

From the Desk of Tom Yuska

In looking back at nearly three decades of work at FamilyMeans, I depart confident that the Youth Development programs have made an enduring impact on Landfall and Cimarron youth and their communities. I've had a direct hand in some of that, but for the bulk of my time here it has been a shared mission, with deeply invested Program Coordinators, contract partners, and volunteers, all working to equip youth to learn, thrive, connect and contribute throughout their lives.

Sometimes people ask if essentially what we are doing is providing “daycare”. I always need to dismantle that stereotypic assumption of our work. It is **not daycare, but life prep**. The name of our department, Youth Development, is pointedly announcing that we set our sights higher than providing daycare or simply, *keeping kids out of trouble*.

These higher sights mean helping youth better understand themselves, and others. Offering exposure to new things, experiences, and people, as well as new perspectives. We create spaces for youth to explore boundaries, and when they misstep the experience ends with a gentle, though critiqued, landing. We put truth to the claim in our marketing materials that we believe in them, even when they might not yet believe in themselves.

What led me to FamilyMeans was graduate work in Urban and Environmental Policy, and a World Health Organization project called Healthy Cities. The graduate program’s focus was on creating policy from a community-based, rather than top-down, perspective. Healthy Cities promoted improving the health of residents of a city, town, or neighborhood from a holistic, multi-sector perspective.

So, when FamilyMeans hired me in 1993 to become the Community Organizer for the Enhanced Housing Initiative in Landfall, I interpreted this as a license to build human capital instead of physical capital. Now, nearly 30 years later, we continue to define our youth and these communities by their assets and potential, and not limit our definition and assumptions of them by real or assigned risk factors.

We create welcoming spaces for all youth, and provide opportunities for them to discover and demonstrate what they can achieve: musical play productions; podcasts that frankly and courageously depict hardship and discrimination; riding 40 miles in a day, or 400 miles over a summer - surpassing what many adults might even attempt (or accomplish).

We are advocates for our youth: in the schools, where they have at times been stereotyped and underestimated; and in the community, by creating a space where they can demonstrate what they can achieve and contribute. Those contributions have ranged from carnivals to raise money for hurricane victims; to raising funds for a differently-abled persons in their community; and bringing songs and games to a Day Out! session.

We teach youth how to advocate for themselves: designing a Cultural Awareness Night for the Stillwater community; mentoring them on how to advocate for their needs within the schools; giving them the framework to advocate for their wants within our programs.

Our work has generated notable community pride: teens wearing their Landfall soccer jerseys to school; others boasting they had a Teen Center when kids in neighboring communities didn't; creating a Landfall bike racing team that won championships two of the three years it competed.

A decade ago, Landfall earned three 100 Best Communities for Young People awards from America's Promise Alliance—a youth advocacy organization started by Colin and Alma Powell. While that award was beneficial for FamilyMeans, and largely attributable to our work, the real goals were to laud the city over its investments in youth—and push back at mobile home stereotypes. Tiny Landfall was a co-recipient of that award amongst New York City and Boston.

We are making progress in guiding young people to be better prepared for adulthood, by aiding them in recognizing their personal strengths and interests, then aligning this awareness with potential careers. We've facilitated career informational interviews that have turned into mentoring relationships. We've pulled teens out of a plunge into school apathy and dropping out into more energizing and personally relevant academic tracks.

In doing Youth Development work, we have taken on a profound commitment. As the U.S. population ages and birth rates decline, it is ever so economically important to guide these youth to be their most productive at the highest level of their abilities. It is no less a moral imperative to our fellow human beings that, to the best of our capabilities, we remove the impediments and open doors that enable these youth to shape a satisfying and productive life.

No entity has been more intentionally and deeply committed to Landfall and Cimarron youth than FamilyMeans. I'm proud of the work that has been accomplished in this program, and am looking forward to future issues of the FamilyMeans newsletter to learn how this work has been carried on.