

How to Replicate the *Strong Connections* Theater Project



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The Strong Connections Project

Background

Adoptions Unlimited, Inc. (AUI) has a long history of promoting adoption for waiting children. AUI incorporated in 2001 and administers the adoption exchange for the state of Illinois, as well as several federal grants. On October 1, 2005, AUI received a five-year federal Adoptions Opportunity Grant, to administer the “Family Connections Project.” Partners in the project were the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, Lutheran Social Services of Illinois and the Jane Addams Hull House Association. The project served youth in foster care in Cook County (primarily Chicago) who were 14-21 years of age. One of the goals of the Family Connections Project was that youth leave foster care with a connection to a committed, caring adult through adoption, guardianship, connections with relatives, and/or a relationship with a mentor.

During the summer of 2007, the Family Connections Project Director attended a performance of a play directed by the Still Point Theater Collective. (Founded in 1993, the Still Point Theater Collective is a Chicago-based community of artists dedicated to creating performances, workshops, retreats, and community events that celebrate spirituality and raise consciousness on issues of peace and justice.)* The performance featured material from incarcerated women that provided insight about their experiences in prison.

The Still Point Theater Collective was approached by the Family Connections Project Director regarding working with young adults who had exited the child welfare system and helping them to write and tell their story. Still Point staff members were very interested in this concept, as many of the young women they had worked with in prison had come from the child welfare system.

Establishing the Strong Connections Project

An exploratory meeting was convened, comprised of representatives from the Still Point Theater Collective and the Family Connections Project, as well as two foster care alumni. The group proceeded to establish partner responsibilities, a budget, timelines, and the goals of the project. The goals of the Strong Connections project were:

* Still Point has worked with inmates in four women’s prisons in Illinois since 2000.

- To help foster care alumni work through the loss of not being parented by their birth parents.
- To help foster care alumni tell their stories of being in care.
- To make it possible for foster care alumni stories to be shared with legal professionals, caseworkers, foster/adoptive parents, and youth still in care.

Recruitment of cast members

Cast members were recruited between January and March of 2008. The ideal size for the troupe was six to eight members. Criteria to be a cast member included the following:

- Be a former ward of the child welfare system
- Be emancipated from the child welfare system or have a finalized adoption
- Live in Cook County and be available to meet weekly from May – September 2008
- Make a commitment to the process
- No prior acting experience needed

Child welfare staff throughout the Chicago metro area were contacted. Letters were sent to Department of Children and Family Services staff and administrators in Cook County, and to program directors and staff at private child welfare agencies. The request for cast members was publicized in child welfare newsletters, in the Child Care Association of Illinois e-newsletter, and through word-of-mouth. The response was minimal, as it was very difficult to find foster care alumni. Workers had not kept in contact with youth once they left the child welfare system. Because of staff turnover, present staff were not aware of young adults who were no longer a part of the child welfare system and who might be interested in the project. It turned out that most of the cast came from one agency that employed foster care alumni. Out of the eight alumni who were recruited, all were accepted into the troupe. However, the troupe was finalized at six. One person left due to a scheduling conflict with soccer practice and another person missed too many rehearsals, and was asked to leave the troupe.

Development of the Troupe

The first meeting with the cast was April 15, 2008. The concept was explained to the potential actors and the commitment of time and expectations were clearly delineated. The group

would meet two hours each week and everyone was expected to be present and to be on time. If there was an emergency and they could not be present, the director was to be notified immediately.

Cast members were paid for each rehearsal and each performance. The payment for each rehearsal was \$50. The payment for each performance varied, from \$100 for a local (Chicago) performance to \$300 for an out-of-town performance. Payment for cast time was an important part of the process. It allowed the cast to offset travel expenses and child care costs. It also communicated respect to the cast by demonstrating that their time and expertise had value.

Director's POV

My name is Annalise Raziq and I was the director of the creative portion of the *Strong Connections* project. What follows is a relatively brief description of a complex process: how to create an original piece of theatre with a small group of mostly inexperienced writers and performers in 16 short weeks. If that task wasn't daunting enough in itself, add the additional layer of working with young people who are also struggling with other life issues ranging from a lack of stability in their lives, the surfacing of raw and sometimes overwhelming emotion, unexpected pregnancy, being stretched too thin with children, schoolwork and full-time jobs, and the basic challenges of being young and out in the world! But it is a process rich with the possibility of growth and connection, and what happened among the cast members made the struggles worth it.

