#40th Fridays

HIGHLIGHTING LIVES CHANGED, COMMUNITIES IMPACTED AND THOSE THAT HELP MAKE CHANGE HAPPEN
Today, there's no better way to kick off our 40th Friday series than by highlighting our founder, Tom Jeffers. Tom was instrumental in deinstitutionalization and building community capacity in Massachusetts and Illinois before opening YAP in Harrisburg in 1975 to bring youth from Camp Hill prison back to their community.

He led YAP as our CEO until 2003 and continues to support our staff and organization. We are proud of and thankful for his leadership, vision, commitment to social justice and for the impact he's had on hundreds of thousands of lives through YAP.
YAP’s first program in 1975 opened in Harrisburg, PA to help youth safely reintegrate back into the community from Camp Hill Adult Prison.

Today, YAP remains embedded within the community, maintaining offices in the Old Uptown area, a community in the shadow of the Governor’s Mansion that is known for high poverty and crime.

While many are working to revitalize the infrastructure of the historic neighborhood, Tri-County YAP is interested in revitalizing the social fabric of Old Uptown, serving over 1,000 youth and families annually.
When Eugene became involved with YAP, he was surviving some serious challenges while living with his grandmother in Roseland, a Chicago Southside neighborhood known for both poverty and violence.

His Advocate encouraged him to consider going to college as a possible avenue out of the dangers of his neighborhood. Eugene now attends Northern Illinois University, majoring in Business and maintains a 3.6 GPA. He is also the Director of Programming of the Black Student Union.

He remains committed to his roots and hopes to return after graduation and start a business in his community to give back to other Southside youth.
Ray Davis, owner of Flight American Fusion restaurant, is a YAP Supported Work partner. Supported Work is a component of many YAP programs that is designed to help youth not only gain work experience, but also to learn the soft skills necessary to succeed long-term in a work environment.

Ray not only teaches his youth about the various roles and responsibilities in running a restaurant, but he mentors them and teaches them life skills—whether it be how to discern a cucumber from a zucchini or how to do their laundry.
Annie Mae Jeffers Brady has been an Advocate in Cumberland County, NJ since 1989.

“She devotes her entire life,” said Program Director Mary Ann Hamidy. “I’ve seen her out at 7 in the morning giving [kids] rides to school or work. I’ve spoken to her at 10 o’clock at night bringing them home from school activities. She is true spirit, true heart.”

We are very blessed to have Annie Mae on our YAP team and thank her for the hundreds of youth biographies changed by her kindness and dedication.
YAP works with the most marginalized and shunned youth in the poorest area of the nation. The South Bronx of New York City is the poorest Congressional District in our country: 38% of the total population lives under the poverty line; worse yet, 49% of the children in the district live under the poverty line.

YAP's mission in the South Bronx is to work with youth who have already penetrated the juvenile justice system and are targeted for prison. The New York City Department of Probation funds YAP to support the youth and connect them to community resources so that they never go to prison using our YAP-Wrap model and Supported Work.

Our partner organization, Community Connections for Youth, is a critical component of our team and connects youth with one of several grassroots neighborhood associations. Youth remain involved after YAP’s official service ends, ensuring that youth continue to get the support they need. These connections integrate youth into the normalized and vibrant, positive community life in the South Bronx.
Anthony's childhood was filled with abuse, and when he began working with YAP he was living in a household where drugs and drug dealing were commonplace, re-traumatizing him on a daily basis.

Through his work with YAP, Anthony slowly learned to trust the world again through the safe environment provided. Over time, he began to thrive in school and developed positive relationships with teachers and other students, building protective factors that have led him to increased resiliency.

Today, Anthony continues to flourish. He was recently promoted at work and is in a healthy relationship. He is majoring in Criminal Justice and maintaining a 3.4 GPA. He was also recently awarded a YAP scholarship from the Tom Jeffers Endowment Fund for Continuing Education.
YAP relies on community partners like Cathy DeYoung in our work to strengthen communities one biography at a time. Cathy, a resident of Williamson County, TX, supports YAP in a number of ways. She is a member of the local Advisory Board and has been integral to the planning and execution of numerous community outreach and fundraising events.

Cathy and her husband Michael designed, built, and hand painted game booths that were used for Williamson YAP’s community Fall Festivals. She baked cupcakes for a back to school night, and has spoken to our youth about the importance of sticking to their goals and never giving up.

“Cathy is one of the most caring people I have ever met,” says Williamson County Director Tiffany Herms. “We are so happy she is a big supporter to YAP!”
YAP Advocate Javier Jasso works in our program in Maricopa County, Arizona. He was matched with a 6-year-old boy on the Autism Spectrum who was in many ways isolated and disengaged from developmentally typical activities in his community. Further, he was preparing to move to Mexico to be reunited with his father, and this was a concern because he struggled with transitions and only spoke English.

Javi invested himself in finding ways to connect with his little buddy, and then in helping him connect with others. Javi learned what the child enjoyed doing and what his interests were and used those to engage him in activities. Because his youngster was interested in soccer- an interest that Javi shared- Javi volunteered to coach a local team so that his youth could play for free. Because Javi is bi-lingual, he is also teaching his young person how to speak Spanish. And they frequently discuss and are preparing for his move to Mexico to ease the transition.

“Javier not only has the desire to help each youth he works with, but strives to learn and develop more skills to better serve them,” says National Autism Training Coordinator Ann Branning.
The Glassboro, NJ community has a history of increased juvenile arrest rates, academic failures, and anti-social behavior amongst youth. As one of the largest low income housing facilities in Glassboro, Hollybush Gardens and NHP Foundation, worked together to start reviving their Community Center Services.

YAP was able to partner with these organizations to develop programming to address the needs of their community. The Young and Powerful After School Program was developed to assist the 130 youth at Hollybush Gardens with homework completion, gang prevention skills, decision making skills, gender specific groups, and project based learning activities.

Outside of the weekday after school programming, YAP was able to help the community center develop other needed supports for the families. YAP collaborated in providing the youth and families with weekend Kids Packs of food from the local Food Bank of South Jersey.
Jannette came to YAP's Orange County, NY program for help addressing truancy and challenges at home in her relationship with her dad. It was easy to see the strengths that Jannette possessed from early on- she was intelligent, had great people skills, showed leadership qualities- and she expressed interest in earning money and in joining a formal team (though she never played any sports before).

Jannette's YAP team encouraged her to develop those strengths and interests through opportunities in her community, and she did: Jannette tried out for and made the cheerleading squad and she engaged in YAP's Supported Work at her local Chamber of Commerce managing their social media. She also improved her school attendance and her relationship with her Dad!

