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Coming Together for Sam: FGDM (FGC) Helps a Family Find a Solution of Its Own

BY LYNN M. WELDEN

The Gordon family (names are fictitious), of Bucks County, Pennsylvania, USA, recently experienced a life-affirming restorative process — a family group decision-making (FGDM) conference (also called family group conferencing or FGC). The family (four young adult children — two boys and two girls — their divorced parents, Linda and Bob, as well as several members of their extended family) came together in an FGDM conference to help 17-year-old son Sam take better control of his life. The process worked extremely well for Sam, but what the family didn't expect, they said, was that the FGDM would also enhance their connections and relationships in many other ways.

During the past year, Sam started using drugs and alcohol, hanging out with fellow "users" in school and buying and selling marijuana. He had trouble sharing his feelings, had problems with self-esteem and, according to his father, started making rash decisions and looking for instant gratification. "My son is a good, bright kid," said Sam's father. "He is very talented. The stuff he got involved with was really stupid." Sam's actions ultimately led to his involvement in a car accident and arrest on DWI (driving while intoxicated) charges related to marijuana use.

The family was shaken and alarmed. Sam was placed in juvenile detention and later put on probation. During his court hearing, at the request of his probation officer, Steve Lowery, the judge ordered an FGDM conference. The objective of the conference was to identify a safe and appropriate plan to keep Sam sober while

still living within the community and to prevent out-of-home placement.

Lowery was firm with Sam in explaining why he felt the process beneficial and necessary, telling him, "You're at the point now where unless you think about seriously committing to asking for help, going through a process like an FGDM, you're probably looking at court placement in a program for the next nine to 12 months."

"But why an FGDM?" the Gordons asked. "How can this help our son and our family?"

Glenna Bonargo, an FGDM and restorative conference provider with Community Service Foundation and Buxmont Academy (CSF Buxmont), model programs of the Bethlehem, Pa.-based International Institute for Restorative Practices, was enlisted by the court to meet with the family and explain the FGDM process. The Gordons liked what they heard, and Sam agreed to move forward.

With its roots in the child-and-youth-serving system, the restorative practice known as FGDM is a structured process that brings together immediate and extended family members, as well as concerned friends, to come up with a plan for what is best for a particular individual (in this case, Sam). In an FGDM conference, the family is empowered to make important decisions about how the meeting will evolve and even to determine who is invited. It is this group — people who know the person of concern best — that decides the steps that need to be taken to help the individual and the family.

While professionals are present in the initial part of the FGDM conference to

share information with the family group about the case, they are excluded from the private family decision-making time. The professionals are brought back into the process after the family has come up with a plan. Then the family and the professionals work together to ensure that the plan is safe and legally sound. The professionals continue to monitor and review the success of the plan in the months following the conference. (To learn more about FGDM/FGC, please go to the [IIRP Online Collection](#) and search for FDGM.)

Before leaving the courthouse on the day the judge ordered the FGDM, Sam and his parents had already made a list of prospective participants and selected a date for the conference. Twenty-three family members and friends (including Sam's sister, who lives across the country in California) eventually agreed to attend the event.

Positive, collaborative family dialogue was beginning to happen at a preliminary meeting several weeks before the actual conference. "This family took primary ownership of the FGDM process and really ran with it," said Bonargo, adding, "Sam, Linda and Bob had really done their homework. It [the preliminary meeting] was actually a mini-FGDM! The family and friends began right then and there to challenge one another to come up with viable ideas for a plan. They were already asking 'How can we make this work?' and 'What do we need to do?'"

The Gordon's FGDM conference began as the group shared food together. The ritual helped the family put their own stamp on the conference, as food

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is very important to them as a gesture of caring. Then Sam's uncle opened the FGDM with a prayer, another way the family made the FGDM their own. Sam, though nervous, read a letter expressing his appreciation to everyone for taking time from a holiday weekend to come together for him. Asking for their help, Sam was met with a roomful of supportive voices telling him how much they loved him and how they would do whatever was needed to keep him sober, safe and out of the "system." Glenna Bonargo and the other professionals answered the family group's questions about available services and legal issues before leaving the room.

Two hours of private family time followed. By the end, the group had come up with a very detailed plan, which the family felt they really "owned" because they had devised it themselves. The family decided to get together once a month to review Sam's progress, by phone, email, face to face, or via Skype (internet video telephone). They also recommended daily phone check-ins by Sam's friends to reinforce the sense of support. Sam's uncle, a very strong voice in the family, volunteered to collaborate with the family to ensure that they followed the plan.

"This process brought us all into the same room," said Sam's father. "I am divorced from Sam's mom and haven't seen members of her family for a while. Coming together for Sam mended a lot of hard feelings on my end."

"The family put their differences aside for the good of Sam," said Bonargo. "The people who attended this FGDM were excited and honored to be asked." Added Lowery, "FGDM is all about family involvement."

Today, several months after the conference, Sam and the rest of the extended Gordon family remain positively affected by this restorative process. Said Sam's father Bob: "I encourage everyone to try

this process. Have an open mind about how an FGDM can benefit your kid and your family. Our plan calls for us to get together once a month. Sure it's for Sam, but it's also helping the whole family remain close and connected."

"I finally got a chance to talk with my son about something other than sports," added Bob. "These hours we've spent together have opened the channels of communication between us. He knows that I am there for him."

Sam's mother Linda echoed Bob's sentiments, saying: "It was a healing process for all of us. My relationship with Sam has truly changed as a result of the FGDM. He has not been this open with me since he was a little kid. It's been a great gift."

Added Linda: "The FGDM process has also been freeing for me. I no longer feel like I'm responsible for solving the problems by myself, or that I have to kill myself to make everything OK with my kids."

Sam is candid about how the process has benefited him. "It opened my eyes, now that I'm sober, to what I had been doing to myself and to my family. I'm doing really well right now. I'm in my senior year and am getting all A's. I'm still around kids at school that I used to use with, and that's a little tough, but I have been straight since my arrest. Having the FGDM has helped me stay straight."

Sam's drug and alcohol counselor, Josh Taylor, is also encouraged by his progress, saying, "Sam is very invested in what he's doing now. All of the family wants this to work. It really is what the family puts into it that determines the success of an FGDM."

"My family intends to keep using the plan they put together, even after it's no longer court-ordered," said Sam. "One of the things I learned is that a good plan can be helpful for a long time."

The Gordon family and friends saw an opportunity to help Sam and seized it. The outcome is a persuasive affirmation of the value of the family group decision-making process.

"In my estimation, it is far more beneficial than placement," said Steve Lowery. "I will continue to recommend a lot of FGDMs to the court for this very reason." ☉