Under the auspices and guidance of Adoptions Unlimited, Inc. and the Family Connections Project, we set out to create a piece of theatre roughly an hour in length that explored the importance for those who grow up in the foster care system of maintaining connections with birth family members. We generated our material by doing writing sessions and then learned to perform what was written by understanding basic theatre and improvisation techniques.

Our sessions were usually two to three hours. Throughout most of the process, we met only once a week. The bright and creative young people who committed to this project are frequently very pushed for time, so once a week was the only interval that would be sustainable. In some ways, this time crunch worked to our benefit. We worked together over a summer, and a

performance had already been set for September. With a looming deadline, the cast was often forced to just keep moving and get it done; in my experience, this can be a great focusing device.

Our time together each week was divided between writing and acting/improvisation. Once we had the show written and September approached, our time was used mostly for straight rehearsals: that is, we spent our time practicing the performance of the written material.

So how do you take a small group of young people with varying experience and maturity levels, and not only develop a cohesive performing ensemble, but also create a space safe enough for them to write about some of their most sensitive memories and emotions?

The heart of this process is creating a place where each person's story is respected and heard. Every week, we would spend roughly half our time together writing. This is how the raw material for the final piece was generated. Some of our members were more experienced writers. One young man journaled regularly; another young woman liked to write poetry and had been doing it for years. We also had two members who were experienced rappers, so they had a foundation in working with words even if they hadn't necessarily put pen to paper in a conventional way. This was very fortunate for us, but not a requirement. I have done similar work with incarcerated women and found that powerful writing can be created by people who have done very little formal writing in their lives; who maybe even thought that they couldn't write creatively, or had been told as children that they were stupid or slow. They may be full of fear and so used to not being heard that the effort seems futile. But when you connect to your own personal story and have a desire to express that – to be heard – and when you come to trust that you WILL be heard, that someone cares about what you have to say, then it's almost miraculous what comes out. (Note: the troupe named themselves *The Unheard*.)

We did timed writings using a variety of prompts: What is your earliest memory? If you could travel back in time to a critical event in your life and communicate with your younger self, what would you say? What is family? Some other prompts were simply incomplete sentences or subjects: How I got by; My favorite day; I wish... Many times the writing that was produced would generate other prompts. In this way a thread began to wind its way through the collective consciousness of the group and patterns started to emerge. This is the magic of the creative process and connecting to a group dynamic. Groups end up being far more than the simple sum of each member's contribution. The combination of all the various personalities becomes a living entity unto itself and the start of defining that creature comes through the writing.

Usually the participants were given about three to five minutes to write on each subject. Later, as the final performance began to define itself, we did longer writings meant to refine certain key ideas that emerged. Some of the group members even did more writing outside of our meetings and brought it in the following week. A few members had enough confidence in their abilities to take one of their ideas and actually script it into a scene that could be performed. I would sit down with them individually and tease out how the scene might progress, and then ask them to take a stab at writing it out.

Ground rules were established for the group writing process.

1. Once you begin writing on a certain subject, you have to keep your pen moving on the paper until you are done or run out of time. This prevents people from getting into their heads about whatever comes up. There's no time to judge what you're writing or allow fear to squelch the expression of topics that may be difficult for you. Even if all you do is continually write, "I don't know what to write. I don't know what to write," that's okay. My experience has been that something else will usually come out as long as you keep your hand moving and your brain from getting stuck.

2. When you're done writing, you can choose to read your words out loud or not. This creates a safety zone. You don't have to worry about what comes out because no one else has to hear it unless you choose to share it. Surprisingly, it was very rare for anyone to not share what they'd written, even when it was especially painful or sensitive. As the trust in the group was developed, I've found that people were eager to be heard. A few times, a group member chose not to share in the moment but would talk to me privately about it. In every instance, the person would eventually decide to share with the group at a later time.