Since her graduation from the YAP program, Jannette continues to attend school on a daily basis while maintaining her activity in the community. She volunteers her time periodically to assist with social media at the Chamber of Commerce and currently works after school for a local pizza shop to raise money for college. Finally, Jannette continues to be a part of YAP through mentoring younger youth that are still in the program: she often comes to the Port Jervis Library to help younger girls with their schoolwork.
YAP Board Member Lillian Heisey came to know YAP when one of her foster children received our services. “The services have always been helpful,” she says. Well, we can say the same about her, because Lillian has been supportive of and engaged with YAP ever since!

Lil and her husband decided to become foster parents in 1999 because they felt that there were kids who needed support and that they could help. They have been foster parents ever since, and have had a number of foster children, many of whom they have employed in their local restaurant. This commitment and dedication to improving the lives of children likely led to their recognition in 2013 when Lillian and her husband were named Lebanon County (PA) Foster Parents of the Year.

Lillian has worked with children for over 16 years in a variety of capacities. In addition to being a foster mother, Lillian is a Girl Scout leader and coaches softball. Lillian's heart and actions are with building strong, resilient children within her community. We thank her for her efforts and are proud to have her as part of our board leadership!
Joyce Thomas is a Master’s level YAP employee in Mercer County, PA. Joyce works in YAP’s Behavioral Health and Adult Developmental Disability Waiver Programs with 4 individuals, including David. David spent over 20 years of his life in a state center where he was victimized, abused, and distant from his family and community. When he first returned to his community, he experienced further trauma and was moved twice as a result. When Joyce began working with David in 2012, he was non-verbal and highly aggressive.

However, Joyce wasn’t deterred. She studied David’s behavior as his means of communication and used what she learned to help him- and others who work with and care about him. For example, she advocated for him to receive a medical evaluation, suspecting that some of his behaviors were caused by pain or discomfort. The evaluation highlighted a number of medical issues previously unknown that are now being treated. She realized that he used consistent gestures to communicate specific wants or needs and taught his family and his group home staff how to interpret them. She worked to identify his preferred interests, and built them into his activities, such as dinner with his Mom and sister, going to Mass on Sunday, and participating in activities at the local recreation center.

Today, David’s aggressive behaviors have reduced by 90%. Despite the brutality inflicted upon him in many settings over many years, David now smiles. Joyce, his ally and advocate, is instrumental to changing his biography.
Even in rural communities, access to fresh and nutritious food for some families can be challenging. Two YAP programs in Alabama are building from the community's natural strengths and resources to maintain community gardens as a means to make nutritious food more accessible to families while teaching YAP youth and families how to grow and harvest their own food.

Cullman County is the leading agricultural county in the state with a deep heritage in farming, but YAP staff saw families in their community in need of affordable, nutritious food. YAP engaged program youth in planting a community garden to provide fresh produce to their own families, as well as to neighbors and a local domestic violence shelter. By helping to plant and maintain the garden, youth and families learn practical skills that can translate to their own personal home gardens, or lead to local employment opportunities. In Marshall County, they plan to partner with local schools and hope to use their garden as an educational resource for culinary arts and agribusiness students.
A team of adults with Autism who receive services in Allegheny County, PA are producing their own quarterly newsletter. The Pittverse, as it is called, was borne out of putting YAP principles into practice: first, we learn what the strengths and interests are of those we work with, and then we find ways for them to further develop and build on those strengths. When Program Director Brian Kluchurosky presented the idea of a newsletter to some of the program's participants, four of them took ownership, brainstorming ideas that resulted in the naming of the newsletter, its logo and its content. The group has grown to include eight active contributors of opinion pieces, restaurant reviews, artwork and other wide-ranging topics.

"The newspaper has inspired some participants to seek a job, to collaborate with others in a job search and to locate opportunities for volunteer work," Kluchurosky says.

To date, the newsletter has provided contributors with the opportunity to create something meaningful using their "voice" that is shared with the community. Now, with a recent grant from the Edith L. Trees Charitable Trust, contributors will also receive compensation for their work on the publication.
YAP’s partnership with community organizations often provides youth with avenues and opportunities they may have never been introduced to, like yoga classes.

Candace Martin, founder of the Young Yogi Program, has been offering free yoga and mindfulness classes to Orlando YAP for more than a year. Teens learn relaxation techniques, stress relief, impulse control, and how to access a greater sense of peace. The kids enjoy practicing the poses, being creative and incorporating the benefits of yoga into their daily life. If a YAP teen promises to continue to practice yoga between classes, The Young Yogi Program will even gift them with a yoga mat.

Through movement and art, the Young Yogi program offers a sense of community and gives youth a tool instrumental to anger management and peaceful conflict-resolution, mindfulness to doing better in school, higher test scores and a greater sense of self-esteem. Further, The Young Yogi Program gives YAP teens and alumni an opportunity to intern at their youth yoga camps, where they can discover their gifts and develop leadership skills in a positive environment.
YAP not only recruits staff who live in the same neighborhoods and communities as the individuals we serve; we further recruit individuals who share our core beliefs and values about what it takes to help individuals realize their goals. Staff need to be flexible, strengths-based, creative, and committed to our families. One such staff is Mario Erby, a YAP employee who works in Greenville and Spartanburg Counties, SC. Mario provides support services to Mark, a 21-year-old with a developmental disability.

Four mornings a week, Mario arrives at 6am to assist with getting Mark ready for the day and transports him to his jobs at Goodwill and Piedmont skills workshop. When one of the other service providers working with Mark moved, Mario began working evening hours in order to ensure that Mark’s family would not be negatively impacted by the absence of the other staff. Together, Mario and Mark develop linkages to helpful community resources and continue to build Mark’s social skills, including communication and coping strategies.

“Mario is truly an asset to YAP. He is dependable, professional and always willing to assist,” said Program Director William Cameron.
The West Baltimore neighborhood of Sandtown-Winchester has struck national attention recently due to protests and outrage sparked by the death of Freddie Gray. Thirty percent of YAP’s Baltimore youth reside in Sandtown-Winchester, as does our Baltimore Director Craig Jernigan. It is a predominantly African-American neighborhood with many challenges- 1/3 of the houses are vacant, more than 20% of working age residents are unemployed, the poverty rate is about 30% (with 55% of households earning less than $25,000 annually), and they have the highest percentage of their community incarcerated than any other Baltimore neighborhood. Baltimore spends $17 million annually alone on incarceration of residents from this community, with each youth incarcerated costing over $100K a year, draining much needed resources from the community.

It is clear that this neighborhood is struggling in many ways; yet even so, young people in YAP's program and other residents both young and old are working peacefully together to make their voices heard and to affect positive change. Baltimore YAP sees the people and youth of Sandtown-Winchester as the neighborhood's best assets. YAP youth and staff have been part of the clean-up efforts, rallies, protests and assist Baltimore City with creating a “new normal.” This weekend, YAP youth are participating in a day long event organized by Baltimore Youth Rise and the Justice League, where they will be able to peacefully march, express their thoughts during a town hall meeting, and rally together with others from their community. We are proud of our Baltimore YAP family, especially our youth leaders and we stand in solidarity with them as they work in collaboration with community and city leaders to achieve peace and justice.
Megan is a participant in YAP’s PA Developmental Disabilities Program. She and YAP Employment Specialist Heather Hoover are working together toward Megan’s important goal: to live independently and support herself with a job in food service.

