

Exalt: Alternative Approaches to Juvenile Justice

In a cozy room in the Brooklyn office of exalt youth, seven teenagers have gathered for a graduation ceremony. Christmas lights are strung around a whiteboard, and purple streamers hang from the ceiling. Proud parents, internship supervisors, and exalt employees applaud the graduates, who are dressed in muted colors and are wearing jeans, button-down shirts, and fresh sneakers. The teens, shy and excited, are part of the 99th cycle of exalt, a nonprofit that gives teenagers with court cases a chance to avoid a prison sentence.

Exalt is an alternative-to-incarceration or ATI program which works with prosecutors and judges to get young people out of the juvenile justice system. It consists of a four-month program that includes a \$12-per-hour paid internship at one of their 96 partner workplaces, as well as classes designed to help them succeed in the workplace.

For 15-year-old Chelsea Brown, a tiny girl in a knee-length gray tunic, jeans, and snow boots, the environment was different than any other she had ever known. “There’s not a time that I walked into the exalt space and didn’t immediately feel loved,” she said.

Chelsea was arrested after she got into a fight with her mom, who called the police. It was her first brush with the law. Her probation officer referred her to exalt so she could learn to better cope with her anger.

Like most teenagers, Chelsea, who has shoulder-length black hair, black-rimmed glasses, and a large smile, needed the encouragement her teachers, Alex Griffith and Rafelina Contreras, provided. “Alex always told me how much he sees in me and always reminds me of how much of a star I am,” said Chelsea. “Little things like that matter, and they matter a lot, because there were plenty of times when I felt a lack of motivation to do anything.”

For Chelsea, the system worked. Her arrest was “a small situation,” and at exalt, she learned “the difference between reacting and responding.” Her temper no longer drives her actions. Rafelina Contreras, the program coordinator at exalt said in the classroom, Chelsea was “opinionated in the most respectful way.”

During the four-month program in which she was enrolled at exalt, Chelsea learned communication skills, organizational skills, and time management skills, all of which will serve her and other exalt graduates for the rest of their lives. The ultimate goal of this curriculum, however, is more ambitious. “We’re changing the criminal justice system,” Griffith said. “It doesn’t have to mean being in handcuffs.”

What to do with children who get into trouble is an old question in the United States, and has devastating consequences for young people who come from minority and low-income backgrounds. Since the country’s founding, authorities have wrestled with this issue and proposed various solutions. Exalt, founded in 2006, has yet another approach, and the results are impressive. Over 95% of exalt participants do not recidivate two years after finishing the program, compared to the 60% state average. But whether they can maintain this momentum or even find the funds to stay open, much less serve as a model for other cities, is an open question.

** New Excerpt**

Brian Lewis, the Deputy Director of Programs at exalt, has worked there for four and a half years. Growing up on Chicago’s South Side, he saw first-hand the arbitrary rules that determined who was a good kid and who was not. He frequently got in trouble in school for things like speaking out or not shaving his beard closely enough.

But he says kids at exalt have it worse. They tell him about going through metal detectors

every morning, police roaming the halls, teachers constantly telling them they're dumb and can't learn. Stories that don't surprise Lewis, but still manage to break his heart.

“There are many young people in the system in New York, who should not be in the system,” he said. Proximity to a friend or neighbor means they are held as criminally liable as someone breaking a law, even if they themselves have not done anything wrong. “The way that gangs operate in Chicago is if you live on a block, you're in that gang. New York is very much the same way,” Lewis said. “It's geography. It is not a choice.”

In his experience, good kids are often swept into the juvenile justice system along with those who are dangerous. “They're not thugs, they're not big bad gangbanger types,” he said of the kids at exalt. “Believe me, I worked with some gangbanger types in Chicago.” Nonetheless, “the system is actively putting these labels on young people.” Not only does this lead to high arrest rates and mass incarceration, but it has a huge impact on the rest of a young person's life.

In one of his classes, Lewis asks students why youth might be arrested for hopping a turnstile, which costs the city \$2.75, when the cost of arresting them is so much more. It's a lesson designed to get students thinking about the historical and social context behind the criminal justice system. Specifically, how the criminal justice system was strategically designed to oppress and incarcerate minority groups, rather than protect public safety.

Otherwise, he said, students think they land in jail because of bad luck. “When you have what might be called ‘the oppression Olympics—you are low-income, and you're black, and you got an open case, and you live in some of the poorest areas in New York City—you begin to think that the whole world conspires against you,” he said. “Young people have come to me and said things like that. Like I don't even see the point in trying anymore or I just have

the worst luck in the world.”

His goal for exalt is to help students imagine a world designed another way.