3. This is most important: because such personal and precious details are often shared, it is critical to create a space where no one is allowed to comment on what's been written. If someone wanted to read what they'd written (and as I said, every group member wanted to share what had come up for them, in most instances), the writer would read the unedited words out loud and afterwards there would be a short silence. No discussion. I believe this structure creates a reverence and respect for the thoughts of others, and allows people to be heard in the purest way possible.

Some good resources for this type of free form writing are Natalie Goldberg's *Writing Down the Bones* and Julia Cameron's *The Artist's Way*.

The second half of our time together each week was spent on our feet. After doing a short physical warm-up of stretching and getting our bodies moving, we would play improvisational games. These started out as very simple exercises and progressed into more complex interactions over time, as the group got to know and trust each other more, and they became more comfortable with the whole idea of creating something physically. These times together were often filled with screaming laughter and great joy, and provided a welcome relief from what were sometimes intense writing sessions. The group quickly developed favorites from the exercises and would want to return to them again and again.

As with the writing process, I feel it's important to keep people moving so they don't have time to think about what they "can't" do. Improvisational games are the perfect way to do this. Plus they are just plain fun, once people learn it's okay to let go.

We would usually begin with some kind of concentration game to get everyone focused. This was critical to grounding everybody. We were all coming to our sessions from busy days of working, or caring for children, coming from school, etc. Games of focus helped clear out all the thoughts and drama of the day and got everyone present in the room in mind as well as body. A favorite for us was a game I taught them that involved rhythmically passing a ball around a circle. The group formed a circle with one person in the middle. That person held a medium-sized rubber ball, of the size kids usually use for kickball. The middle person tossed the ball to someone in the circle, making eye contact with them first and making sure the person knows the ball was coming. That person tossed it back to the middle. The middle person picked someone else and tossed the ball. It was thrown back. A rhythm was developed and silence was maintained. The only sound in the room was the thwacking of the ball as it was caught. Once that rhythm was firmly established, someone from the outside circle stepped in to take the place of the person in the middle. The key to this was that it be done both seamlessly—not breaking the established rhythm—and wordlessly. The silence encouraged the group to learn to communicate and pay attention to each other in a more subtle way. People began to move in and out of the center more quickly as the game progressed. At some point, we added another ball, so the end result was two balls being smoothly thrown in rhythm with people moving in and out of the center position quickly and in no particular pattern. It required great concentration and was very hypnotic. It was a simple and physical way to get everyone centered.

The ball game serves the additional purpose of training people to be able to pay attention to multiple things that are happening around them while staying calm and relaxed. It is the perfect skill to learn when you're planning to do a group performance in which any number of things can go wrong at any time. It's important to know how to continue to support what the group is doing without panicking. Plus, it's fun!

In addition to concentration games, we would also play games that encouraged the participants to learn how to communicate with their bodies as well as their voices. People who don't have much experience onstage frequently "forget their bodies," as it were. They may become so involved in remembering the words, they lose awareness of what their bodies are doing. To the audience, this reads as a lack of physical energy, which can quickly drag down a performance. There are many wonderful games that help actors learn to keep their bodies involved in their performances. One of them is a game called Party Quirks.

The set-up for Party Quirks is that one person is hosting a party. This person will be the guesser in the game. Everyone else leaves the room. Then each of the guests is secretly assigned a separate quirk, unknown to the party's host. One might be, "You are absolutely terrified of the word 'drink.' Every time you hear it, you have a meltdown." Or, "You are a secret assassin for the CIA and are stalking someone at the party." Then the quirky guests enter the scene, arriving at the party one at a time. They need to be present at the party, interacting with the host and the other guests, while also maintaining their quirk. It's the job of the party host to guess each guest's quirk as the party progresses.

This is another game that's lots of fun, but it also teaches what it feels like to have your body engaged as well as your mind. I would keep encouraging the group to play out their quirks in the biggest, most physical way possible. In this way, the group learned to incorporate their bodies into what they were trying to communicate while still interacting in the scene.

