

Duncan Campbell and Orin Bolstadt
interviewed by
Cynthia King-Guffey and Jay Hutchins.



true friends of the children

Friends of the Children started in Portland with two “Friends,” and has since expanded to six other cities across the nation.

In 1992, its Founders Duncan Campbell and Orin Bolstad had become discouraged by the services available to the most disadvantaged kids in the state. They looked at available research and found that a sustained, positive, pro-social relationship with a caring adult appeared to be the most important factor in determining whether a child facing multiple hardships in life would ultimately be able to become his or her best self. Now, Friends pairs children who have been carefully identified with paid fulltime professional mentors who provide support and guidance from kindergarten through high school graduation.

Friends serves almost 350 children in Portland and is a leader in mentoring practices, due to a passionate, skilled, and diverse staff and a strong commitment to learn and improve the ways in which they can most effectively love their kids.

Duncan and Orin sat down with Jay Hutchins and me for a conversation about what led them to step outside the normal government-supported channels to help our most vulnerable children become loving, happy, and purpose-filled members of their communities.

Cynthia King-Guffey - Guest Editor

Hutchins: What brought the two of you to create the Friends of the Children approach to help high-risk kids?

Bolstad: In the 1990s, Duncan and I were on the board of Children First for Oregon. I had a naïve notion that we could activate people to do something with facts as a tool to hold state legislators' and Congress' feet to the fire. Duncan had already become skeptical that this would change anything.

Campbell: Orin actually founded Children First for Oregon.

Bolstad: Yes, and I eventually realized Duncan was right; we needed to shift from education of policymakers to actually doing something for the kids. Duncan later founded The Children's Institute to support and educate policy makers about the successful work Friends was doing.

Campbell: My idea before all this was to find something specific—one clear plan, with a three-year, five-year, 10-year, and 25-year focus—a plan with specific steps that would change the reality of children in trouble.

Hutchins: In the early 90s, the two of you also worked together on the Governor's Commission for Children?

Bolstad: Yes, the Oregon Commission on Children and Families system was established in 1993. Larry Campbell, who was Speaker of the House, helped set it up.

Campbell: At the time, 300 bodies in Oregon were serving children. Yet, in survey after survey of services, child abuse mental health wards were getting worse and worse cutbacks. And more and more, in our private conversations, Orin and I focused on kids that were so high-risk no one knew what to do to put a dent in the problem.

Bolstad: It seemed to us that a lot of

simple issues had been allowed to become too complex. The committee we were on was referred to as The Children's Agenda. A broad spectrum of people was committed to children, but it became clear that there was not enough substance or money to actually do something.

Campbell: Orin and I came up with a radically contrarian notion for getting something done—that we should target a select number of high-risk kids and just do something to help them. My paradigm became: Before I die I want to help one child lead a better life, and stop just talking about it.

King-Guffey: Friends is action-focused and committed to learning-as-you-go. But can you tell us what initial research set you on your present course?

Campbell: Yes, we scoured models in research and practice that looked promising. It looked like the only way to get the kind of success we were seeking was to create a long-term, intensive mentoring relationship. And that's what we did.

King-Guffey: What do you believe constitutes success?

Bolstad: Well, we have a set of three, clear, measurable goals for our youth: Succeed in school, gaining either a high school diploma or a GED; Avoid involvement in the juvenile justice system; and avoid early parenting. Also we have high expectations and want the kids to have high expectations of what they can experience. In addition, we have many other goals that we are collecting data on. However, we have found it necessary to put our focus on a limited number.

Campbell: These expectations include feeling loved. We commit to walking alongside kids when they don't meet all of our hopes. We still communicate with the few kids who are now in jail. We

have amazing testimonies of success, but the point is that our measures of success are guided by what is successful for each of our kids. We support the most disadvantaged kids in the city, and when one of them becomes a hairdresser or a mechanic, we celebrate that. We are not only a one-flavor outcome organization.

Hutchins: Do you change the program if the research changes?

