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The Power to Become

Mark Freado

I am not what happened to me. I am what I choose to become. ~Carl Jung

By the time Josh was four years old, a cascade of loss and powerlessness had already begun. He was removed from his mother's custody and his home in Moscow, Russia, to an orphanage in the Ukraine. He was later joined there by his two younger sisters. Josh has some memory of his mother, who committed suicide. He recalls being told his allegedly abusive father died in prison. He believes a grandmother died of cancer, one grandfather was murdered, and the other died from complications of alcoholism. After seven years in the orphanage, eleven-year-old Josh and his sisters were adopted by an American family and moved to Amarillo, Texas.

It is difficult for Josh to talk about the problems he experienced in his adoptive family that resulted in his placement at Cal Farley's Boys Ranch in 2011. While he continues to express affection for his family, he acknowledges a lot of fighting with his adoptive father and having very little relationship with his adoptive mother. He expresses great love and a sense of responsibility for his little sisters. During his



time at Boys Ranch, contact with his sisters and adoptive parents has been limited as a result of the stress in the family. He spends no time at home and the family's visits to see Josh are infrequent and brief. In Josh's life, family experience has been elusive. There is no doubt that his adoptive family placed him at Boys Ranch to ensure his needs might be better met and to provide him with opportunities for learning and growth that he would not have had with them. However, for Josh it was more loss. Since he lacked the consistent stability of family experience and the benefit of adults attending to his needs throughout his childhood, Josh found it difficult to seek out adults to help him in times of stress (Masten, 2014).

Many times when children grow up experiencing loss and tragedy, they feel powerless. Sometimes in their reaction to stress, they can come across as defiant toward their caregivers. It is important for adults to recognize that what we may perceive as intentional behavior might be expressions of pain. It is more indicative of an internal struggle than an attempt to engage in a power struggle. Responding to young people with a willingness and ability to see beyond their behavior and to better understand their needs and interests invites them to engage with adults in meaningful ways. Whenever possible, include them in the decision-making process. Giving them voice, access, and ownership empowers them to be a responsible participant in problem-solving.

Josh's initial transition to Boys Ranch was not easy. Facing the challenges of multiple transitions of places and people was a hallmark of Josh's life experience. Josh estimates that he has been in the care of 16 or 17 house parent couples in his years at Boys Ranch. He attributes some of that to his initial residence there in a house for more challenging boys. Even as he talks about those transitions, he recalls many of them in very personal terms, recognizing the caring and guidance they provided to him.

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Some of them still work there and he sees them as extended family. For young people who experience troubled or transient relationships with so many adults, it can be difficult to gain the kind of closeness with significant others that many of us can take for granted. However, sometimes resilience develops in them even when they realize or believe that they can't count on others (Bannink, 2014).

Josh eventually found his place and a connection to people that are providing him with rich experience, and a metaphor to approach his impending transition. That happened through his participation in the sport of cross country running. He remembers the first time he ran the course and how he struggled; some running, some walking, and some wondering whether he would be able to do it. He also remembers the excitement and pride he felt when, after working hard to get in shape and prepare, he finished well ahead of a group of runners, some of whom had much more experience than him.

The Boys Ranch cross country team holds a prominent place in the state of Texas. Being a notable member of a team with a rich competitive tradition is a significant point of pride for Josh. He credits his former coach, Kenneth Brown, with helping him along by encouragement, patience, and challenges, noting that Coach Brown is a father figure like no other in his life. He also values his relationship with his teammates and his responsibility to them. For the first time in his life Josh seems to experience a sense of his own value and what it is like to be of value to others (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 2002).

As he anticipates graduating and leaving Boys Ranch, Josh is reflective about coming in to his own as a young man but also about all the help and advice that guided him along the way. There were times when he stubbornly asserted his power and insisted on doing things

his way, only to have it not work out so well. He acknowledges a recent experience that had implications for his last year of cross country competition with his Boys Ranch teammates.

Earlier in the fall, while catching football with a friend, Josh stepped on a curb and twisted his ankle, causing a sprain. The staff in the clinic and his new cross country coach, Katie Shepherd, advised him to stay off of it to rest and let it heal. Josh decided to ignore the medical and coaching advice he received and take matters in to his own hands. When he went out to run he reinjured his ankle and set back his training for weeks, causing him to miss the first several cross country meets this year. He learned that being able to make decisions and take action on your own is a form of personal power, but sometimes we are more powerful by having people in our lives to guide our decision-making and help us learn from our mistakes.

Cross country competition provides opportunities for individual as well as team success. Each runner can benefit and still be dependent on other members of the team for their overall success. It is the hallmark of good teammates to be concerned with each other's success and well-being (Deci, 1996). Josh was concerned that not only had he jeopardized his ability to compete in his last year of cross country, but he also risked letting his teammates down because he didn't embrace the advice and support of others. While injured, he supported his teammates by encouraging and cheering them. Fortunately, his ankle recovered in time for him to compete in one or two meets before the district championship, where he placed second and the team won their 36th consecutive title. The team went on to place third in the regional final and earned second place in the state championship.

Believing that he has overcome a lot, not only in his cross country endeavors but especially in his life, Josh is facing the challenge of moving on to the next phase of his adventure—young adulthood. His next step will be in a Cal Farley transitional apartment before enrolling in college to study engineering. He will proceed with a sense of what he can accomplish on his

own and even more so in the power of being part of a team. Throughout his young life he has learned that he has to take care of himself. In the past few years he has also learned that he has the capacity to create meaningful relationships with others who can care about him, support him, and guide him. He said he understands and appreciates the power of “people who have your back, even though life can be pretty bad sometimes.”

Summing up his life experience, Josh says he likens it to a race. “It's been a long race, there's been uphill, there's been downhill, there's been mud, there's been stickers, there's been everything. It comes down to, I'm almost done.” He is pleased and proud of his accomplishments and the relationships he's made at Boys Ranch. He said he is not afraid about moving on because he has already endured a lot of bad things in his life and is still learning and moving forward. He is determined to succeed in whatever he does because he has learned, “There's a lot that you can go through but there's never a point you can stop.”

Mark Freado has MA degrees in both counseling and forensic psychology. He is Director, International Training Network, CF Learning and trains professionals world-wide. He has broad experience heading Re-ED programs with Pressley Ridge in Pennsylvania, West Virginia and Ohio.

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