The third category of games used in our process were games designed to keep the participants producing ideas without judgment. Like the timed writings, where stopping was not allowed, we did Clockwork Scenes that kept the group members shifting in and out of short scenes with no breaks in between. Two participants would begin a short scene, sometimes starting with a suggestion and sometimes starting with whatever thought popped into their heads. The actors were encouraged to use lots of physical movement. At some point a short way in, one

of the other group members would yell “stop” and the two actors onstage would freeze. The person who’d stopped the scene would then jump onstage and tap the shoulder of one of the frozen actors. That actor would step out and the new person would step in, taking the exact same physical position of the person they’d replaced. Then the person who’d stepped in would begin a completely new scene that somehow justified the positions in which they’d been frozen. Like the ball game, these scenes got to the point where people were swapping places very quickly—some scenes would only go two lines or so before someone else jumped in!

Even though many people are scared when they hear the word “improvise”—maybe thinking they’re not smart enough or quick enough or funny enough to keep up—my experience has been that once they get thrown into a game like this and get comfortable with it, all those doubts melt away. As with all these games, an added benefit is that it strengthens the bond of the group.

Some excellent resources for improv games and laying the groundwork for improvisation are Viola Spolin’s *Improvisation for the Theatre*, Augusto Boal’s *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*, and Keith Johnstone’s *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre*.

Now the question becomes: how to meld these two different processes into a cohesive piece of theatre? This is where the art comes in.

As I mentioned before, in time, the writing exercises will begin to connect, as long as the trust in the group has been established. Participants will begin to be influenced by the stories they hear from others and will, often subconsciously, begin to connect those stories to their own, perhaps by thinking, “How am I like this person? How is my story different?” If the director is sensitive to these sometimes subtle connections, a pattern will start to emerge that will provide the framework for a whole piece. Then it becomes possible to take the writing that’s been done so far and begin to shape it together. Group members gave me copies of the writings they’d done, both in our sessions and outside of them, if they wanted. Then I took those pieces and started to weave them together into a script.

Most times, I used their stories as written—only shaping them to make them theatrical; maybe taking a poem and turning it into a group piece or a song; sometimes taking a story told by one person and having others play the various parts. I would consult with the group members on their individual pieces. They would make suggestions or adjustments, and maybe be provoked to a new way of looking at the story by our discussion. Or maybe they would tell me I had it

outright wrong and they didn't like the way I'd structured it. It was a dialogue, and the pieces developed with a lot of give and take from the group.

This way of working is painstaking and sometimes frustrating, especially with the pressure of the clock always bearing down. But the end result is a final product in which everyone has ownership.

The process can be even more delicate because many times participants have a history of not trusting others; of feeling let down and abandoned. And those issues can be triggered in bewildering ways. Sometimes emotions come up in unexpected ways, and some of the group may not know what to do with those feelings. These emotions and issues can threaten to be overwhelming and to interfere with the creative process. This is why the establishment of a safe and respectful space is so critical from the start. I did not allow observers to come into our sessions together very often. When I did, it was only with the express permission of the group and only after a piece had transitioned from the delicate first stages of creation into something more solid that everyone felt comfortable with.

Despite all the possible pitfalls, it is my belief that the risk and potential heartache involved in doing this kind of intimate work with people is well worth it. The successful result is a piece of theatre that moves those who see it and inspires the participants to keep striving for that which they thought wasn't possible.

This process is much more rich and complex than can be explained in this brief summary. I am more than happy to discuss the structure we used and my personal experiences in more depth with anyone that might be interested. My Email address is anraz@aol.com.

The Power of the Play: Growth and Changes in the *Strong Connections* Project

The theater project was one of the unanticipated, but powerful, outcomes of the Family Connections Project. The play clearly had a great impact on the more than 2,730 people who saw it. Most of the young adults who participated in the project were experienced presenters. Because of their involvement with the state agency's Youth Advisory Board, presentations at child

welfare conferences, and trainings at professional conferences (both local to national), several of the theater group members saw themselves as “old hands” at telling their stories. Group members were interviewed three times over the course of the grant by Jeanne Howard, PhD, a project evaluator. These interviews reveal that even “old hands” experienced powerful growth and change through developing and performing the play. *Strong Connections* affected not only the audiences who saw it, but the cast members as well.

