

The Youth NETWORKER

newsletter of the [northwest network for youth](#)

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This is your last issue of the Networker

Sorry for the drama, but I wanted to get your attention. Next Friday will be the inaugural issue of the Networker in its new format, powered by emma. Some of your email systems may not recognize the new format. **If you don't receive your Networker next Friday, please contact me at jtfest@in4y.com** and I will work with you to resolve any delivery issues. Thank you for subscribing, and we hope you enjoy the Networker's new look next week.



Homeless Youth and the Media, Part II

Some follow-up thoughts

By JT (Jerry) Fest

In last week's feature article I shared some of my personal reflections on unintended consequences of youth exposure through the media, and suggested that as advocates for youth we should be very thoughtful about our involvement in such exposure. While I'm sure there are other viewpoints (and I encourage those with opposing points of view to share them with me), I received a new record amount of feedback in response to the article, and each response was in support of caution due to the unintended consequences. Typical of the responses was one that I received from [Margo Hirsch](#), Executive Director of the [Empire State Coalition](#) of Youth & Family Services, reprinted with permission below:

"We have struggled for years on how to find a balance between working with the media to educate the public about the plight of homeless youth while protecting the interests of those youth. We have always come down on the side of never recommending that a youth put their story on camera or even on tape. The immediate emotional risks and long term implications for the individual young person are too great a price to pay, even if that meant not getting our very important message out in a compelling fashion. A few years back we did a video (Safe, Health, Prepared) which is on our website and on our facebook page, where we used staff to tell the stories of youth. While maybe not as compelling as seeing a youth on the streets, we decided that the "greater good" was not worth the risk of harm to even one young person."

I applaud this position, but I would like to take the 'risk of harm' a step further that the immediate emotional risks and long term implications that Margo refers to and that I addressed in last week's issue. There is often also the potential for actual physical harm and exploitation. Take for example an outtake from the show. While it did not make the cut for the final show, a 6-minute segment is readily available at the 20/20 website depicting a 15 year old girl on the streets of Portland. While the segment ends with her living at home after serving time in a juvenile institution, it shows her life on the streets in some detail and is typical of other media exposures of youth who are not off the streets when the cameras go away (for example, one of the youth who did make the cut last week). Also, while I wish the best for this young woman, we all know that she is still young enough to end up on the streets again ... and most of us know many youth who have been institutionalized, gone home, and hit the streets again weeks or months later. My point is that after watching the segment in which she is featured, I know *what she looks like, her name and street name, the parts of town she hangs out in, her drugs of choice, her family and institutional history, and her emotional vulnerabilities*. As a caring adult, maybe I've had my eyes opened to the drama of youth on the streets. But suppose for a moment that I am *not* a caring adult. Suppose instead that I am an exploiter or predator that lives in Portland, or even a serial killer such as the Green River killer who used to prey on homeless youth in the Pacific Northwest? I have just been given a road map to finding her and psychologically manipulating her into a situation that exposes her to psycho-emotional and/or physical harm, or even death.

Worst case scenario? Absolutely. Alarmist and unlikely? Perhaps ... perhaps not. I just know that we are entrusted with the lives and well-being of the most vulnerable and exploited young people in this nation. I'm just not willing to take that chance.

Margo and the Empire State Coalition asked if the "greater good" was worth the risk of harm to even one young person. They decided that it was not. When I consider how serious the possible unintended consequences may be, I have to stand with Margo on this one.

Newsletter articles express the opinion of the author, and do not necessarily represent the position or view of the Northwest Network for Youth.

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