

Thriving

children • youth • families



Growing Edge Training online journal



From Spaghetti to Stability

*from isolation to belonging
from struggle to mastery
from fear to independence
from scarcity to generosity*

Bridget Calfee

The Reclaiming framework has impacted thousands (millions?) of young people and the adults accompanying them all over the world. In a small community in Oregon, we've used the Circle of Courage as our guide for implementing programs and relating with youth and have seen thousands of lives impacted. I recently met Mark Freado who graciously invited me to share our story of implementing the Reclaiming Framework and the life changing impact it's had on our community and me personally.

HomePlate Youth Services is a youth-serving organization rooted in the Circle of Courage in Washington County, Oregon. It just turned 19 this spring and I, as the founding executive director, have been reflecting a lot as I prepare to transition out and HomePlate prepares to welcome a new leader. I'm forever grateful and proud for this little engine that could, and for a community that saw a need to more fully support its young people and built something beautiful.

In 2004, there were multiple conversations happening in Washington County, Oregon (the state's second-most populous county, just west of Portland, Oregon, diverse with a mix of suburban, small town, and rural communities). Young people were confiding in their teachers that they had unstable housing challenges. The local police department was picking up youth for curfew violations, and after learning they didn't have an address, driving them around all night until they felt safe to let them back on the streets when it was daylight. Local churches were searching for ways to give back to the community, serving meals in Portland or even traveling to San Francisco to find ways to give back. Unaccompanied youth were also coming to the doors of family and adult social services where they couldn't be served, which I witnessed firsthand at the family shelter where I ran children's programs. This perfect storm of community conversations brought schools, churches, social services, and police together to brainstorm what could be possible in our community and to begin addressing these needs.

When the idea of HomePlate began formalizing and the small co-founding group received an initial grant of \$8,000 (\$5,000 to put in a shower), we had \$3,000 to pay for someone to gather, plan, and coordinate. I raised my hand. I love teenagers. I had worked with them in summer camps and at

an after-school program; I loved the coming-of-age conversations at that stage of youth development. They were asking all the important questions of themselves and their community. What strengths do I have now? What could be possible for me? What doesn't ranch dressing go on? The truth was they were playful, kind, and funny.

HomePlate was born! I started working 5 hours a week in January 2005. At first, the steering committee and I did a lot of work researching models of other youth programs and philosophies. We toured a few and learned a lot about what we wanted to replicate and what we didn't. For example, one program told us we needed bodyguards as they frequently physically restrained youth in their program when fights occurred. It alarmed us and gave

us pause. A few months later we opened our first drop-in night without bodyguards but with a few more skills, a home-cooked meal, and some hope that we could support these youth who had been falling through the cracks of family and school

systems of our community. These are the same youth that HomePlate strives each day to look for and truly see, to listen to and really hear, and to support, care for, and champion. That first night, I think we had 30+ volunteers (the community was so eager) and one brave youth (I still remember her name and face). With time, youth started to trust us; they came and brought their friends week after week. That first year we served 116 youth, which has grown to nearly 1000 youth served in 2023.

In those early years when the drop-in nights were slow, I would take a walk with a volunteer's fluffy dog and loop around to the transit centers and nearby parks asking, "Could you or anyone you know use a hot meal or shower?" At first it was challenging to reach youth this way because the only other people approaching youth at transit centers were known as "Bible bangers," people who would tell youth they were in a bad situation because they didn't love Jesus enough. Eventually, the youth began to trust me and the volunteers. We were as no-strings attached and as low barrier as possible. We had (and still have) only four rules: No drugs, No alcohol, No weapons, No drama. The youth who really needed us were the best at regulating their peers on the "no drama" rule when others got feisty. Before we knew it, a community had formed. A group of young people who have been inaccurately labeled their whole lives as lazy

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or rebellious were sitting down to dinner, some art, and perhaps a game of Apples to Apples with community members who had their own stories of why they cared. We knew we needed volunteers in the beginning to make staffing a drop-in center feasible, but we didn't know how powerful it would be to pair these two groups who may have previously judged each other (for experiencing homelessness or for the volunteers driving there in their Subarus). Their paradigms about each other faded away and authentic relationships were built. Relationships. That has always been HomePlate's secret sauce.