First Impressions: Before the Play is Developed

Some of the potential cast members were interviewed prior to the group’s first meeting. Four young adults (three of whom eventually became cast members) met individually with the project evaluator to describe their experiences in foster care and their hopes for the theater project. In these initial interviews, the young adults spoke about their desire to share their stories to help the larger community understand what it means to children to be permanently separated from their original families. Themes of loneliness, despair, isolation, and shame about being a “foster kid” were common across the interviews. Two participants told specific stories about their yearning for connection with their mothers, despite their mothers’ significant mental illness. The stories they told to illustrate these feelings ended up in the final production, in a very similar form to the initial interview. In the interview, a young woman told of being a child and getting the part of Dorothy in her school’s production of *The Wizard of Oz*. She identified strongly with Dorothy and imagined that her mother would come to a performance, be proud of her, and work hard to get her back from foster care. She also imagined being able to click her heels and go home, to what was familiar and, therefore, safe.

At this point, the young adults were unsure about how the play would be developed. Despite their uncertainty about the process they were eager to participate. They wanted to go public with their stories and hoped that doing so would be a step toward improving the lives of children currently in foster care.

The Play is Performed

After the play was developed, rehearsed, fine tuned, and performed for three audiences, the evaluator met with cast members again to discuss their experiences. This meeting took place in a group and all cast members participated. The performers were proud of their play and proud

to perform it. They were touched by the reaction of audiences, particularly young people still in care who approached them afterwards to tell them how meaningful the play was to them. The cast also derived great satisfaction from having adults who make decisions – caseworkers, supervisors, and even court personnel – as part of those early audiences.

Cast members also praised the process by which the play came to be. They felt comfortable and connected to the director and were in awe of her ability to weave their various stories into a coherent whole. They discussed the writing and performance exercises that evolved into the production, and noted how this process was essential to the development of the play and their comfort level in performing it.

Theater work as a tool

In response to a question by the evaluator about whether this process could be of benefit to young people still in care, most cast members were cautious. They noted that youth might not be ready for such work, and that being in foster care made it hard to see beyond the immediate. Here are some of the cast members' reactions:

- *This will sound crazy [because] I run programs where we empower young people – give them a voice, use a lot of media – but for something like this I would be very careful. A lot of times young people haven't processed their own situation.*
- *It's a great opportunity but going through the system I did not feel comfortable even letting people know I was a ward of the state. Let alone saying it out loud – "this is my life" – especially at the age I was going through it.*
- *I think it might be better for younger audiences to see the production come from older [performers]. They can see to what to aspire to – that they too can have hope.*
- *[There] might be cause for a clinician to be there. Not just any person could help them process the here and now. We [the cast] are past the here and now.*

Participants did not volunteer much about how creating and performing the play had benefitted them directly, beyond noting the close bond they had developed with one another. One (who had not had the experience of telling his story in public previously) talked about "coming out of his shell" and others noted the benefit of having fellow cast members support them and help them overcome their fear of performing. One participant (with the others nodding in

agreement) noted that the process had helped her understand that the child welfare system is not all bad:

Until we did this play I never knew anyone personally that grew up in the foster care system and lived in a relative's home. I never knew any successful stories until this. I never knew anyone who had been adopted and was still there and it seemed to be going well. I'd only heard traumatic stories. This experience opened up my eyes – it's not all horror stories.

Final Impressions

A few months before the last scheduled performance of the play, the cast was interviewed again. They had performed for well over a year, to over 1,000 people at local, regional, and national venues. They were particularly proud that they had performed for the Director of the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services. Their performances for judges and other court personnel was a point of pride as well. In this second group meeting, cast members spoke extensively about how little connection they as foster care wards had with the judges who decided their fate, something they had spoken about little in the earlier interview. They were delighted that judges seemed to better understand the impact they have on children's lives and how badly children needed a connection with their families. The importance of helping judges "get it" made up the longest section of the interview.

One cast member noted how judges could approach cases with "third eye" thanks to the play. This led to a lengthy discussion of the cast members' experiences in court and how much they didn't understand about the process as children. Most did not remember ever attending court or being asked what their thoughts were about where they should live, what their goals should be, and when and if they could visit family members.