With a job at Chocolate World in Hershey, PA, Megan is on her way. Megan’s was one of approximately 2,000 applications submitted earlier this year. She was one of about 250 called for interviews and one of the 30 people hired at that time.

Megan’s story exemplifies the old saying that “where there’s a will there’s a way.” Her determination to succeed amazes all who know her.

Heather and Lori Burrus, YAP’s Coordinator of Developmental Disabilities Programs, agree that the right kind of support from staff and from employers makes all the difference for people who might otherwise struggle in workplace. The team is continually working to develop job opportunities for young people like Megan who just need a chance.
Kelsey Jackson co-owns very popular restaurants that have been featured on the Food Network and FYI Philadelphia, but that is just one part of his successful work. For years, Kelsey has partnered with YAP as a supported work employer, helping young people learn that success is within their reach.

Joseph Au, a 2012 YAP graduate began with supported work training at Kelsey & Kim’s restaurant. Because Kelsey believes that young people should learn all phases of restaurant work, Joe slowly worked his way through dishwasher and busser positions to a server position. He is now employed as the lead server at Kelsey's flagship location in Atlantic City, thanks to the training and skill building he received through supported work.

YAP staff believe that Kelsey inspires youth by continuing to live as a true example that hard and consistent work can eventually pay off for anyone when given an opportunity.
When youth in YAP’s Franklin County NY Program joined community volunteers to help rebuild a house, they changed two lives in the process. The homeowner, an elderly woman, cares for her adult grandson who struggles with a disability. Their dilapidated house was nearly condemned and she did not have the means to fix it. After networking within the community, Program Director Jordan Clark, YAP Advocates and their clients volunteered to help.

During the project, which took place mostly from December 2014 through February 2015, the youth learned construction skills and much more. With the assistance of a certified electrician and other knowledgeable leaders, they learned how to make a home energy efficient and up to code. They also learned to be resourceful, utilizing community resources for supplies and they helped with post-construction clean-up.

Most importantly the young people learned how it feels to make a difference in other people’s lives. “The homeowner expressed her gratitude on a daily basis,” Jordan recalled. “She even cooked them dinner every Sunday!”

Today, the homeowner and her grandson have peace of mind, knowing that their house is safe and secure. A BBQ at the house is planned for the end of this summer to celebrate all of the hard work the community did.

“By our youth partnering with the community and volunteering, they got a chance not only to learn about construction but also to learn how rewarding it is to give back to the community,” Jordan said.
YAP Advocate Vicky Reynolds wasn’t the graduate, but earlier this year she received a graduation gift that she’ll always treasure. Ramona Riggs, a young graduate of YAP’s Cullman County Program, sent Vicky this message:

“It’s sad that our time is up. I didn’t see you as my instructor but as my friend, someone I knew I could count on and have my back 100%. You never failed to cheer me up or make me laugh. You will always be part of my heart and the memories I will cherish for the rest of my life.” - Ramona Riggs, YAP Graduate

Vicky has been with the Cullman County Program for about three years. She remembers being introduced to YAP’s work by Christie Meadows, also an Advocate. “When Christie talked about her work, I just fell in love with YAP,” Vicky said.

YAP’s Cullman County Program serves young people and families referred by the Juvenile Probation Office (JPO) and the Department of Human Resources (DHR-Child Welfare). Some young people, like Ramona who was adopted along with her siblings, have been involved with both systems.

“I have worked for both sides of YAP’s program,” Vicky explained. “I enjoy seeing young people flourish and bloom into the wonderful persons they always were.”
Nevada is a major destination for human trafficking victims including commercially sexually exploited children (CSEC). Las Vegas is home to these and thousands of other young people who are out-of-school, out-of-work and struggling to turn nightmares into positive realities. Together with community partners, the Clark County Youth Advocate Program (CCYAP) is helping them find their way.

CCYAP is bifurcated into two programs. YAP-Advocacy operates out of Las Vegas and serves youth who are currently involved in the Juvenile Justice System—with a special emphasis on victims of human trafficking and/or CSEC. YAP-Workforce Investment Act Reentry (WIA Re-entry) is a voluntary program for young adults (ages 17-21) who have a past in the juvenile or adult justice system.

Clark County District Judge William O. Voy, whose court is widely viewed as a national model in addressing child trafficking issues, supports YAP as a community-based alternative to secure detention for CSEC and other youth.

Program Directors Daisy Hernandez (YAP-Advocacy) and Nyeri Richards (YAP WIA) work with numerous organizations to help young people achieve educational, employment and other goals. The University of Nevada—Las Vegas (UNLV) and the Nevada Sex Trafficking Awareness Campaign are among YAP’s many community partners.

“Our staff are extremely dedicated to kids in and out of YAP’s programs. They do a lot of pro bono work themselves and they also involve kids in activities that benefit their communities.”

- Patty Rosati, YAP’s Southwest Vice President
“There is more to me than the hardships I have faced—whether being left homeless by my mother, being in foster care, or raising my son alone,” Monica Self wrote in her application letter for a YAP Endowment Fund scholarship. “I am exceptional because I am a survivor, and I plan to use the challenges I have faced to help others survive theirs.”

Monica is also determined to give her son Tripp the stable, nurturing home that has been out of reach for most of her own life. She was age 14 when Tripp was born and his 19-year-old father was in jail. With free daycare provided by the Teen Parent Program, she managed to finish her freshman year of high school. When summer came, Tripp’s father left his family and was never heard from again.

The foster care system, where Monica and Tripp have lived together, is an interim step in her life plan. “Now I do not have to worry about how I’m going to feed my son, or where I can lay him safely to sleep at night,” she said. “I am not saying that foster care is easy—it’s not. But that is where YAP comes in.”

Monica recalled that constant moving and starting over had made her stop connecting with people. She credits Liz, her YAP Advocate with helping her overcome feelings of being lost and alienated. Liz is also helping Monica, who has consistently been a high school honor student, pursue her goal of a college degree in social work.

“YAP made being a “case number” in foster care so much easier and Liz and I have a great bond,” Monica said. “I want to be able to offer kids in my shoes the same guidance that Liz offered me.”
Sue Christner, Lebanon County Juvenile Probation Unit Supervisor, was recently named the Pennsylvania Juvenile Justice Professional of the year. Sue originally entered college hoping to be a teacher and when she interned at probation, she discovered a surprising outlet for her teaching ambitions.