A few years into this adventure, we incorporated into a 501c3 nonprofit to be able to receive more funding from foundations and government agencies. Just as importantly, we built it, and they came. The need was indisputable. I was fully in—those generous youth who had been dealt a rough hand had captured my heart, and I felt needed and connected. One youth said that HomePlate nights (we were only open on Thursdays for the first seven years) were her favorite because it was the only place that she would go where people would ask how she was doing. "How are you?" The only place.

Less than one year in, I realized I was bitten by the youth work bug and wanted to get some more training and networking contacts. I was accepted to Portland State University's Masters of Social Work program. It was there that I met Ben Anderson-Nathe, who is the best professor I've ever had. His class on Youth and Youth Work was the first class where I was totally enthralled with every article, activity, and assignment. I could apply what I was learning there and directly implement it at HomePlate. For example, the text of the course was none other than *Reclaiming Youth at Risk* by Larry Brendtro, Martin Brokenleg, and Steve Van Bockern. I gobbled it up. I connected so deeply with the descriptions and explanations of youth in challenging environments. The relational model was innately in me and now I had the words to describe it, which was empowering. At HomePlate, I instantly made this required reading for the board members and the additional staff we began to add in 2010 (five years in). That tradition continues today. Before new employees (even operations and finance) get into their roles they sit down and

read *Reclaiming Youth at Risk* on day one. I have seen that when folks skip this step and browse instead of read, they miss our core philosophy. Consequently, they struggle in the work and don't last too long.

As the need was uncovered in our community, HomePlate grew to better address the needs. Our **street outreach program** was next to be formalized after our initial drop-in center. We trained staff and volunteers to go out to transit centers, skate parks, and wherever youth congregated to continue meeting youth "where they are" both emotionally and physically. Within seven years, we opened a second drop-in night and location and the following year we added a third night and location. We've tried to follow the needs the youth are expressing and build programs from that place, centering their experience.

Right after the recession, we saw that many people were having a hard time finding work—especially young people who didn't have any employment history. With a few key community partners, we decided to employ them ourselves and started a small social business. With the Beaverton Farmers Market we launched Sit-n-Stay, a dog sitting service during their Saturday market. We saw a lot of success with this and our **Youth Employment Program**. The youth had a skip in their step, a newfound confidence, and even though it was us hiring them, they were so proud to have a job!





At HomePlate we exist to offer an opportunity for such courageous and resilient young people to connect in safety with others in our community who genuinely care, without judgment, fear of exploitation, or concern for expectation. It is in this offering of bonding, comfort and love, our basic emotional needs, paired with meeting other basic needs like food and clothing, that we have witnessed unending promise for not only our youth, but our volunteers, our staff, and our broader community.

Our pilot **Education Program** began in 2019 as we were seeing some youth really struggle with low-wage jobs and navigating the college systems. It was intimidating. Our Education Program supports youth with community college certificates or trade schools and have even added GED support along the way. We support youth to navigate these further educational experiences with assistance, for example, we help them fill out the FAFSA to qualify for financial aid and scholarships. HomePlate additionally offers a scholarship to fund the other in-between things that could support their educational success like a phone bill, computer, trade school tools, or whatever the youth and our Education Coordinator deem important to remove barriers. This flexibility matters as youth without much or any familial financial support have many taken-for-granted gaps to fill.

HomePlate's programs are designed to disrupt cycles of instability for our youth. Along with support for basic needs, education, and employment opportunities, HomePlate recently launched a much-needed **Housing Program**. Finding affordable housing in our area can be a challenge, and for our youth, having a stable place to live can seem like an impossibility. With voter support, our region passed a measure to tax high-income households (one percent of anything over \$125,000). It has brought new, unprecedented resources for affordable housing as well as the support services to accompany newly housed community members. We now have the capacity to support up to eighty 18-24 year olds per year—with help through all stages of the process—to find and apply for housing, help with the application and fees, rental assistance, and ongoing support.

