Decreasing the Dropout Rate...It’s Not a Job, It’s a Mission

By Dr. Mikala Rahn, Founder & CEO, Learning Works Charter School

People ask me how did you end up with a charter school focused on dropouts? It’s actually a long, deeply personal story that changed my life forever. God introduced me to poverty. Not the poor, or sometimes broken, which I grew up in that defined me in terms of standing up for the little guy (sisters) or the effects of addiction and joblessness. He introduced me to the poor families and children struggling to survive in an America that pretends they don’t exist.

On the research side at Public Works, we were studying the pyramid graduation charts of high schools where students enter 9th grade and then, for example in some Los Angeles schools, only about 50% graduate by the time they are in 12th grade. The students just fade away. No real pressure from the school or the family to finish. As one would expect, these youths are disproportionately African American and Hispanic, teen mothers, from single parent homes, youth in the juvenile delinquency system, and of course, poor. As we were studying the dropout problem, strangely or perfectly, they started to show up to our tutoring center at Learning Works (before we opened the charter).

Maybe “show-up” is strong— I digress. I had started working with a student who was very at-risk. His family was really struggling with him (English Learner, Special Education, middle child), which culminated in him getting stabbed. I remember a moment with his lovely mother, sobbing together in December 2003, when I totally believe God spoke for me and I said, “I will take him on.” He basically became part of my family, and I would tutor him every night. I would pick him up from soccer and it would take at least three hours to get through homework after I put my own children to bed. This work taught me about struggling families, unresponsive schools, youth development (incentives/consequences), but mostly about my own personality of tenacity and “no excuses” attitude. I was going to graduate this kid no matter what even at the expense, at times, of my family and my own sanity. He graduated in June 2006.

At first his friends ignored the lady in the green van who always showed up to pick him up. They were all struggling in school, but they did not have the family pressure to use or want my help. This group was not “at-risk,” but in crisis. However, by senior year... a group of them were reaching out—all in their own time, and in their own way. I have often reflected on what changed my life from tutor/mentor to dropout/youth zealot. It was definitely this group of “seniors,” but I think it started with one text.

I was having a beautiful, abundant Thanksgiving in San Clemente with my in-laws. Given that my mother-in-law teaches and writes about cooking and food, the entire meal was amazing as usual. Table set perfectly, champagne poured, festive, loving—family. I have never learned not to answer texts when trying to not feel/think/enjoy. Text: My life is shit. I am alone. One of the friends, Daniel, had been evicted from uncountable number of places with his single mom who always seemed to have a scheme on housing that always ended in eviction. The current one was not good. He was not too sure where she was, but he was sleeping on the coach at the place they had been evicted with tenants just wondering when he would leave the couch. He was surviving, mentally cracking and trying to graduate. That next day, I drove over, picked him and his stuff up and moved him onto our couch. Six years later, someone has always lived on our couch. I started to learn that parenting the unparented is not easy or glamorous work, but you live for words, texts or moments of blessing. Text: You are the greatest white woman I have ever met. Daniel graduated in June 2006.
Carlos, the funniest, sweetest kid ever—schemer—loved shoes. His mom was a single mom working as a nanny with six of her own kids and his two older brothers were dropouts. They lived in the heart of gang and drug activity—Parke Street. His stories were novel material and could he tell a story! Like his brothers, Carlos became a dropout. Something about excessive truancy and stealing a teacher’s shoes? He found an independent study program in La Crescenta that didn’t work out—he gave up. He ended up talking the district independent study program, Center for Independent Study (CIS), into taking him in. He called me and said that he needed my help and he was “ready to change.” After lots of starts and stops, I took Carlos on—nagging, driving, meeting with the teacher, tutoring, feeding, and chasing (as we now call it). I developed my principle honesty is the best policy, even if you won’t always like what you hear. Carlos graduated in June 2006.

Jaime dropped out. I tried chasing that guy down early on, but he wouldn’t hear it. He was an angry kid very wounded by his parents divorce. He would only call me when he was in trouble, which was often. I think I have been through more crashes, arrests and court dates with Jaime then any other. Finally he came to me. First I tried to walk him back to every teacher at the regular school. The response was—“its November, he might as well stay home until next semester. He has an F and there is no way to recover.” Stay home? Wow! Somehow he got himself in the District’s CIS program, and then something about lighting a firecracker outside the classroom and then kicked out? I never really got all the details. I enrolled him in an independent study program in Glendale. Again, he got kicked out—attitude, words, checking other students. Little known secret, Jaime is really why Learning Works Charter School started. I had nowhere to enroll Jaime. I am irrational or the path God sets requires faith when everyone thinks you are crazy (maybe both).

I went to the District, and demanded we work together to start a program for dropouts. I argued that the 24.6% students dropping out of high school in our community was unacceptable. In April 2006, the District supported a partnership between Learning Works (LW) and the CIS program to address these needs, which was housed at the LW facility for free. Within two months of the initiation of this partnership, 67 at-risk Pasadena dropouts had either graduated or remained enrolled in school (17 graduated with a high school diploma). Based upon the Board’s approval to expand CIS, LW continued to provide support to students throughout the 2006-07 school year and 2007-2008 enrolling 188 at-risk youth, including 67 pregnant teens/teen mothers. In essence, we created a dependent charter school, a precursor to our current independent charter school.

Jaime graduated on time with his class of 2006. People say, how? I really cannot explain my house from December 1-graduation 2006. I had Daniel, Carlos and Jaime with DiShaun (another long dropout story that culminated in a major crash in front of Pasadena High School where he was ejected from the car and everyone lived) all at my house tutoring 24/7. Occasional visits from Kendrick for Algebra II tutoring and Aaron Henderson for Spanish. Lots of pizza, everyone sleeping on couches, screaming, nagging, coaching... and yes, my own children. I really don’t know what happened. I believe God asked, and I said yes (lots of arguing with God though). And so.... Learning Works began....Chasin....Decreasing the dropout rate... It’s not a job, it’s a mission.