“I have learned that if I can help youth make better choices in spite of their circumstances and connect them with resources that will support them in meeting their goals, success is possible. Too often we criticize teens and their parents for their behavior, but never take the time to consider that they have never been taught nor have they ever been expected to behave any differently. Without learning new skills to make better choices, no amount of punishment will change this.”

For the past 15 years, Sue has found a partner in Lebanon County YAP. “YAP has always provided our youth opportunities to be successful within the community because they find and nurture the strengths possessed within every child. Additionally, YAP has always been willing to go above and beyond to meet the needs of our most challenging youth and their families,” says Sue.

In addition to referring youth and families to YAP, Sue works to close service gaps and to ensure there are adequate community supports for youth and families involved in the juvenile justice system. She also takes the time to listen to youth.

“We recently partnered with YAP to conduct a focus group comprised of delinquent youth to get their thoughts, ideas and insight on the use of incentives. The kids appreciated having a voice and their feedback was used to shape incentive systems in YAP Day Treatment and Juvenile Probation.”
On one memorable day, Kathy received a message from a youth she worked with when he was just four years old. He asked an advocate in a YAP t-shirt, “Is Kathy still at YAP? Yes? Well, when you see her, tell her Rob says hello and that I am NOT in jail!” “I remembered the young man in an instant,” Kathy said. “His message made my day.”

Kathy joined YAP as an Advocate in 1992. Today she supervises 25 staff and manages operations of the Morris Sussex Office. Her staff provides in-home and community-based services for at-risk youth referred by the State Division of Child Protection and Permanency and other referral sources. She also oversees one of the largest behavioral health Out Patient Clinics in New Jersey YAP and is the Gatekeeper for Foster Care Support contracts in six North Jersey counties.

For 16 years and counting, Kathy has coordinated the Foster Sibling Camp Project at Camp Merry Heart (NJ). Her work in bringing together siblings separated by foster care has been recognized by state government and the Human Services Commission. This year’s camp is slated for July 12-18.
Young men released from Delaware’s Ferris School have a new team to help guide them safely as they re-enter their Wilmington neighborhoods. YAP’s Re-entry/Transition Program has just begun, but Program Director Terron Brown and staff are already working with three young men who will soon be released from custody.

Terron grew up in Wilmington and his life story models success for young men. He understands both the strengths and challenges of struggling neighborhoods like Hilltop, Westside and Riverside where many Ferris School youth will return.

“Poverty, gang activity, drugs and other problems are pervasive in many areas, but there are people in every community who want to give back,” Regional President Dana Newman said. “Terron is well-connected and brings people together as part of a kid’s positive network.”

YAP works with each youth at Ferris School for approximately six weeks prior to discharge. Staff also visit families, conduct community assessments, identify resources and ensure that each youth has a safe place to live.

Ferris staff work closely with YAP to re-enroll youth in school. YAP works with Workforce Investment Boards (WIBS), Job Corps and local businesses to develop employment opportunities. Other resources include Rites of Passage, Raising Kings program, sponsored by One Village Alliance, and various groups such as Boys and Girls Clubs and YMCA’s.

The program funder, Delaware Department of Children, Youth and Their Families (DSCYF), wants to help youth exit the criminal justice system as quickly and successfully as possible and reduce recidivism. Dana Newman is confident that Terron and his team will do what it takes. “Terron has that fire in the belly that you need to help youth succeed,” Dana said.
High school graduation seemed doubtful for Breonna Collier when she and her mother met the staff at YAP’s Truancy Intervention Program in Allegheny County, PA. Since then, the family has celebrated three graduations and there may be more to come.

Midway through her senior year of high school, Breonna was on the verge of being kicked out of school for poor attendance and failing grades. YAP staff met with Breonna, her mother, and the school to make a plan to get Breonna back on track for graduation.

Breonna’s mother was an enormous support to her daughter, fiercely advocating for her at school meetings while enforcing consequences at home like not ordering Breonna’s prom dress until the credit recovery was complete. Inspired by her daughter’s commitment to graduating, she enrolled in evening classes herself so she could finish requirements for her own diploma.

Breonna graduated on time with the rest of her class. Just a few days later, her mother received her own high school diploma.

After discharge from YAP services, Breonna stayed in touch with the program. She recently received a scholarship award from the Tom Jeffers Endowment Fund for Continuing Education. In May she graduated from Bella Capelli Academy with a certification in Cosmetology. Next, she plans to enroll in business classes at a local community college to learn about the business side of running full-service hair salon.
Joe Aldrete was the natural “go to” person for Program Director Denise Simms when she needed a YAP community partner to help system-involved kids of all ages. He became a volunteer program partner in 2012.

Denise describes “Pastor Joe” as “one of the most energetic, down to earth people that you would ever want to meet and he has a heart of gold.” He is a full-time minister as well as the Lead Chaplain for the Baldwin County Sheriff’s Department. He received the FBI Director’s Community Leadership Award in 2014.

“Each and every kid has great potential and we all have opportunities to make a difference in their lives,” Joe says. As a strong supporter of YAP’s work, he allowed Denise’s program to use his facility for group sessions where he teaches life skills and coping skills. “He helps teach our YAP children integrity, honesty and accountability,” Denise says. “If any of our YAP families need assistance with bills or counseling, he is there to help.”

Joe also donates food to YAP families from his church’s food pantry. He and other YAP partners that include the Foley Police Department and Toys for Tots at Christmas have given 10,000 pounds of food and 270 wrapped gifts to the community.

Joe’s relationship with YAP has changed a bit, but his commitment to our youth and families is stronger than ever. In March he became a YAP Advocate. “Making a difference: that’s the heart and soul of it,” Joe says of his work. “That’s why I’m so proud to be with YAP.”
YAP staff are passionate and deeply committed to making a positive difference in the world. They do this not only through their work with youth and families, but also through giving back. Staff give back in a myriad of ways, often driven by what they identify locally as an unmet need and an area of interest. For example, in communities where violence often casts a tragic shadow such as Harrisburg, PA, YAP employees host events like the recent Peace Street that bring neighborhood residents and businesses together in a peaceful setting; during the holidays, staff may donate clothing, food and gifts to families in need.

Nationally, many staff contribute to fundraisers and payroll deductions for the Tom Jeffers Endowment Fund for Continuing Education. Since 2004, staff have raised over $1 million. In 2014, 425 employees contributed $24,608 through voluntary payroll deductions. To date, 81 scholarships have been awarded and seven more YAP scholarship applicants are waiting for the fall semester. A current fundraiser is Cow Patty Bingo, an annual event held at the fair in rural Somerset County (PA).

The concept of giving back extends beyond U.S. borders. For decades, YAP staff have been supporting the work of two organizations helping vulnerable youth internationally: in Guatemala, where there is no social service system, staff help fund the work of an organization that aids street children; and in Sierra Leone, staff contributions help former child soldiers in their ongoing efforts at community reintegration and education. Last year, there were more than 260 payroll deduction contributions totaling approximately $32,000.