Bolstad: The premise of Friends is to increase resilience. And, of course, we have made a number of changes in long-term focus, but what we focus on is getting better at what works. When we started Friends, there were many research gaps in the high-risk youth arena, and there still are. The enthusiasm for mentoring nationally tends to be well ahead of solid evidence supporting its effectiveness. Opportunities for meaningful participation in the community with mentors are what we observe works and so we this is what we do.

Hutchins: Who are the kids in the program now?

Bolstad: We select the highest-risk children based on risk factors, identifying them as the most likely to experience serious long-term negative outcomes. We gauge the degree of vulnerability to school failure, gang and drug involvement, teenage pregnancy, and criminal behavior.

Hutchins: Who are Friends?

Bolstad: Friends are full-time, trained, paid professional mentors hired for their experience and talent for working with high-risk children. Each Friend works with eight youth. They receive extensive training by our staff. About 60 percent are people of color, and half are women. They are the heart of the program.

Campbell: They are the ones giving high-expectation messages to our kids.

and to do this we have to treat every child as if he or she is our own.

Hutchins: What are your concerns about the way government agencies deal with kids like yours?

Bolstad: Our kids typically have emotional issues that go beyond Friend's services, so we end up working with state and local government agencies. It has been my experience that government agencies and nonprofits fail with this population of underserved children. Services are too few and too late. There are problems of coordinating and integrating services. Sometimes we see different agencies wanting to transfer the problems to other agencies. Caseworkers spend too little time with each child. Mental health therapists often spend about one hour a week with these children, an amount that falls short of their complex needs. We have designed Friends so that most of the time is devoted to direct contact with the children, not in an office, but in the community.

Hutchins: Orin, you are a child psychologist. What do you think about psychotherapy for the population that you serve?

Bolstad: I have very little faith that psychotherapy has any impact on these kids. Friends do skill training and are around to see if it is happening. They spend time in the home, in the school, in the parks, in the whole community. An hour a week with a therapist is not enough for this population.

An even bigger difference is we do it for the long haul, right into early adulthood. There is actually research that shows relationship variables out-trump specific treatment variables three-to-one for positive outcomes. And most importantly, once you have a relationship base, you have to do something with it, such as skills training, building positive expectations, providing opportunities that broaden horizons.

Hutchins: What do Friends actually do with the kids?

Campbell: One of the first things Friends do is take every child to the library. The child will get a library card, check out a book. Then the Friend sends an important high-expectation message by showing great interest in the book. We take our kids to restaurants—most of them have never been to one. All the kids also learn how to cook a meal and clean up afterward.

We teach them everything that goes into critical basic

experiences, things our kids do not always get in their family setting. Unless you see some of the homes they come from, it is hard to believe these kids can function. Many of our kids' problems are outside the bounds of other mentoring programs. We realized very quickly that almost none of our kids read to grade level in the early grades. We started focusing on this and now we use an interactive tool for kids ages 6 to 8—it's called Study Dog. We have volunteer tutors for our kids of all ages.

[Study Dog is a Reading First Program, approved by the National Reading Panel under No Child Left Behind]

Bolstad: Very few of our kids have even been to the west side of Portland. We take them to art museums, to a Blazer game, to a concert, things they have not experienced.

Campbell: We work with our kids' strengths, find a unique talent or interest, and help them develop it. We are always looking for a talent because it's a great way to build self-esteem. We had a kid who had been expelled in the first grade. His school did not know what to do with him. He was a drug runner when we got him. On excursions, his Friend observed him rapping out rhythms on the dashboard, so the Friend used his rapping to get him interested in drumming. This was a real thing we could do to increase his expectations about himself.

Hutchins: What about the effect on your kids by their neighborhood peers?

Campbell: When our kids became teenagers, they started challenging us, so we looked closely at our model, how we could adapt it, and we started engaging them in service projects, internships, in learning camps led by two to three mentors. I have always thought that we must stay mindful of qualities of character, and help kids strengthen them. And to do this we have to treat every child as if he or she is our own.

