

A Family Plan Forged Out of Commitment and Love: An FGDM Story

BY LYNN M. WELDEN

Alyssa (not her real name), 18, made some unfortunate choices over the last few years, some with legal consequences. But her situation improved recently, thanks to a Family Group Decision Making (FGDM) conference facilitated by the Community Service Foundation (CSF) in Pennsylvania, USA, one of the IIRP's demonstration programs. By involving Alyssa's family and friends and tapping into their collective feelings of responsibility and concern, FGDM encouraged her to commit to positive changes in her life.

On probation and unable to function in school, Alyssa was in and out of alternative programs, youth detention facilities and group homes.

Bucks County Juvenile Probation Supervisor Dean Hiestand brought Alyssa to the attention of CSF's Conferencing Program, thinking that she and her family were ideal candidates for an FGDM conference. Laura Rush, conferencing program coordinator, and Jolene Head, conferencing staff member, agreed. Alyssa was very enthusiastic about the idea of a "family meeting," as were her mother and father. With juvenile court concurring, the FGDM process began.

Twenty people attended Alyssa's FGDM conference, invited by Alyssa and her parents. Said Head, the FGDM's main facilitator, "This family wanted to do this. They owned it and wanted it to happen," adding, "The more committed people at the FGDM, the greater the resources and number of ideas generated."

When the family group met, Rush, Head and Hiestand were present. "The professionals had been invited to this part of the meeting. They wanted us to be a part of their starting prayer," noted Head.

Everyone stood and held hands for the prayer, led by Alyssa's mother, who then read letters from friends offering her daughter work. Hiestand provided information and answered questions. Alyssa jumped in to share her own feelings, take responsibility for her past behavior, apologize to her parents and ask forgiveness from others she had hurt. At this point, Rush, Head and Hiestand left the room so the family could get to the heart of the matter: where Alyssa would live and get an education.

Two and a half hours later, the professionals were asked to rejoin the group. The family had come up with a plan for Alyssa, outlining solutions for her living situation, education and work requirements and legal obligations, and stressing reconciliation with family, church and community. The group planned to meet each month to review Alyssa's progress and to circulate a report to keep everyone informed. This FGDM was an acknowledged success, with everyone proud of having had a voice in the process.

"I was excited about the FGDM concept," said Alyssa's aunt. "People talk about doing it, but nobody ever pulls 'the village' together formally. To actually have family and friends volunteer to take responsibility, to participate, is great. The FGDM was about bringing our village together in a formal process. It strengthened our relationship with Alyssa and with each other and acted as a reminder of how we have to stick together as a family. There are more kids, younger than Alyssa, coming through our family pipeline, so whatever we can do to save them from making bad choices is important."

Family Group Decision Making (also known as Family Group Conferencing, or FGC), is a process that brings together extended family networks—aunts, uncles, grandparents, neighbors and friends—to make important decisions that might otherwise be made by professionals.

Prior to the conference, a facilitator engages extended family members and friends, asking them to attend the conference. At the conference, professionals share information with the family group about the case. Then family and friends meet by themselves, without professionals present, to make decisions regarding the case. Subsequently, professionals and family ensure that the plan meets safety and legal concerns. Post conference, professionals monitor and review the plan's progress. (To learn more about FGDM, please go to <http://www.familypower.org>.)

The FGDM participants are determined that Alyssa will follow the plans they devised, because they were directly involved in developing them. "We all know she cannot deal with every point right away," said Alyssa's aunt. "But we are happy and hopeful that this conference has encouraged her to take these steps."

Alyssa now realizes that everybody who was at the FGDM that night loves her. They had met to help her examine her missteps and to contribute constructive ideas for her future.

Hiestand presented the family's plan for Alyssa to the juvenile court judge, who accepted it. Alyssa is now attending a local high school and is taking cosmetology courses. "No one has a crystal ball," said Hiestand. "But if the family sticks to the plan, I think Alyssa will be fine." ☉