Three cast members reported no contact with the judges who made major decisions about their fate. One stated emphatically, *I don't ever remember seeing a judge. Ever.*

Another, who had been in the system most of his childhood added that he was never involved with court proceedings. *I didn't know about a G.A.L until I was probably twenty-four, twenty-five, he said. I didn't know nothing about that process at all...*

Others recalled periodic visits to court, like the cast member who said, *I remember being there when the judge made the decision to take us out of my mom's custody. After that, I don't ever remember going back again...I was never really included.*

Most cast members had cloudy memories at best. One stated, *I remember one court room in the early '90s, but after that, caseworkers were like, "Yeah, here's your court date." They'd always go to court for us all the time but wouldn't tell us if it was necessary for us to go.*

Another performer commented on how "out of the loop" he was regarding decisions that affected his life. *I remember my initial plan was to be adopted [in] '95, '96, something like that, he said. A year later my initial plan was changed to independent living and I don't know [why]. Was it a judge that made that decision? I don't know.*

The lack of inclusion in court carried over into a discussion of how parents are often told what their goals will be, and not included in deciding what they need to work on. This topic had been raised only in passing in the first interview.

I can remember my mother facing that same issue, said one cast member. She's just told based on the substance abuse issue that she had, "Now this is your plan. We created this for you...either you go this route or you lose your kids forever." As opposed to saying, "What are some plans that we can have in place based on your interest in regaining your family?"

Because of their sense of being controlled by others who didn't know them, cast members greatly appreciated the opportunity to perform for judges. One performer noted that not only are youth not informed about court dates or encouraged to come, but that they may be embarrassed to go to court because their foster care status is visible. He hoped the play helped judges understand more about how foster youth feel.

The play as therapy for others

In the first focus group, the evaluator asked cast members if they felt the process of developing the play would benefit youth still in care as a therapeutic exercise, rather than performing the piece for an audience. They were cautious, recommending that this occur only with highly trained professionals, such as therapists, who could help the youth process issues on the spot.

In the final focus group, cast members were more open to the idea. They noted that the experience had been powerful and that they could see the benefits of youth being together, talking together, and recognizing their similarities and strengths.

I think we should have a group based around it, and have youth and kids use their frustration in this kind of forum, said one cast member. They can be mad at the world [and] mad

at the staff at that point, but they can make a much bigger [statement] if they do something like [Strong Connections].

The play as therapy for cast members

Despite the intense emotions that are part of each performance, cast members related that being in the play gave them a sense of mastery and helped them cope with their own stories.

I feel like I have like a certain sense of control that I never had with anything, said one cast member. *When I'm up there I'm like...this is MY story. I have a responsibility to be true.*

“Growing” the play

Participants were proud of the play as it stood and all enthusiastically reported they would do it again. Unlike the previous interview where they had only a few comments about how the story might be tweaked, they shared more thoughts in the final interview about how the play might evolve. Several cast members focused on life after foster care.

I can remember when I was out of the system I was like, “Good, that’s over with, done! I don’t have to deal with it anymore!” noted one cast member. *A lot of people coming through the system probably have that mentality just because of the turmoil you have to go through. A lot of kids don’t see past 21.*

Parenting when one has been maltreated and grown up in the system was another important focus for cast members. All but one of the cast members are parents. They stressed the importance of conveying the challenges and the hard work, as well as the pleasures, of being a parent. If the play was expanded or an “Act Two” was developed, parenting would be part of the play.

One cast member remarked how, *people always say, “I’m not gonna do what my momma did.” But the reality is you have the potential to do exactly what your mom did and if you don’t hear from people who didn’t go that way, you kind of struggle with the challenge of just trying to compete against yourself.*

Cast members also believe their play and related performances could benefit audiences outside of child welfare. They have been approached by churches and local community groups. All agreed that raising general awareness—community awareness—about the challenges faced by foster youth is important. Two of the male performers talked about the importance of

educating communities, and young men in particular, about the consequences of violence on children.

Audience Reaction

The power of the play as reported by the performers is affirmed by comments from those who witnessed the performance. The following are quotes from a performance at the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges on July 13, 2009. Over 500 judges from all over the United States were in attendance.