Bolstad: We figured out from the kids that we had to create an alternative socialization system, to provide a peer culture that is positive. A Friend observed this positive culture displayed on a playground, when two boys (only one of them in Friends) started scuffling. Another Friends boy comes up and pulls away his peer, saying, "We are in Friends—we don't do this."

Campbell: We strive to help kids discover their virtues.

Hutchins: What about issues with parents and sexual relationships; they must be challenging with your kids.

Bolstad: With the kids, most of the conversations about touchy subjects take place in natural settings, like during a car ride: concerns about boyfriends, girlfriends, mom's new boyfriend. Around all these subjects, we try to create or support a peer culture and a family culture that is positive.

King-Guffey: Friends is involved in an NIH-funded research project. I think it is an important effort that could build bridges between research and practice, in both directions.

Bolstad: Yes, we believe that our organization is effective and that it works. But the gold standard in evaluation is randomized controlled trials. Few long-term scientific studies exist on the impact of youth mentoring, especially those with multiple risk factors.

Campbell: The National Institutes of Health has awarded funds to Oregon Social Learning Center and Public Private Ventures to study the Friends model, in four different cities, over a period of five years.

Bolstad: The study is going to look at the impact of long-term mentoring on behavior, relationships, and wellbeing. Friends carry with them a device that records how they spend their time with youth. We'll use this information to track what works best in the context of the mentoring relationship.

Hutchins: We are really interested in how best practices are determined, and how the prevailing paradigm affects what people consider best practices. We have observed that what people call best practices doesn't always create empirical success.


Bolstad: We observed that with "best practice" programs, you didn't always get a focused plan.

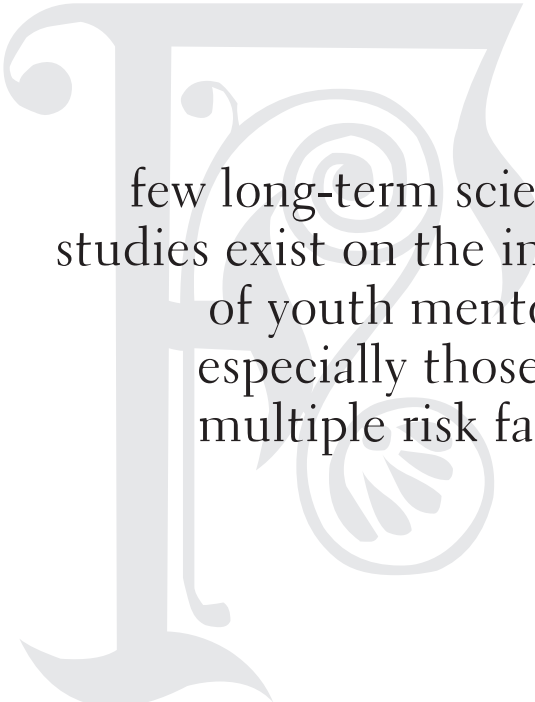
Hutchins: What are best practices based upon?

Bolstad: Best practices represent an intervention model that appears to be viable based upon anecdotal or informal results. Sometimes there are even fairly careful data collected confirming the model as effective. However, the research seldom meets the standard of randomized assignment of subjects to the intervention group and a control group for a more research-based result that generates more confidence. Often, all we have is "best practices."

When the best practice model appears promising, one needs to take the evaluation up to a higher standard (randomized, control studies). With FOTC, we have long known we have a promising, best practices model. At every stage of the way, we have generated data and research to help us evaluate our program and adjust to its results. Now, our engagement in this randomized control study over the long term will provide clearer information about our practices and their outcomes, and frankly, the kind of seal of approval that funding organizations require. This is very exciting.

King-Guffey: Yes. But, as good as Friends of the Children is at learning and evaluation, what sets the organization apart is your deep commitment to the kids.

Campbell: For us, that is the key. In the context of a long-term relationship, Friends provide unconditional positive regard and high expectations to help our kids fulfill their potential. Friends love their children and youth. What I decided was that before I died, I wanted to see one's child's life changed for the better, instead of just talking about it. What is most rewarding to me is that 15 years later, our organization really works, and because of it, our children are thriving. 



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