



***.A Matter of
BALANCE***

by

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**Balancing Compassion
and Accountability:**

**Reflections on a Homeboy
Industries Visit**

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[Note: For brevity, I will use the abbreviations "HI" for Homeboy Industries, "Fr. G" for Father Gregory Boyle, "homies" for both the homies & homegirls served and employed by HI, and "CCs" for collaborative courts.]

The Beyond the Bench (BTB) workshop and keynote plenary speaker will be Father Gregory Boyle (Fr. G), author of *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion*, and founder/executive director of Los Angeles-based Homeboy Industries (HI), the largest gang intervention and re-entry program in the country. Widely recognized as a national model, Fr. G's Homeboy Industries started out serving the Boyle Heights community, which is comprised of the largest public housing developments west of the Mississippi and, at the time, had the highest concentration of gang activity in the city. Today, HI serves thousands of clients each year from all over Los Angeles, offering employment in its various economic development enterprises (Homeboy Bakery, Homeboy Silkscreen & Embroidery, Homeboy/Homegirl Merchandise, and Homegirl Café & Catering) as well as case management, education, legal services, mental health care, tattoo removal, and a variety of other free programs.

Recently I had the opportunity to visit HI in preparation for developing the plenary presentation and a related gang workshop that Fr. G will deliver. I would like to share my reflections on that visit—which opened my eyes to the similarities in challenges, interventions and approaches that Homeboy Industries and our family/juvenile/collaborative courts take in working with vulnerable populations and individual behavioral change.

Organically Grown

On the visit, I experienced Homeboy Industries as an equal opportunity employer and service provider where the line between service provider and service recipient is purposely blurred. In fact, most staff come in the door as clients, often quickly becoming staff, which right away breaks down the "us-them" categorization. It's clear that Fr. G has created a culture where HI staff stand behind and beside, not before and apart from, those seeking help—something Fr. G advocates for all service providers. Further, it's apparent that those who walk through the HI doors receive:

- Respect as a unique and valued individual
- Understanding of their attitude
- Accountability for their behavior
- Compassion for what they've endured and are yet to endure
- Second (third, fourth, fifth, sixth, etc.) chances

Homeboy Industries—unlike Athena springing full form from the head of Zeus—did not come to life in, and take shape immediately from, the initial thoughts of Fr. G. He walked and bicycled the streets, heard the common request from homies for jobs, and first thought getting local employers to hire them was the answer. When there weren't enough employers who would hire gang members/released felons, proactively he became the employer, creating his own nonprofit job site. Then the real work of identifying the deeper issues and multiple challenges of his new workers began, and present-day HI began to take shape organically from the streets—in the words of the popular song, “Rose in Spanish Harlem,” “growing in the street right up through the concrete”—one business unit and support service at a time.

Stages of Change

Fr. G has said the homies that HI serves “will give up on us before we give up on them.” From what I've learned about behavioral change from the book *Changing for Good* (CFG) and other sources, it would be more appropriate to say that homies won't give up on HI but on themselves—but that HI with understanding and compassion will always welcome them back.

The book *Changing for Good* notes that any activity you initiate to help modify your thinking, feeling, or behavior is a change process involving six stages: precontemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, maintenance and termination. On the visit, I repeatedly heard stories from staff about homies (and they themselves) progressively working through each of these stages. For those fortunate enough to reach the maintenance stage, relapse is always possible, if not probable. HI is wise enough to keep the welcome mat out for those who do, which is emblematic of programs successfully dealing with vulnerable populations and individuals with multiple deep-seated issues.

Fr. G and HI instill hope and belief in those they serve. Homies must believe that they can have and truly deserve a better life and, most importantly, that they don't believe the demons in their heads that often say they don't deserve a better life for themselves (and their children, if they are parents). Several conversations during the visit demonstrated how difficult it can be to modify their behavior and poor self-image, and underscored the amount of time true change can take.