YAP staff give of themselves emotionally, mentally and physically in their work with youth and families; yet their generous spirits go above and beyond to give more where they see a need to help others. For this and so many reasons, we are thankful for and proud of our YAP Team.
When Miriam Peña joined YAP’s national Board of Directors, she brought passion, commitment and a strong connection to the Colorado communities YAP serves. Miriam was born in Juarez, Mexico but was raised in Denver, Colorado. From an early age, Miriam possessed passion, intelligence, discipline, perseverance, dedication, and compassion. She developed and channeled these qualities into issues that were important to her: education, social justice, people, and service.

Miriam was not only the first person in her family to go to college, but she also earned a graduate degree in Business Administration. She has assumed a number of roles that have helped advance equitable and humane policies, unified different stakeholders together to collaborate on projects and partnerships that improve the opportunities for and quality of life for all people in her community, and supported a number of nonprofits by serving on the board, such as Rights for All People, Colorado Immigrant Rights Coalition, El Centro Humanitario (Humanitarian Center for Day Laborers); and nationally with the Alliance for a Just Society.

"Miriam lives the life of a change agent through her transformative work as a servant leader,” said YAP Southwest President Gary Ivory. “She embodies a caring spirit with great intellect and passion for the least, the last and the lost. YAP is fortunate to have her represent us as our Colorado board member.”

Today, Miriam is the Director of the Denver Office of Strategic Partnerships, and is the proud caregiver of her three nieces, ages 12, 10 and 8.
When they started their first community garden, YAP Program Director Felicia Wells and her Tampa FL team set out to grow more than just fresh produce. Community spirit and healthy futures for children and older youth are also cultivated in this important “give back” project.

The team chose a child care facility for their first site. “Older teens that have gone through our program come back and help garden to give back to younger children,” Felicia explained.

An Aetna Foundation GoLocal grant supports the project. When school resumes, Felicia plans to have 3 additional gardens in 3 inner-city schools. A Healthy Living Garden in the Park Day, an event open to the community, is planned for YAP’s 40th anniversary “give back” celebration.

“Giving back is very important to YAP and opportunities aren’t always just there; we help create them in many different ways,” said Dorienne J. Silva, YAP’s Southeast President and Deputy CEO.

Felicia’s program receives referrals from parents, family members, schools, probation officers and other programs throughout Hillsborough County. Funded by The Florida Network of Youth and Family Services, the program served 158 youth and families in FY 2014-15. Fifty youths are enrolled in summer groups that utilize the evidence-based Peaceful Alternatives to Tough Situations (PATTS) curriculum.

“We want to help kids, families and the community grow in healthy ways,” Felicia said. “Giving back to the community is a pathway to that goal.”
Mike Brennan, Administrator of Probation Services for Lucas County Juvenile Court “completely understands the trust relationships that YAP builds with kids and families,” said Sherri Munn, Director of YAP’s Lucas County (OH) Program. “He has built that same kind of relationship as a community partner and long-term friend of YAP.”

After dedicating 32 years to the Lucas County Court, Mike will retire in September of 2015. Sherri and the YAP team will greatly miss the man they describe as “truly genuine”—a man who knew families and remembered the names of YAP Advocates and kids alike.

Mike has been a valued partner and ally since the inception of Lucas County YAP 10 years ago. His own advocacy in securing YAP Advocates for court-involved youth had significant impact in improving the lives of youth and families. He promoted good relationships between Probation and YAP staff, sometimes having applicants for Probation jobs touch base with YAP to learn how the program worked. He was also instrumental in developing a referral process for the program and provided valuable insight on staff training and day-to-day operations.

“Mike was awesome to work with,” Sherri said. “We wish he could stay, but we wish him a happy retirement and hope he enjoys lots of Miles pizzas, Werther’s candy and golf,” she added with a smile.

As Mike moves on to the next chapter of his life, he will not be forgotten. He leaves a legacy of work dedicated to helping young people find pathways to productive, law-abiding futures.
Is having a pre-packaged, microwaved meal for dinner a really big deal? Not unless fear and uncertainty make that your only choice every day of the week. Melissa, age 26, was in that situation when she met YAP’s Bradford County (PA) Developmental Disability Team. What happened next made a huge difference in her independence and enjoyment of life.

“When Melissa began services with YAP she was just moving into her own apartment and beginning her journey living independently,” Assistant Director ReBecah Kilbury recalled. “She was strongly apprehensive about using the stove and oven.” Trapped by anxiety, Melissa was unable to choose healthier, more enjoyable food.

Melissa and her YAP team set to work on cooking, safety and other important independent living goals. The team reviewed appliance safety with Melissa and walked her through each step-by-step process for making a variety of simple foods in the oven and on the stove top. Together, Melissa and the team also identified new food interests. After several months of encouragement and incremental gains in confidence, Melissa was safely using the oven to prepare simple meals and snacks.

For Melissa and for all of us, voice and choice—beginning with basics like the food we eat-- are essential to quality of life. In partnership with her YAP team, Melissa developed her voice while achieving goals to maximize her independence. She has also learned the joy of sharing with others. Now, every Friday, Melissa takes a dish—that she’s prepared herself—for all to enjoy at the day program she attends.

“It is our privilege to be able to work with individuals and families toward leading healthy, safe, and productive lives.” ReBecah said. “We partner with consumers to develop and put into action YAP’s philosophy of creating meaningful lives.”
You won’t find her on the sidelines, but Carla Benway cheers on the YAP team with boundless enthusiasm, optimism and energy. She’s also a team player and multi-tasker extraordinaire, taking part in virtually every agency initiative from employee training to new program development.

Carla joined YAP in 1998. Her passionate commitment to kids, families and YAP’s mission has taken her across the U.S. and “across the pond” to the UK and Ireland. Her YAP career began in Lehigh Valley PA, first as a therapist and then as Director of a re-entry program for youth returning from institutions. In 2001-2002 she was an embedded YAP director in Leicester England, working to establish YAP in the UK. Her international work continued in Ireland where she trained staff in 2002/2003.

In her current role as Vice President of Employee and Program Development, she leads YAP’s training and marketing efforts nationwide. Her leadership skills and multi-talents result in effective national presentations and a proliferation of written materials, brochures, reports, power points and “whatever it takes” to spread the word about YAP. She is YAP’s go to person for local programs across the country.

