

NiNa

Young Women's Leadership Programme

*Reflections on The
Transitioning of Young
Women from State Care in
Trinidad and Tobago*

Reflections from Cindy Gonzales – Nina Participant –

Q. What were your thoughts when it was nearing your time to leave St Jude's Home for Girls?

A. So for me when I was leaving I didn't put much of a thought into going back I was just happy to be leaving.

Q. What was your first year like after leaving St Jude's Home for Girls ?

A. My first year actually wasn't that bad I had the support of the Nina group they helped a lot, miss Akosua helped me to become employed, both her and Miss Patricia helped me to attain a place to live as well as aiding in other financial areas where they could have.

Q. What would you like to see put in place for ladies leaving?

A. I would like to see educational opportunities ensuring their access to resources scholarships ect that may aid them in pursuing a higher education or a skill for their development.

As well as housing a safe place that's affordable.

I would like them to have follow up support. Even after leaving the various institutions a hand picked group that specifically understand what it's like to transition what it's like to come back into society one that can give further guidance counseling ect because those persons themselves would have know already overcame that hurdle.

Q. How long were you at St Jude's Home for Girls?

A. I was at St. Jude's for two years roughly.

Q. What kind of support was most helpful to you after leaving?

A. After leaving there is no specific support that was helpful all the support I received helped me one way or the other, they all worked hand in hand.

Q. What were the toughest challenges?

The toughest challenge for me would have been my Identity and self discovery process it was me learning about my purpose and my value it was me ignoring the negative self talk after mistakes you know.

Q. What else do you want us to know?

Firstly I would like to express my gratitude to the sponsors and Coordinators of this amazing program y'all have helped not only me but a lot of young ladies into smooth transitioning, you guys have gone above and beyond to ensure the young ladies that would have passed through this program. Know that there is hope and life after being in an institution. So to that I say Keep up the great work.

Secondly to any young lady that may read this question in particular of the feedback I would like to let you know that it is okay to make a mistake many people may not agree with this statement but I made it anyway, it is okay if you mess up to feel how you may feel. What is not okay though is not learning from your mistakes. What is not okay is making the same mistake beyond 2 times. What is not okay is when you feel disappointed in yourself you allow yourself to sink deeper into making more mistakes because you feel like you already made one.



My name is Cindy Gonzales and I too was once in your shoes. I too left an institution and I had made mistakes even after leaving the institution, even after having the support.

But I corrected those mistakes and I learned that there is always a choice to be made.

You are the author of your life; people may want better for you, but you have to want it just as bad or even more for yourself.



NiNa

Young Women's Leadership Programme

About NiNa

The NiNa Young Women's Leadership Programme (NiNa) provides financial literacy, entrepreneurial skills development and self-management tools to build self value in young women within the state care system and particular chosen schools in Trinidad and Tobago. NiNa has a transition programme for young ladies who leave the state care at the age of 18 to reintegrate them back into mainstream society and has worked with girls from the St. Jude's Home for Girls to support their overall development.

The Nina Transition Program aims to provide resources networks, safe physical spaces, personal healing, growth and development and education resources for young women aging out of State Care. The likelihood of these young women disappearing, becoming statistics or perpetuating the cycles of abuse and neglect that they were exposed to is high. The vision is to support their transition in LOVE and in SERVICE.

CHALLENGES & FINDINGS

THE TRANSITION PROGRAMME

The Transition Programme aims to provide resource networks, safe physical and psychological spaces, personal healing, growth and development and will facilitate education for young women ageing out of state care. The likelihood of these women disappearing, becoming statistics or perpetuating the cycles of abuse and neglect that they were exposed too is high. The aim is to support the transition.

Working hand in hand The NiNa Programme, through its work with young ladies within care homes of the State is determined to ensure that Trinidad and Tobago have a cadre of young women who can take up the mantle of leadership, and empowered citizens to continue on the legacy left by our past leaders to make our country a better one that we found it. We continue to expand by including other students from schools such as the Belmont Secondary and Bishop Anstey and Trinity East and include mentors from university and other tertiary institutions.

Youth who are transitioning to adulthood need to have well developed self-esteem and self-efficacy skills.

The transition arm of the NiNa program emerged after having mentored young women who resided at the St Jude's Home. Upon approaching their time to leave the St Jude's Home at the age of eighteen (18), these young women began showing signs of self-sabotaging behavior, fear, and anxiety including reversing any progress made in preparation for entering the 'real world'. Additionally, there were cases where the young women who left St Jude's at age eighteen (18) who were part of the NiNa mentorship programme requested financial support, and resources to assist with them navigating their new lives outside the St. Jude environment. Resources requested and required included housing, employment, money, and emotional support.

