

**Collaboration & The Justice System:
A summary of how extensive interagency & family collaboration
made the difference for one young man
November, 2004**

A 17-year old boy with severe and persistent mental illness is accomplice to a crime. Guns, knives, and prescription medications are stolen. Where a house used to stand, now only a pile of cinder and ash remains. No denial of guilt. Society's response: 15 – 30 years in adult prison; accountability – yes; public safety – yes; reform – maybe; rehabilitation – probably not. "End of story" in most cases, but not for Mike.

History

Mike is a complicated young man. Despite assessments by several mental health clinicians, Mike's mental health diagnosis remains a question. Considered diagnoses have ranged from Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, Oppositional Defiant Disorder, and ADHD to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Autism, and Schizotypal Personality Disorder. He has had a difficult road in life beginning as a child who witnessed severe and ongoing violence and abuse; to a young man who has lived in three different homes (Mother, Uncle, and Grandmother) and attended three different schools in the past four years. Mike's primary deficit involves social skills, as he is severely introverted and relationally impaired. Others often see Mike's behaviors as infantile and irritating. Mike is not a reckless or antisocial individual. In contrast, he is low-key and generally a thoughtful individual who lives by his own code of ethics and is easily influenced by others. He is also very intelligent, scoring several grade levels above his peers in several areas. In everyday life it is difficult for Mike to understand the cause and effect of behaviors and how choices he makes impact his life. Add multiple, pervasive needs to "everyday life" and it becomes obvious that Mike needs adults in his life to work together in order for him to succeed in his home, community, and school.

Mike's Integrated Services Team

In July of 2001, Mike was referred to the county's Integrated Services Project. The team consisted of Mike, his mother, his uncle (whom he lived with at the time), a service coordinator, a school representative, Mike's therapist, and family advocate. The team's overall goal was "that Mike be able to confidently represent himself socially, so that others...may appreciate his sensitivity, caring, and intelligence." The team's initial focus was on keeping Mike out of an institutional setting by developing a school, home, and community plan for supervision, safe supervised activities, and development of a positive peer group. Due to the dedication, collaboration, and hard work of team members, Mike had the most successful school year of his life – developing a sincere interest in school, following rules, completing assignments, and (for the first time in his life) developing friendships.

While many successes were celebrated, the team continued to adjust Mike's Plan of Care to address challenges as they arose. Mike had made two friends whom he adored. Unfortunately, both individuals had a history of drug use and involvement with the legal system, and both began to realize how much their friendships meant to Mike and just how much they could make him do to prove his loyalty. Mike began to steal from his grandparents, who had taken Mike into their home after his uncle decided he could no longer care for him. The team's focus switched more heavily to helping Mike understand the consequences of such behavior, hoping to prevent more serious future violations of the law. Efforts were underway to partner with the local Human Services and Sheriff's Departments to develop a collaborative Crisis Response Plan as well as an "informal agreement" to hold Mike accountable for the crime committed against his grandparents. While team members worked to get representatives from these agencies "at the table", efforts to intervene in a preventive way were sadly outpaced.

Mike, led by one of his "friends", broke into an individual's home with the intention of stealing prescription medications. In the process, they found knives – one of which his friend badly cut himself with, resulting in a trail of blood as the boys searched the house for rags to stop the bleeding. Mike

was given kerosene to douse the walls of the home and told to light it in order to cover up any evidence of the boys being in the home. The result – Mike faced adult court, two felony charges (armed burglary and armed arson) and up to 30 years in prison.

The team, recognizing the seriousness of Mike's actions and the need to address public safety and accountability, also recognized that society's standard response of "adult prison" would not be the best short- or long-term alternative for Mike, his family, or the community. Mike's only chance of true reform and live outside adult prison was dependent on an unprecedented level of interagency and family collaboration.