Finally, our original program got a glow-up when we ran a capital campaign and purchased and fully renovated a new **Drop-In Center** in 2020-2022. It is equipped with all the dreams we didn't have at our rental spaces: a commercial kitchen, multiple showers, laundry facilities, and a quiet space. Youth have been a part of the dreaming years before and we were able to incorporate their ideas into the design. They can feel the intentionality of this beautiful space.

At every turn, our team has tried to further imbed the Circle of Courage, enhance our Reclaiming Environment, and address the Seeds of Discouragement sprinkled and sometimes fully implanted around the young people. We've operationalized this model with each other, too. We've brought it to staff and board retreats where we reflect on how the circle components show up for ourselves and each other. For example: "Morgan, I saw your mastery shine when you made the website," or "Brian, I see you remembering each youth's name when they come into the drop-in, which enlivens belonging." We use the Circle of Courage sieve when making decisions about adding programs or activities: does this program, intervention, or event offer opportunities for Belonging, Mastery, Independence, or Generosity?" Here are a few examples of the ways the Circle of Courage has shown up:

Belonging— When a young person got released from the hospital after giving birth, the first place she came was HomePlate. We were all surprised and asked if she wanted to go home (she had just been housed in her own apartment a month before). She said she felt like staff and volunteers were like family and who would you want to show your *brand new* baby to, your family! We were beyond moved and celebrated her exquisite new baby boy with her.

Mastery– I grew up not being very interested in video games and got the idea along the way that video games weren't a great use of time. This opinion changed when we received a donation of a Nintendo Wii at HomePlate and the youth would show up and excel at it. They were experts! I had no idea Garage Band could be mastered in the way I witnessed. After demonstrating their extreme Mastery, they were teaching me how to play. With the boost of confidence, I saw them soften and be open to trying new, previously declined, activities like making duct tape wallets at our art table.

Independence– One of our programs over the years was to support stability through job training. We partnered with the local farmers market to offer a dog sitting service during the market hours as dogs were not allowed at that market. We had community business leaders volunteer for our interview committee. The youth learned technical skills like dog behavior and cash handling, but possibly more importantly, they also learned soft skills like showing up on time and communicating with supervisors and customers. About a month after he started, one youth sheepishly came to share that he had gotten another job. He was nervous to quit, but we were so celebratory because that was the whole point! The job offer came from a pizza business owner from the interview panel who was very impressed. This youth was 19 and had custody of his two young sons. He now had a steady job to provide for his kids (and they loved the extra take-home pizza, too).

Generosity– After learning about the Circle of Courage, and inspired by the generosity component, one of our co-founders, Bernie Bosnjak, offered the idea that we could add a Holiday Store but not in the common way where youth would receive gifts from donors. Instead we gathered donations and the youth could “shop” and pick out gifts for their loved ones, such as a candle for their aunt who lets them stay with her from time to time or a stuffed animal for their nephew or child. The energy every Holiday Store night is electric, generosity overflowing.

Another thing we've implemented over the years is to embed the principles of Circle of Courage in our policies and procedures for staff doing the work.

Two of the human-centered policies I'm most proud of are a paid sabbatical policy and a 32-hour work week. This work can be challenging and include secondary trauma. We often employ those with lived experience and due to our relational model, we want them to stay in the work and return each week rested. More importantly, these policies allow time for staff to deepen their belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity in their personal lives with family, friends, and community.

It's hard to believe this year marks nearly two decades since a small group of people came together in passion for social justice in an effort to meet a need unmet. We began with the basic premise of meeting young people struggling with housing instability, where they were at, by offering them a safe place to eat, perhaps even a place to talk about their challenges, as well as their hopes for a better future. Together we all wrote HomePlate's mission, and came up with the name, a play on words for the food (home-cooked plate of food) and safety (baseball reference that youth would be “safe at HomePlate”) found at our drop in centers.