Carla’s devotion to YAP is second only to her love of family, friends and her cherished pets. No matter how hectic her schedule, she manages quality time with her husband Scott, their children and two dogs, one of which has special needs. At home as at work, Carla’s encouragement and unconditional support help all who know her to deal with their personal challenges and do their very best for themselves and their community.
Fort Worth, Texas in Tarrant County had some of the worst gang violence in the early 90’s. The Bloods, Crips and Latin Kings were warring and had taken over whole residential blocks and neighborhoods. After a national search, the Tarrant County Juvenile Services under the leadership of Chief Probation Officer Carey Cockerell contracted with YAP in 1992 to reduce commitments to state correctional facilities run by the Texas Youth Commission (TYC). The Department focused our services in the Poly Stop Six Community, the poorest neighborhood and highest crime area. YAP worked closely with the probation department, police, and local youth agencies such as the Boys Club and YMCA. After the first year of operation we helped the Department reduce their commitments to the TYC by 44%. Of the 208 youth discharged during calendar year 2011, 80% were not rearrested while enrolled and 97% were not adjudicated on any new charge while enrolled in the program.

Since then, YAP has continued to work with moderate and high risk youth involved with the Tarrant County Probation Department. YAP also provides services to children and youth whose emotional and behavioral needs put them at risk of out of home placement through the state Youth Empowerment Services (YES) Waiver, and works with students at risk of school dropout and failure in partnership with the Fort Worth Independent School District.

Effective last week, YAP expanded our continuum of services in Tarrant County through a merger with Santa Fe Youth Services. Since 1997, Santa Fe Youth Services has built an excellent reputation for providing adolescent drug treatment as well as a number of prevention and early intervention evidence-based programs to Tarrant County youth and their families. Partnering with schools, community agencies and Tarrant County Juvenile Services, Santa Fe Youth Services currently provides programs for more than 4,000 youth and families a year.

We are proud to have Santa Fe Youth Services as an official division of YAP, and welcome them into our YAP family with the confidence that together, we will broaden and deepen our collective impact on children and families in the community.
Jonathan, age 17, was once a very angry young man. Now, 18 months later, he has an impressive list of accomplishments that include giving back to his Savannah, GA community and working hard on his educational and employment goals. He has also learned to manage the uncontrollable anger that once drove him in negative directions.

“Jonathan was hungry for change when he came to our program,” said LaVeisha Cummings, Director of the Chatham County Advocate Programs. After six months in the YAP program, Jonathan graduated in September 2014. LaVeisha and her team remain in touch with the family. Jonathan and his mother agree that controlling his anger was a key benefit of his YAP involvement. “Just having an Advocate, someone to talk to,” was most important, Jonathan said.

“YAP helped him so much with his anger!” Jonathan’s mother said. “He used to get so angry but after working in the program he learned how to control his anger.” During his time with YAP, he completed the Peaceful Alternatives to Tough Situations (PATTS), worked on coping skills and life skills and drug and alcohol prevention activities. He is no longer on Probation. Supporting Jonathan’s educational progress was a major YAP program goal. “Jonathan’s mom and I teamed up and incorporated his educational plan,” LaVeisha said.

Jonathan now attends the high school where he was once banned from campus due to behavioral issues. He has learned to redirect the emotional energy that was once consumed by his anger. Today, this young man who loves animals, aquariums and music is moving forward in peaceful and productive ways.
Dianne Wilby has retired from her post as Deputy Commissioner, Department of Social Services in St. Lawrence County, NY, but she will remain an inspiration for YAP County Director Dana LaCoss and the YAP team.

“Dianne has been an asset to the growth of our large YAP program in St. Lawrence County,” Dana said.

Dianne brought YAP to the county in 1999 and credits YAP’s “willingness and openness to adapting to the needs of what was occurring at the time” as key to their partnership’s early success. “Dana would always mold the program to whatever was needed,” Dianne said.

Dana wholeheartedly agrees. “That was very true, especially when we started the 0-5 program in 2012,” Dana said. “When Dianne came to me with the issue of all the under 5’s being placed into foster care, I worked closely with her to start the 0-5 reunification and prevention program in the county,” she explained. “Dianne met with us whenever needed and she included YAP in the thought process of many cases and changes at the department.”

Positive outcomes reflect Dianne’s tireless efforts to keep families together and her willingness to be a strong YAP partner. YAP’s 0-5 program has had a 97% success rate of establishing permanency for 0-5 year olds. Dianne’s influence will be felt in the years to come by all who know her.

“She has made me the person I am today and has taught me many important aspects about human services and working with youth and families,” Dana said. “There needs to be more people like her that work in this field.”
After Hurricane Katrina, June Washington was hard at work as a Red Cross volunteer in the Louisiana Bayou Region. There she met William Walker, Director of YAP’s Bayou Region Programs. When William learned that June had lost her home in New Orleans, lived in the Red Cross tent on Nicholls State University's campus and was still most concerned about helping others, he asked her to join YAP’s team.

Today, YAP serves youth from the Juvenile Justice system in New Orleans as well as the Bayou Region. June is now Assistant Director and William describes her as his “right hand.”

“June is always out there, doing what it takes to get to families,” William said. “The Bayou can be a scary, sometimes dangerous place, especially in pitch dark, but June drives there night and day,” he said.

“The most important thing is getting to know the kid and forming a meaningful relationship,” June said. “It’s a relationship that says ‘we’re here to help’ and ‘we’ve been in your shoes.’”

Kids and families know that June’s words are genuine and spoken from her heart. She was raised in a New Orleans public housing development where hope for the future easily dimmed. No matter where they live, June sees kids as unique individuals with potential to succeed. There may be bumps in the road, but June inspires hope and determination. She lets kids and families know that “I’m going to be there to say ‘try again.’”

*June’s work is featured in YAP’s “Safely Home” video.*
A unique community is growing in Allegheny County PA. At its core is a group of adults in YAP’s Autism Waiver Services Program. Like many small communities, this one has its own magazine, an innovative publication titled Pittverse Magazine. The paper is a voice for those with autism and also fosters relationships upon which a community is built.

“A ‘connected, inclusive’ community has been one of the most important aspects to come out of the Pittverse project,” Program Director Brian Kluchurosky said. “The group is growing and socializing so much more with one another and with others outside of YAP.”

Michelle Middlemiss, who does not receive YAP services, learned about Pittverse Magazine by word of mouth and wanted to be a part of it. The group welcomed her as a writer and member of their creative community. Michelle’s mother, Patti, quickly became an enthusiastic supporter.

Michelle and Patti recently shared a copy of Pittverse Magazine with Dan Torisky, President and Co-Founder of the Autism Society of Pittsburgh, father of an autistic son, and an architect of the Autism Waiver in PA.

Waivers allow funding to provide supports and services for people closer to home in their own communities. Michelle was thrilled when Mr. Torisky agreed to have her interview him for a Pittverse article that will be published later this year.

As the Pittverse community grows in size, friendships are growing too. “In fact,” Brian said, “two of the adults who became friends through the group are looking to move out of their parents’ homes and into a home as roommates!”
Chris Mendez entered YAP’s transitional house in Newburgh, NY after his release from prison in 2012. The assistance he received went far beyond temporary shelter. “It is amazing how they genuinely believed in me,” Chris said.

