Roca: Strengthening youth at the broken places.

***Roca**, a youth development grantee, serves very high-risk youth in the Boston area. Their young people are in gangs, on the streets, and in and out of school. Through relentless outreach, strong relationship-building and programs that build skills for economic independence, Roca helps youth change their behavior and shift their life trajectories. **Julio**, a program participant, shares how Roca's unflagging support transformed him and impacted his life path.*

Before Roca, I was in and out of school, a loud, obnoxious kid. I was always in the streets, doing drugs, stealing big merchandise from stores, selling them to get my drugs, and never in my house. When I was little, my father really wasn't around, and my mom was always working. I was just bad. Really bad.

When I used to bother to go to school at all, I'd try to find a way to get suspended or sent home. One time, when I got sent to the dean's office, he knew, so he wouldn't send me home no more. He said, "Listen, in order for you to leave this place today, it's in handcuffs." So I left in handcuffs. Because what I did was push everything off the dean's desk in one big crash. And that was destruction of school property. So the police came, handcuffed me and brought me to the station.

I first found out about Roca when I saw Essencia, Roca's dance team. I thought, "Damn, I want to dance, I want to be like that." So I came to Roca and asked about the dance group, and met Angie (youth worker). I came to Roca to dance, but they were always trying to help me. I told them, "Don't bother me," but they kept bothering me. I used to come to Roca high on drugs or as drunk as possible and just didn't care. Angie would try to talk to me, but I would say, "Listen you aren't my mother. I never had parents before; it is me, myself and I." I was 13 years old.

Then I had a wake-up call. Two wake-up calls. One, I was sent to the hospital because I overdosed myself. And I got sexually assaulted. That's when I really needed help. I was sent to a mental institution for two weeks because I tried to kill myself in front of my counselor. But Angie came and visited me. And she's the one who picked me up when I got discharged. When I saw that Angie came all that way to pick me up in the hospital, that was when I knew I was going to be okay. After all those years of me telling her "no," she still wants me to do good.

When I came back to Roca, Essencia had a circle. We talked and everyone was telling me that they cared for me. I was just sitting there, crying. I thought, "Damn, this is what I was blocking out." Since I was on drugs so much I really wasn't paying attention to the support and advice. My mind was telling me drugs, drugs, drugs, but my body was saying help, help, help.

To this day, I still can't believe I graduated! I really doubted myself because my mom and my dad told me that I was not going to do it. They didn't do it, all my sisters never graduated so why would I? But I did! I actually graduated!

Now, I am going to college to study social services and choreography. Then I can work at Roca as a youth worker, and some day open my own non-profit dance studio to help those kids who are going through the same thing that I was. I can tell them, "I can help you; I can't change you, but I can help you and help you make smart choices." Kids look up to me now. I want to be able to give them whatever they need, just like Roca gave me.

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