Since then, our growth has literally been in lock-step with the youth. The number of youth we have served has gone from just over 100 youth the first year, to nearly 500 youth in just under 10 years, and nearly 1000 almost 20 years in.

Booker T. Washington once said, “Success is to be measured not so much by the position that one has reached in life as by the obstacles which they have overcome.” At HomePlate we agree, and we see each overcoming, each hopeful step towards something better, as the true measure of success.

With my impending transition to consulting to support other organizations with youth work programming and human centered policies, I reached out to some former youth (who are now in their 30s and even 40s) and asked if they had any advice for the current youth. These youth are the reason we do the work. Youth have proven that support and empowerment during hard times in the critical years of coming of age can make a true and lasting difference, and in *their* words, they pass that support and empowerment to other young people coming up after them.

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They said:

- As a teen I always looked forward to HomePlate every week every single staff made everyone of us feel so welcome and always had some advice or some kind of resource for anything we were going through it felt like a home away from home where everyone could get together and have amazing food and catch up with people we might not see on a regular basis.
- HomePlate has given and offered to me more knowledge and resources than I can ever imagine. I have learned how to become a successful worker in the world, all from guidance and support from staff/volunteers sharing their knowledge and allowing me to learn new skills from them. I will forever remember the folks that would serve us, the ones that would sit with us when we didn't want to sit alone, and always there to help with rows of resources at hand. In short, HomePlate has brought many new lifelong faces into my life, many resources for life skills and being able to navigate life when I was young. Forever grateful for the chance to have been a part of it.
- I'm doing great, I have 3 kiddos, a few animals, renting a home and I am working as a lead Admin for a contractor. Without the help of Bridget and the others I wouldn't have ever stepped into this field and made something of myself all of this time later.
- I have bought a house out in [the country] with my husband. We have 3 kids ages 13,12,8. And we have two cats!

And their message to current youth:

- Don't give up. It may be hard now but it does get easier as u get older. Take the steps now while u have a great support system from HomePlate just take it one day at a time set small goals for yourself and remember nothing happens overnight.
- The person you will be 10 years from now, all starts with the goals you set, and the steps that you take to reach them TODAY. Even through all of the storms, remember it's a bad day, not a bad life. You are important and the world needs you in it.

I've been thinking about trust lately and why young people trust HomePlate. They didn't have to. Often in their lives trust had been broken countless times. Their resilience, vulnerability, and bravery has been so impressive. And outside of all the outcomes, the fact that youth trust us is probably the thing I am the most proud of. HomePlate offered belonging via a space and relationships and the youth reciprocated and filled it up with generosity and mastery.

One of my favorite things to hear from HomePlate youth across the years is hope for newfound possibilities when they exceed their own expectations (independence!). And as Katriese, a former HomePlate youth notes, "You all taught me to reach for the stars. I did just that and now own my own home!"

I hope this reaches you in your own community where you are showing up and implementing the Circle of Courage principles in unique and powerful ways. This model has changed many lives, including mine. I have learned a lot over the last two decades. I have learned that those who face the most adversity often are the strongest among us. Their courage inspires me, and fosters my belief that the youth in our communities have the ideas, the talent and the will, that will help build a healthier, happier community for us all.

Bridget Calfee (she/her), MSW, is a youth worker with over 20 years of professional social work, team development, and nonprofit leadership experience, and over 25 years working with and leading youth programs. Starting with \$3,000, a community need, and a vision, Bridget Calfee has been the director of HomePlate Youth Services since its founding in 2005. Today, the organization is among the leaders in implementing human-centered policies and addressing housing instability and reclaiming youth ages 12-24 in the Portland, Oregon metro region. She holds a Bachelors of Psychology and a Masters of Social Work. Bridget currently provides a range of consulting and training services for youth work, team and organizational development, executive director coaching, and employee retention. She can be reached at bridget@bridgetcalfee.com. Outside of her professional passion for youth work, Bridget gets to nature as often as possible with her spouse and 3 energetic kids.

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