Collaboration & The Plan

The detective who interviewed Mike quickly recognized the importance of the Integrated Services team and offered his support by providing valuable and comprehensive information to the team about the legal process and the work ahead to develop a plan that met the legal system & society's needs while at the same time developing an individualized, strength-based plan that could help facilitate Mike's reform and recovery.

Another door was open when the District Attorney (DA) said he would be willing to talk with the team about Mike, and would be willing to consider Mike's interests as well as those of the community. Prior to meeting with the DA, the team developed an outline of their concerns and recommendations. The DA and the family's defense attorney met twice with team members to consider Mike's individual strengths and needs to develop a recommendation for the Judge. What made this stage of the process unique was the way the DA and defense attorney took interest in the case and were inspired to do something unique with Mike's team and with the court on Mike's behalf. The outcome of this collaboration was a tightly constructed, individualized, and collaborative legal request. In summary, Mike would face two felony charges and be required to serve one-year "hard time" in the local jail, rather than prison with seven years of probation during which time he would be closely monitored. He would also have the opportunity to earn Huber release to attend school in the fall. The request also included a step-down transition plan for return to the community incorporating the possible use of monitoring equipment. Interwoven through the entire request was the commitment of Mike's team to continue its collaborative efforts, planning for the many transitions ahead involving Huber, school, and transition back into his community and home.

With the collaborative legal request in hand, and the presence of team members in the court room, the Judge recognized the thoughtful, credible efforts put forth on Mike's behalf. As expected, the Judge was careful and critical of the request, giving thoughtful consideration to the interests of society at large. The final result – the Judge accepted the team's request in full and praised everyone involved for their truly collaborative efforts.

Ongoing Planning

The team began its work planning for the many transitions ahead of Mike. The first key was to forge an alliance with the Department of Probation and Parole. One member of Mike's team, a family friend willing to share lessons learned from his own personal experience in prison and later on probation, offered to connect with the head of the Probation and Parole department (an individual he knew personally). From this initial connection and support, the team was able to build a relationship with the individual who would be Mike's probation officer. This officer chose to take a chance; stretching the limits of the autonomous and controlling corrections model to the collaborative model of the team's efforts.

The ongoing efforts of the team continue to be intense. With the support of everyone involved, careful consideration is being given to what will be needed in the future for Mike to be successful at home, school, and the community. Several challenges lie ahead. Mike's mental health diagnosis remains unclear, making it difficult for him to qualify for many benefits and formal adult services. At every step,

the team must also consider the needs of the community at large, and not lose site of efforts to facilitate Mike's reform & recovery.

Summary

No one can predict for certain what Mike's future holds; but it can be said with certainty that without the extensive efforts and collaboration of everyone involved, Mike would now be in prison. And society would pay a much higher price than the amount per year it takes to incarcerate one individual. For in 30 years, upon release to society with his experience of life in prison, the issues of public safety, reform and rehabilitation would still be there.

The decision made by Mike's service providers and family to go above and beyond, to test the boundaries of their roles, to sacrifice power, to trust collaboration, is one that gives Mike a chance at learning from his mistakes and maximizing his strengths. His future is in the hands of a family who knows and loves him, service providers who are aware of his strengths and needs, and a community who is invested in Mike becoming a successful and contributing member of society.

Quotes

"Working with the family as a team gave us (in-home therapy team) a perspective that no professional working alone could have figured out."

- In-home Therapist

"We had the therapist's experience, family's experience, my experience...we couldn't have been successful without everyone's unique experience of Mike"

- Service Coordinator/Case Manager

"He's the kind of kid it takes years to connect with – it takes a collaboration of everyone to work with Mike"...

..."I haven't seen this in the entire time I've been a therapist here...we worked with the court to develop an individualized, creative plan."

- Therapist, CICSW

"I can see that people really care."

- Mike's Grandmother

"I just want you to know that [Mike's Grandfather] comes in here once a month and he's been talking up all the work you've been doing as a team and he said he's been praying for you...and I've been praying for you as well, and we think something really good is coming out of all this."

- Local Barber commenting to the team's service coordinator