"I believe that every person, if given the proper guidance, can find the path to their own personal success," said Jamaal Ennis, YAP’s Transitional Housing Director. “Chris has been a prime example of this statement,” Jamaal added. “He has overcome many challenges to be where he is today.”

YAP has assisted Chris with finding his path to success. After he completed his time at the transitional house, the team helped with every step of his relocation. “My case manager Ricardo Cargill helped me with everything,” Chris said. Jamaal maintained regular contact and Chris moved forward with employment and education.

Having been out of school for 10 years, Chris entered community college. “The application process took a while, but with Jamaal’s help everything fell into place,” Chris said. He is dual majored in human services/liberal arts and earned a 3.5 GPA in his second semester.

Chris’s goal is to work in human services and help others. “It would be extremely selfish of me not to return the help that was provided to me,” he said. “Everyone deserves a second and sometimes a third chance to change their lives.”

Chris stays in touch with everyone at the transitional house. “I cannot thank everyone enough and I am excited for what the future holds,” he said.
They don’t call them ‘community partners’, but kids in YAP’s Fort Worth Independent School District (FWISD) School Support Program know that people who care about them are working together to help them succeed in school. “That is what a community partnership is all about,” said YAP Program Director Mary Merino, whose program began early last year.

The FWISD refers students at highest risk of not succeeding in school. YAP’s team works closely with school personnel to identify students in selected Title 1 Middle and High schools on Fort Worth’s north side. Mary’s program serves five schools and works with 5-6 students at each of them. About 99% of the students are Hispanic, living in low-income neighborhoods. Many of their parents are non-English speaking and have difficulty engaging in their children’s education. Students referred to YAP struggle with academics, absenteeism and behavioral issues. YAP’s program participants have shown consistent overall progress in each of these areas. Mary’s team provides an array of school and community-based services for kids and families.

An ever-growing circle of volunteers adds support. Among them are student interns from Texas Christian University (TCU) and University of Texas at Austin (UTA) “College football players are like celebrities to kids,” Mary said. “The kids are in awe that they take time to be with them and it changes the dynamic about what a mentor looks like,” she added.
YAP’s national Give Back initiative is in full swing. Programs in all of our 18 states are hosting or participating in a variety of community service events limited only by their creativity and imagination. In Chatham County, GA, YAP recently collaborated with Socks for Courtney to host a “Trunk of Love Day” that helped the homeless in Savannah.

“We set out to fill our trunks with love (warm socks and warm cups of chili),” said YAP Program Director Dr. LaVeisha Cummings. Her group set up shop near the Inner City Night Shelter and the Salvation Army to distribute socks and food generously donated by Walmart, Wendy’s and Atlanta Bread. More than 100 pairs of socks were distributed along with food items.

Aleanta C. Kemp, co-founder of Socks for Courtney, worked beside LaVeisha and her team at the event. Aleanta’s daughter Courtney died of an undiagnosed heart condition at the tender of age of nine. Along with all living creatures, Courtney also loved socks of all types, colors and patterns. Her parents founded Socks for Courtney in her honor.

Courtney’s legacy of giving with love embodies the spirit of YAP’s 40 years of commitment to community. YAP’s Give Back initiative is one of the many ways we are working together to “strengthen communities, one biography at a time.”
When Jeff Fleisher first met YAP’s founder Tom Jeffers he was inspired by Tom’s visionary leadership and groundbreaking work in keeping young people out of prisons and institutions. Jeff succeeded Tom as CEO in 2003. His inspirational leadership reflects genuine caring about kids, families and YAP staff. He still talks with young people as he did when he pioneered programs for high-risk and gang-involved youth in NY and NJ.

Jeff earned his MSW at Rutgers University where he played collegiate soccer. Along the way he also fell in love with sailing. He became the director of La Casa de Don Pedro, a grassroots community organization in his hometown of Newark NJ. He still helps some of “his kids from La Casa” as he does many others he’s met over the years.

YAP recruited Jeff in 1990. Jeff passionately advocated for major Child Welfare system change including the NJ “Bring Our Children Home Act” which ended out-of-state placements and ensured that money saved followed the kids to their home communities where they could receive family and community-based care.

While Jeff is quick to credit others for YAP’s success, his personal track record is outstanding. A gang intervention program he developed for youth involved with the Bloods, Crips and Latin Kings became YAP’s first Texas Program. The program drew international attention and Jeff co-founded Youth Advocate Programmes/UK Ltd. and YAP/Ireland to reduce their reliance on institutional care.

“Tom Jeffers gave us and our world all so much,” Jeff said when Tom passed away last month. “Now it’s our job to carry on his work.” To Jeff, that means adhering to YAP’s mission and helping as many people as possible stay out of institutions and safely home. In his personal and professional life, he works tirelessly to change lives, communities and systems, one biography at a time.
“Community” is multi-faceted in Jefferson County NY, an area about 30 miles south of the Ontario Canadian border. Watertown, home of the Jefferson County Youth Advocate Program, has a small town feel and a growing population. Across the county are many close-knit rural communities, many of them isolated from the activities and resources Watertown offers. Although poverty and unemployment rates are high in comparison to the rest of the state, a “never give up” spirit prevails. “Our families really appreciate all efforts to help them,” said YAP Assistant Director Briana Bushaw.

Fort Drum, a large US Army post, is a great neighbor and generous community partner familiar to most county residents. “It seemed fitting to integrate this group of community members that contributes greatly to our county and our country into a ‘give back’ initiative,” Briana said. YAP youths and staff organized a community kickball game as a “thank you” to Fort Drum soldiers and families. The event was a success for all involved.

“This was an interactive and positive community activity that we would love to participate in again soon,” said CPT J. Menard. “The YAP youth were a pleasure to get to know,” SSG Stahl added.

YAP youth and Fort Drum families became even better acquainted as they enjoyed lunch after the game. “For many of our youth, military aspirations were affirmed by this opportunity to meet, talk and enjoy a recreational activity with these men and women,” Briana said.

JCYAP is committed to community-based activities that help young people recognize their abilities while building what often become long-term friendships. “Our objective is always to introduce our youths to the great community they have come to know and love,” Briana said.
At home in Ireland Charlene Maguire and Jimmy McDonagh received much needed help from the Youth Advocate Programme Dublin. They were also involved with YAP’s “Participation with Another Nation” project. This week Charlene and Jimmy came to the US to share their experiences, explore new ideas and meet new friends from around the world. They were welcomed by their host families in Orange County NY where they joined YAP staff and the Newburgh community in street soccer training given by YAP’s Argentine delegation. Later they joined YAP staff and guests in Harrisburg, PA for YAP’s 40th anniversary events.

