Welcome to The U
A New Program for Oregon's Most Emotionally Reactive Youth

By Sarah Evans, OYA Communications
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Rockaway Unit is calm on a foggy morning in late December. Two youth and two adults play Spades together at a table. A teen naps on a couch near a live tree decorated with snowflakes. In an office adorned with handmade beaded geckos, another teen talks quietly with a staff person while coloring a picture of a lion to add to the numerous colored sheets hanging on the wall above his head.

The space feels much more like a community center for teens than what it really is: a unit at MacLaren Youth Correctional Facility that serves some of Oregon’s most emotionally reactive male youth.

The 12 youth living in Rockaway ended up there because, in other environments, they were aggressive, they lacked basic social skills, and they regularly spent time in isolation because they picked fights with peers or staff and had to be moved for everyone’s safety. They might blow up and yell at everyone just because they lost a game of Monopoly or didn’t want to put on their shoes.

But that’s only one side of their story. They are also in Rockaway because they’ve endured long-term, often repetitive, severe trauma — everything from physical or sexual abuse to parental abandonment — that prevented their brains from developing in normal, healthy ways. The result: they are constantly traumatized and reactive because they don’t know how else to act.

Until two years ago, the Oregon Youth Authority (OYA) would start by placing youth like these in its general facility population, where their behavior often resulted in them transferring to a “behavior modification” program for all of the agency’s most problematic, aggressive youth.

Now, OYA works to identify youth experiencing complex trauma when they first arrive for intake, and then immediately moves them to Rockaway to participate in a program called “The University of Life,” or “The U” for short. There, they receive
trauma-informed treatment and care that helps them learn how to address their emotional reactivity and act properly in social situations, skills they need before they can even begin to think about things like how to stay crime-free.

“The approach we take with these kids is skill versus will,” says Sarah Villarreal, living unit manager at The U. “Their behavior isn’t always a choice — there are reasons why they do it. The whole focus of this treatment is to help them learn themselves and their bodies, learn their emotions and what they’re doing with them. Learn how to think before they react.”

Re-Evaluating a System That Was ‘Clearly Not Working’

The creation of The U began a few years ago. Several major youth incidents in OYA’s “behavior mod” program — housed in MacLaren’s now-closed Geer Compound — led OYA to re-examine the way it was working with aggressive youth, says Heber Bray, policy and practice advisor for OYA Facility Services.

The Facility Services team recruited the help of OYA’s Youth Reformation System (YRS) team, which uses research data to help staff make informed decisions about youth placement and services, and they convened stakeholders from across the agency.

“We quickly came to the conclusion that we were serving several different populations of kids in the same program, and that was clearly not working,” Bray says.

Previously, facility staff typically sent two basic types of youth to Geer. The first possessed social skills, yet tended to use aggressive behavior as a coping strategy or a means to an end. They often were involved with gangs, Bray says, and many considered it a badge of honor to go to Geer. With the program change, these youth now stay in their regular units, where a newly developed community safety protocol helps staff work with them on site.

The second type of youth at Geer became the focus of The U: those who lack the ability to regulate their behavior and emotions due to past experiences with trauma. Research shows that the traumatic events they witnessed or experienced can impact the physical development of their brains, leading to long-term health and social issues — but the effects are reversible with the right treatment. (Read more on the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention’s "Changing Minds" website.)

“There these youth may just have emotional reactivity that becomes aggressive because of the way we approach it,” Bray says. “We have a phrase at the The U: ‘Approach determines response.’ If you have a reactive and traumatized youth and you back them into a corner, you’re probably going to get an aggressive response.”
Inside OYA

OYA developed a new program and curriculum, based on research, for traumatized youth. Agency leaders had to write their own curriculum rather than adopting an existing one because nothing they found fit the needs of youth who live 24-7 at their treatment program.

"Many of the programs out there are only geared toward one or two hours a week, and that isn’t going to make a difference for these kids,” says Shannon Myrick, development implementation manager for OYA’s Development Services. “We have to break them out of that fight-or-flight trauma brain. We needed a program that focused on doing the right things in every interaction with youth, every time.”

The curriculum is based on four themes: Balance, Believe, Contribute, and Excel. Each theme contains multiple practice areas on everything from mindfulness to learning how the brain works to maintaining a healthy lifestyle.

The program is meant to last about six to nine months before youth move on to another placement, preferably in the community. OYA has already helped two residential programs adopt The U’s curriculum so that they can accept youth out of the Rockaway unit, and the agency is creating training for potential foster homes as well.

The Five R’s

Staff at The U use five research-based strategies in how to approach youth, and they teach youth these same strategies:

1. Regulate: Fundamental to all other skills, youth and staff must know how to regulate their emotions in a healthy way before they can do anything else.

2. Relationships: Staff form positive, appropriate relationships with youth and gain their trust, while teaching them what those relationship looks like.

3. Relaxing activities: Once youth are regulated, they can focus on positive activities to help them relax. Staff model examples each month by sharing their own relaxation hobbies.

4. Reason: Youth learn how to critically examine their issues to come up with solutions. The first three R’s must be in place before effective reasoning can occur.

5. Restorative justice: When youth disrupt the unit, they later must sit down and talk with those involved about the harm they caused to the community.

