do their jobs better, not to usurp or duplicate.

How has Bravehearts made The Children's Village better?

Kent: Our relationship with the Bravehearts has benefited The Children's Village in more ways than we can count. It has given us the opportunity to reassess our agency's policies and even our mission. We had already bought into the idea of working with credible messengers, but before Bravehearts we had little interaction with individuals with lived experience of foster care. Now our job descriptions reflect the shift in our values, including removing education requirements for many of our positions and valuing lived experience highly.

There have also been a lot of changes in the ways we respect the needs of young people in our care. We were going in this direction already, but the Bravehearts gave us permission and confidence to say yes, this is

Young people transitioning to adulthood are asking themselves two questions: 'Who am I?' and 'Where do I belong?' This process of discovery is rooted in relationships. If you build up relational support for youth, they're more likely to establish trusting relationships with adults, and they're more likely to feel renewed confidence in themselves.

— JESSICA GRIMM,
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, BRAVEHEARTS M.O.V.E. NEW YORK, INC.

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the right way to go. For example, we really saw the importance of celebrating young people's culture. If you are a young person in care who has limited time or connection with family, you need something to hold onto and feel pride in. We have hired a full-time position to address ethnicity and equity, and this summer we are taking some of the young people in our care to Africa. Another example is that we no longer take away home passes as a form of punishment. Young people want to be with their parents; they don't want to be here. If the youth is not doing well on campus, they still need the opportunity to be with their family and community, because resentment about that separation may be what's driving their behavior.

Grimm: This is one of my favorite changes I've seen: When a young person exhibits troubling behavior, they might be classified "EBP," which means they're not allowed to attend programming for a period of time. When we started Bravehearts on The Children's Village campus, we found that young people who had a complication were prevented by that label from coming to Bravehearts. We went to Warren and said, "Bravehearts is not a privilege; this is a right." Young people have a right to sit in this space and get support from their peers. When a young person is dysregulated, that's when they need us the most. The policy was changed, and today young people who are EBP are still allowed to go to Bravehearts.

What we are describing is truly a cultural shift. Sometimes agencies have people in positions that aren't best serving our young people. Not everyone is on board with change. The Children's Village has at times taken the step of parting ways with adult professionals whose behavior was harming young leaders or whose values were not in line with the shifts in mission, vision, and culture. This example is so special in the child welfare system because it's a system full of young people who were never believed. When we as young leaders with lived experience speak up, it's scary. We wonder whether administrators will believe us. When we bring an issue to the administration and they don't shy away, they handle it, it boosts our confidence that we are heard, believed, and seen. At the same time, that

is being role modeled to the residents and young people served by The Children's Village.

What does the future hold for Bravehearts and The Children's Village?

Kent: The goal has always been to help Jessica develop the skill set she needs to be the best leader she can be, and then for her to direct Bravehearts, Inc., as an independent nonprofit. Several funders already want to contract with Bravehearts, Inc., directly. We are developing a formal strategic agreement in which Bravehearts will be its own entity and The Children's Village will continue to be its backbone.

Our ultimate goal will be to gradually move all the programming that's under the director of Bravehearts Services at Children's Village over to Bravehearts, Inc. To borrow Jessica's metaphor of a foster parent/foster child relationship, you don't just drop foster youth when they turn 21. You allow them some time to get their footing, give them the opportunity to have some setbacks, and you help them back up and make sure they keep moving forward. That's what we want to do with Bravehearts.

As for The Children's Village, we no longer see a future that doesn't include the Bravehearts and other people with lived experience throughout our organization. We are forever changed.

Grimm: I don't think there will ever be a point where there is no relationship between Bravehearts and The Children's Village. Healthy relationships between adults and youth change over time, and both partners need to be open and adapt to that change. The relationship between Bravehearts and The Children's Village will continue to serve as a teaching model to other congregate placement agencies that want to take on this type of effort.

What advice would you give other leaders interested in creating similar partnerships?

Grimm: I would encourage any agency interested in replicating a model like this to assess their level of trust, tolerance, and creativity. Bravehearts would

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not be where it is today if not for Warren throwing the doors open. You have to focus on the ultimate goal, and sometimes that means pushing aside red tape, hierarchies, and protocol.

To the youth advocate who may be reading this: When you're trying to lift up your own voice and the voices of others, there will be mountains to climb. There will be moments when you face walls. You will be discouraged, but you need to build yourself a ladder and climb over that wall. There is success and healing to be found in that perseverance. Don't give up!

Identify one true adult ally, one individual that has power. Sometimes the word "gatekeeper" has a negative connotation, but a gatekeeper is just

someone who has the keys to a door. If you can identify someone who is willing to unlock a door for you, work with that. Foster that relationship. That one will multiply and you will find more people who will walk beside you.

Kent: To the adult leaders, I would say: Keep an open mind. Don't make this about power and authority. Don't feel threatened by young people saying what they need. There is no way for someone without lived experience to understand what it's like to be a child in the foster care system. Let's not think that an MSW or Ph.D. is going to give us that experience. If we really want to make a difference in the child welfare system, we have to stand back and allow the experts in this field to tell us how to do our jobs better.

To learn more, visit [Questions from the field](#) at [Casey.org](#).

1 Adapted from interviews with Jessica Grimm and Warren Kent on February 6 and March 24, 2023.

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