- *This performance underscored the need to continue our often difficult work to improve systems. The heartrending stories told by these young people reminded us all that the child welfare experience leaves behind a lifetime of issues. We must continue to strive every day to improve outcomes for children and families in this nation's foster care system.* (Judge Mary Mentaberry, Executive Director NCJFCJ)
- *I was so impressed with our young people, especially their ability to articulate their experiences and how those experiences, positive and not so positive, afforded them the opportunities to grow and develop into the people they are today. Every time I hear their stories I am reminded of just how far reaching the judicial decisions made in cases involving the lives of our children and families extend. How one decision can truly change the direction of their young lives. These young people make me proud to be a juvenile court judge!* (Judge Patricia Martin, Presiding Judge, Child Protection Division-Cook County Juvenile Court Chicago, Vice-President, NCJFCJ)
- *Those kids served as a reminder why we do this work and an inspiration for us to continue.* (Judge Michael Nash, Presiding Judge, Los Angeles County Superior Court)
- *The theater performance was moving and inspirational. The opportunity to hear firsthand how foster youth are affected by each decision made on their behalf will make us better judges. To each of the performers, thank you, and please forgive us for any mistakes we made along the way.* (Judge Patricia Macias, district Judge, El Paso, TX, Immediate Past President, NCJFCJ)
- *The performance of Strong Connections, a play written by members of The Unheard, was incredibly moving. It brought a room full of judges from across the country to tears, giving*

us insight into a system we thought we understood. In the course of the 45 minute play, they will have inspired more change in court practice than any other training we have ever had. It stuck a chord deep inside all of us. We owe them a huge debt of gratitude. Other youth will be better served because of them. (Judge Susan B. Carbon of New Hampshire)

A DVD entitled *Strong Connections* was made of the performance. The performance can be viewed online at <http://www.nrcadoption.org/youthpermanencycluster/video2.html>. The video is 45 minutes in length. The DVD may also be purchased from Adoptions Unlimited, Inc, by calling 312-346-1516. The cost is \$10, which includes shipping and handling.

The following are quotes from people who saw *Strong Connections* on DVD:

- *The DVD helped me understand why I need to have good connections before I emancipate out of the system.* (20-year-old youth at Hull House)
- *Seeing the DVD and the stories that the foster care alumni told helped me better understand what my youth were going through and gave me ideas on how I can help them get positively connected.* (Case manager at Lutheran social Services of Illinois)
- *The Strong Connections video educates people to a world of feeling and situations of children in the DCFS system that we would not normally be privy to and are thankful to be made aware of.* (Mentor in the Adoptions Unlimited Mentoring Program)

Strong Connections Performances

The first performance was September 19, 2008, in Chicago. It was an open performance for the community. Attendees included the chief judge from Juvenile Court as well as three other Juvenile Court judges, staff from the public guardian's office and several administrators from the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services. We drew a capacity crowd of about 130.

- Second performance was October 25, 2008 for the statewide foster/adoptive parent conference. 500 in attendance. Held at a hotel in Oak Brook, IL.
- Third performance was November 7, 2008. Open performance in Chicago. Standing room only audience of about 140.
- Fourth performance was the National Child Welfare League of America Conference in Washington, D.C. on February 25, 2009. About 350.
- Fifth performance was March 13, 2009, in Chicago, Open Performance. About 90.

- Sixth performance was May 22, 2009, for Cook County Foster Parents Appreciation Night. 50.
- Seventh performance was May 29, 2009, Adoption Exchange Association national conference at the Palmer House Hotel, about 100. Adoption workers nationwide and youth from Chicago.
- Eighth performance was June 17, 2009, Department of Children and Family Services Youth Symposium at Malcolm X College in Chicago. All youth in attendance were in foster care. About 200.
- A performance was scheduled for June 24, 2009, for the Cook County Public Guardians staff. It was canceled by the Public Guardians because a Memorial Service for a judge was schedule on the same day at the same time.
- Ninth performance was July 13, 2009, Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges national conference in Chicago. About 500 judges.
- Tenth and eleventh performances were August 4, 2009, Catholic Charities in Peoria, IL. Two performances, 2:00pm and 7:00pm. Child Welfare professionals, youth in foster care and foster/adoptive parents. 170 and 60. Total 230.
- Twelfth performance was October 32, 2009, open performance in Chicago. Smaller attendance but an excellent performance. About 40
- Thirteenth performance was March 26, 2010 at Loyola Law School for Cook County Public Guardians, CASA Volunteers, and Loyola Law students. Attendance 100.
- Fourteenth performance was June 17, 2010, Department of Children and Family Services Youth Symposium, Chicago. Attendance was about 300.

Margaret Burke
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