Teaching Staff First

To teach the teens how to regulate themselves when their emotions are elevated, it’s critical that staff model the right behaviors, Bray says. And that’s not easy when working with difficult youth for whom any small action might be a trigger.

It requires more time and undivided attention, which is why OYA set a higher ratio of staff to youth for The U — about 1 to 4 when the unit is full, versus about 1 to 8 for a standard MacLaren unit that’s full.

But staff success also relied on the right training. The staff who would be working in the new program had previously been in Geer, where they used a vastly different approach and had experienced their own trauma due to incidents with violent youth. They trained extensively to re-teach their own brains in how to approach interactions with youth.

It wasn’t easy. Many struggled with keeping calm as they tried to help youth, and sometimes they found themselves slipping back into “the old way” of giving orders or demanding quick compliance.
Several of those who developed the curriculum worked one-on-one with staff. That included Nick Sotelo, now MacLaren’s treatment services supervisor, who spent countless hours on the unit, coaching them and providing support.

Two years into the program, even those who were skeptical of the new curriculum at first are now firm believers in its efficacy.

“When staff started seeing positive results with The U, it motivated them even more to be interactive,” says Derek Shrives, the unit’s case coordinator. “We’re not just dropping the hammer every time something is wrong. Once the youth see how we treat them and that we’re there to build trust, they change. There is a glimmer of hope.”

“I think they found their purpose again,” Villarreal says of the unit staff. “It’s emotionally the most difficult work we’ve done. But it’s the most rewarding.”

‘They Take Part of the Pain Away’

A reexamination of the scene in Rockaway near Christmas reveals the influences of the new program. The staff and youth playing cards aren’t just killing time — they’re forming positive relationships and learning to trust each other. The napping youth is employing one of his coping mechanisms. The colored sheets and beaded geckos are the results of youth engaging in positive relaxing activities, often while talking with the unit’s qualified mental health professional (QMHP).

For many of the youth, these seemingly simple activities have become lifesavers. One youth carefully covered the walls inside his room with artwork, school test scores, and a flag made from sunflower seed bags that he created with the help of unit staff. When asked if his room could be photographed, he wouldn’t allow it until he made his bed.

That he would take so much pride in his space makes sense when you learn he’d never had his own bedroom before MacLaren. With no parents in his life, he grew up in foster care. At the time of his crime, he was a homeless kid in Portland with good street skills, but had no idea how to interact with people. When he arrived at The U, staff described him as “feral” — he would horde food and get angry with staff if they threw away leftovers.

“As we evolved this program, there were some really clarifying moments for me when I realized I had some growth to do,” she says. “I didn’t start to bloom as a person in my own brain and learn the right skills until this program opened up.

“I cry a lot now — in front of the kids, in front of the staff. But it’s become my norm in how I release, and I try to teach the kids how healthy that is. It’s so much better than slamming and destroying things or lashing out at people.”

Staff Profile: Missy Mintun

Missy Mintun has been working in intense programs for assaultive youth for 22 years, about 15 of which were in MacLaren’s Geer Compound.

When she started learning about brain research and the new approaches for The U, where she is now a group life coordinator, Mintun not only changed the way she worked with youth, but she changed her own life.

She recognized that she herself was suffering from the results of complex trauma. She had grown up in a broken home, was a victim of abuse, and was addicted to drugs from age 15 through 26.

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from a place of survival skills, we would leave him be, because we knew why he was doing it. Later we’d talk with him about how he didn’t have to horde everything.”

After many hours of patient work from unit staff, the youth is now known as a helper, someone who reaches out to new arrivals and offers them supplies — even extra food.

Staff point to 17-year-old Justice as another success story. When he first came to OYA close custody, he was “a handful,” he admits. He often got into one or two physical fights a week.

Justice’s traumatic upbringing — which included growing up in foster care — contributed to him feeling unsettled and like he didn’t have a place to call his own, his caseworkers say. “At first he just seemed willfully aggressive, like a bully,” Villarreal says. “We continued to work with him and find value in him. We tried to teach him about appropriate boundaries, that sometimes adults don’t make the best decisions, and that’s not your fault.”

During his 10 months at The U, Justice says he has learned to think through situations instead of immediately attacking. He started focusing on school — now he’s only five credits away from finishing his high school diploma.

He says he started to change when he began “looking at the bigger picture, instead of just living day-to-day, which kept me fighting and in isolation.”

He credits The U’s staff — who are patient yet “make sure you’re doing what you need to do” — with having the most impact. “I’ve got a lot going on at home. They helped me get through it,” he says. “They take part of the pain away from me instead of just making me do it by myself.”

In particular, Justice bonded with the unit’s QMHP, Kristine Meany. When asked which part of the unit is his favorite, he beelines toward her office.

“She kept pushing and pushing me to help me get the skills I needed,” he says. “She never gave up.”
A Positive Physical Environment

The University of Life is based in Rockaway, one of six new living units that opened at MacLaren in August 2017. The units, which each house 16 youth, embody OYA’s move toward positive youth development.

Features include individual sleeping rooms that allow youth to have more privacy and a quiet space to calm down, connection to nature through windows and enclosed courtyard spaces, multiple gathering spaces for a variety of activities, and materials and furnishings that look more like a normal, community-like environment.

These features are based on research in juvenile brain development that shows positive physical environments better support rehabilitation, and they have provided a perfect setting for The U.