Charlene and Jimmy hope that their experience will inspire others. They know that overcoming challenges such as bullying, family conflicts and low self-esteem is hard work that can’t be done alone. Charlene’s Advocate, Emer, worked with her in relation to problem solving, conflict resolution and coping mechanisms. Jimmy’s Advocate, Steve, helped him build self-esteem and confidence. Jimmy’s love of acting led to attendance at drama classes. He also joined a local boxing club. Charlene found positive ways to spend time in her community. She has a career plan and intends to go to college to study nursing or midwifery.

As they celebrate YAP’s 40th anniversary, Charlene and Jimmy can also celebrate their successful personal journeys. They have developed their many strengths, talents and interests. Now they want others—no matter where they live—to have a chance to do the same.
At the heart of this week’s 40th Friday is a simple phrase: “Thank You!” John F. Kennedy once noted that we have to take time to thank those who make a difference in our lives. YAP leadership wants to thank those who make a difference in the lives of others.

As YAP employees prepared to enjoy their own Thanksgiving, they made sure that YAP families could do the same. Staff in programs across the country, along with staff at our administrative center in Harrisburg, shared food and friendship with those in need. That is the kind of employee giving that happens throughout the year.

No matter where they work or what their job title is, employees keep the spirit of giving alive at all times. They volunteer their time for community work. Through voluntary payroll deductions, they support YAP’s scholarship program and help struggling families in Sierra Leone and Guatemala. They are always there, ready to do what it takes to make other lives better.

Often YAP staff are joined by grass roots community partners—faith-based groups, fraternities, sororities and a host of others—who share their time, energy and resources. There are not enough 40th Fridays to individually recognize each person or group. There are heartfelt words that say it all: Thank you for all that you do to ease the struggles of those in need.
YAP’s NJ Essex/Union Behavioral Health Programs are distinguished by highly qualified passionate, dedicated staff. Program Coordinator Shakema Bell recently shared highlights of their work for this 40th Friday feature.

**Kimberlee VanBurch**, MSW, LCSW, is the Clinical Supervisor of YAP’s Essex/Union NJ Behavioral Health Outpatient Program. She is a Clinical Trauma Professional with in-depth knowledge and experience with Trauma and Crisis Intervention related to at risk youth. Kimberlee has worked with children and others in the community who experienced some form of trauma such as rape, natural disaster, abuse, or violence. Most recently Kimberlee has designed programs to help youth develop resiliency to help them better deal with the effects of trauma.

**Fiorella “Fi” Garrido**, Behavioral Support Specialist, came to YAP as a college undergraduate intern. She later earned a Master of Social Work Degree from Rutgers University with a certification in Violence Prevention against Women and Children. As a Licensed Therapist in the Outpatient Clinic, Fi uses several therapeutic strategies. She teaches “mindfulness breathing” to help children calm down when they feel anxious. Play therapy helps children recognize and confront their trigger areas; and “feeling cards” help individuals communicate their feelings and emotions effectively. Fi is bilingual and a great asset to Spanish-speaking children and families.

**Terell Williams**, Behavioral Support Specialist, has always wanted to help people and to establish positive change within the urban community. During his short time at YAP, he has already used his empathy, patience and passion for the arts to achieve that goal. Terell found his own means of self-expression through the Spoken Word (poetry writing). When a 16-year-old YAP youth struggled to deal with the death of his mother, Terell helped him channel his grief and anger using Spoken Word as an outlet.
College Senior John Salcedo got firsthand experience in working with juvenile justice involved youth in Lebanon, PA this past fall through Lebanon County YAP’s partnership with Lebanon Valley College (LVC) that allowed 20 LVC students to work directly with YAP involved youth in a variety of community give-back projects through their Sociology Senior Seminar. Unlike his fellow students, John found himself in very familiar territory. Familiar not just because John himself was involved in the juvenile justice system just 4 years ago as a high school senior, but because he successfully navigated through his juvenile justice experience with the support of YAP in his home county of York, PA.

“YAP matched me up with people I was familiar with from my neighborhood, who understood what I was going through” says John.

In January, John’s role will expand with YAP as he begins his internship where John will have the opportunity to work with young people as their Advocate.

“John has a tremendous understanding of the challenges of life, empathy for persons in all situations and the strength to make his life what he wants it to be. He will go far in whatever he chooses to do,” according to Dr. Sharon Arnold, Sociology Chair at LVC.

“This gives me an opportunity to take advantage of experiences I have gone through,” says John. “I anticipate success with kids. I don’t see them as juvenile delinquents. I just see them as kids who need support.”
YAP Program Director Valerie Koeppel first met Jeremiah when he was 7 years old and living in his 6th residential placement. He was four hours away from his home and family, and YAP began working with his family to plan for his return home. Through the assessment process, the team learned a lot about Jeremiah and his family. Like Jeremiah, his mother and stepfather were accustomed to hearing- and believing-negatives about themselves. “Helping them see their potential took a lot of hard work,” Valerie recalled.

Although Jeremiah’s parents lived apart and often didn’t agree on how to parent Jeremiah and his siblings, with YAP support, they learned to work together in the best interest of their children. Their collaboration was critical to the development of a strong plan. The family had very complex needs, and as a result, there were many other services and supports in addition to YAP that worked together to meet the family’s needs while also building their strengths and interests. The planning process was difficult but important goals were developed, particularly regarding safety planning and crisis intervention.

Jeremiah was reunited with his family in June of 2013. Since Jeremiah’s successful transition back to his own home and community and his discharge from YAP in July 2014, Valerie stays in touch with the family on a casual basis. Jeremiah continues to thrive. He no longer takes any medication. He is succeeding in the private day school he attends—gets along with his peers and achieves good grades.

For much of his short life, Jeremiah was described as angry and extremely aggressive. But today, those labels are no longer attributed to the 10 year old. His principal describes him as “very mannerly,” and Valerie is not surprised. “Jeremiah is talented, charming and funny—and his parents did what they needed to do to help him and keep him safe,” she said. “The entire team effort was amazing.”
On this, the final Friday of 2015 and the last in our series of #40thFridays, we can’t help but feel a bit reflective. It has been an affirmation and a joy to work on and share stories about our families, our staff, our partners and our communities. We’ve been moved. We’ve been inspired. We’ve been motivated. And we know that some of you have, too, by the support you have shown through liking, commenting and sharing these stories with others.

We’ve realized that there is a need for sharing stories that highlight resilience, the positive power of caring relationships, and the infinite ordinary and extraordinary ways to contribute to making the world a better place and to bringing hope.

In our lives, particularly in our media, we’re often flanked by stories that hurt, foster fear or incite anger. Darkness can saturate and permeate if we’re not careful, tainting our soul’s inherent capacity and desire to create and contribute.

Edith Wharton wrote “There are two ways of spreading light: be the candle or the mirror that reflects it.” As we look to the new year, may we each resolve to do what we can with what we have from where we are to cultivate the light within ourselves, to bring hope and inspiration to others through our words and deeds, and to reflect light from others through what we share in conversation and in social media.

Best wishes in creating the happiest of New Years.