As an example, one higher-up HI manager spoke of the multiple interactions he had with Fr. G and HI from his pre-teen years onward. Although he eventually became a HI program manager, he told us that he relapsed (using/dealing) right at the time of his greatest success (awarding of a grant for the HI program he headed). Fr. Boyle and HI stood beside this manager, welcoming him back when ready. He's back, more motivated and committed than ever. I also learned that HI has stopped selecting an “Employee of the Month” because absences from work would increase and work performance would deteriorate for those receiving the award. HI has devised alternative ways to acknowledge effort and reinforce positive behavior.

For the HI employees who spoke with me, the “termination” stage of change is not yet a reality. *Changing for Good* defines termination as the “ultimate goal for all changers. Here, your former addiction or problem will no longer present any temptation or threat; your behavior will never return, and you will have complete confidence that you can cope without fear of relapse.” An HI drug counselor and former addict himself noted that even

when “clean and sober”, one can still crave the “rush” of both the gang life and drug-taking and that he personally still finds himself being triggered and has to practice restraint. An HI tour guide, a former heroin addict, has repeatedly relapsed (as recently as this past April) and has been on and off HI’s staff for a number of years. HI has welcomed her back each time.

Personal transformation is gradual and not without relapse, and programs offering the hope of transformation must include a way back for those who have relapsed so that they may restart and recommit as many times as needed. Fr. G calls it having “patience with the slow work of God.”

Problem-Solving: Homeboy Industries & Collaborative Courts

From my limited knowledge of both Homeboy Industries and California’s Collaborative Courts (I would include family and juvenile court in the collaborative/problem-solving court category), it appears to me that they are on similar tracks in their problem-solving approaches. The accountability and sanctions are firmly in place for those who “offend/cross the line”, but the incentives for individuals to transform and lead better lives (leaving both HI and the courts behind as a by-product) are the true focus of operations. Similarly, in their problem-solving approaches, HI and CCs work on an individual basis, one person or one family at a time.

Rather than imposing fines or sending offenders to jail, CCs—like HI—employ an inclusive and non-adversarial approach, reach out and connect offenders/customers to services in an effort to help them transform their lives, refrain from re-offending, and clean up their criminal records and past (for those CCs dealing with criminal issues). This requires case management, and cooperation/collaboration among a diverse array of providers/partners and a variety of programs, including individual therapy, domestic violence prevention, substance abuse treatment, and parenting classes, among others.

Similar to HI, which evolved gradually over time into its present-day form, CCs have evolved gradually—in nature and name—over time in California and the U.S taking diverse forms in their various communities: drug, homeless, peer, domestic violence, mental health, community, and juvenile justice courts. In spite of proven track records/documentated success in 1) working with vulnerable populations, 2) decreasing public expenditures, and 3) increasing public safety, support and funding for operations can vary and sometimes be a challenge for HI and CCs.

The HI-CCs similarities are evident in the National Center and Justice Management Institute studies that identified several practices common to collaborative justice courts in California:

- Proactive, problem-solving orientation of the judge/ongoing judicial supervision/return to court appearances (read: Fr. G and HI case managers and workplace supervisors providing support, guidance and accountability, and welcoming back those who relapse but choose to return and recommit to the organization’s rules and code of behavior)
- Team-based, non-adversarial approach
- Immediacy of response/sanctions and rewards

- Community involvement
- Participant accountability
- Integration of social services/coordination of related cases (read: HI's case management and one-stop employment & support services environment)

Two homegirls from the Homeboy Industries staff will be joining Father Greg when he presents at the Beyond the Bench Conference on December 15, 2011. I hope that you will be able to attend the conference.

For more information on Father Boyle and Homeboy Industries:

- Homeboy Industries: <http://homeboy-industries.org/>
- *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion* book:
 - Amazon: <http://www.amazon.com/Tattoos-Heart-Power-Boundless-Compassion/dp/1439153027>
 - Alibris: <http://www.alibris.com/search/books/qwork/12226662/used/Tattoos%20on%20the%20Heart%3A%20The%20Power%20of%20Boundless%20Compassion>