**CHALLENGES AND
RECOMMENDATIONS
CREATING QUALITY CITIZENS
AUTOMATICALLY LEAD TO
BUILDING A BETTER
TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO.
IT TAKES A VILLAGE...**

Youth who are transitioning to adulthood need to have well developed self-esteem and self efficacy skills that equip them to manage relationships in multiple contexts, including education and employment settings, as well as with friends and family members. Often, youth in the state care system have lived through multiple traumas and disruptive events by the time they begin their transition to adulthood. This can include abuse and/or neglect, lack of continuity in education, and an array of losses of relationships (e.g., friends, family, and/or siblings).

Their life experiences can create additional problems resulting in mental illness, substance abuse issues, and a lack of confidence. These challenges impact their emotional and social development as they transition into adulthood. Research points to the significance of this stage and highlights the importance of positive, supportive relationships in the context of the continuing development of the adolescent brain.

What the NiNa program has learnt over the years is that, ideally, the young women leaving St.Jude's at age eighteen should have a place to call home upon emancipation from the child welfare system, with connections to caring adults who can provide support, including helping them access necessary resources and services. Research suggests that youth in state care who have natural mentors during adolescence have improved young adult outcomes.

Connections to non-parental adults through informal mentoring is reported to enhance the outcomes of foster care youth in education/employment, psychological well-being, and physical health. Youth who had the support of a mentor also demonstrated a decreased participation in unhealthy behaviors, such as unprotected sexual activity, alcohol and substance abuse, and delinquent activities.



**RESEARCH ON THE DEVELOPING BRAINS OF
ADOLESCENTS AND YOUNG ADULTS POINTS TO
THE IMPORTANCE OF UNDERSTANDING THE
“VULNERABILITY OF TEENS”**

**WHEN YOUTH "AGE OUT" OF THE CHILD
WELFARE SYSTEM WITH LIMITED
CONNECTIONS OR
WITHOUT THE SUPPORT OF POSITIVE,
CARING ADULTS, THEY MAY HAVE AN
INCREASED RISK OF
FACING THESE CHALLENGES:**

1. Lack of adequate elementary and secondary education. Youth emancipating from state care typically face many obstacles during their educational journeys, obstacles that can hinder their ability to graduate on time or receive CSEC passes. Young ladies within the St. Jude's Home may have missed many days or even months of school. Participants within NiNa have been placed in programs such as Civilian Conservation Corp (CCC), Servol Life Center and MIC-IT Institute of Technology. While these programs provide an opportunity to build skills, it has been observed that for the majority of jobs, the requirement is a full Caribbean Examination Council (CXC) certificate, bringing the young ladies to an immediate block in their search for employment or further education.

2. Unstable housing or homelessness - Within the NiNa cohort of young ladies, upon turning eighteen, at least 40% of the young women had no stable place to call home. St Jude's played a role in securing housing for some of them through placement at hostels, the others who were placed in the care of relatives, after a few months, found themselves looking for a place to live due to poor adjustment to living with unfamiliar family members, being asked to leave, and getting involved in unhealthy relationships. The result is them being left without a stable place to live. Studies show a correlation between a history of state care and homelessness as well as the impact of emancipation from state care on young adults. More than one-fifth of state care youth experience homelessness for at least one day within a year of emancipation.

3. Problems with physical health, behavioral health, and general wellbeing. Young ladies leaving state care at the age of eighteen within NiNa without support and stability have encountered health problems including hospitalization due to illness, accident, injury, drug use, or emotional problems. There have also been cases of mental health disorders including depression, social phobia, alcohol abuse, alcohol dependence, substance abuse, or substance dependence.

4. Lack of access to health care. Young ladies within the programme who are not legal residents of Trinidad and Tobago have encountered challenges in accessing health care at the hospitals and health centres.

5. Lack of employment and job training. Former residents of state care may have limited work histories and on-the-job training opportunities. Many lack the skills required to hold a steady job, or the incentive and academic preparation to attend a university program. Ladies who do obtain employment may find only jobs with lower paying wages, which makes them vulnerable to poverty, and the inability to establish complete independence. The lack of employment, independence and limited skills also leads to being exploited usually by older men who provide a false sense of security to the young ladies leading them to vulnerable living situations including gender based violence, unsuitable housing and even exploitation via prostitution and other criminal activities.

WHEN YOUTH "AGE OUT" OF THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM WITH LIMITED CONNECTIONS OR WITHOUT THE SUPPORT OF POSITIVE, CARING ADULTS, THEY MAY HAVE AN INCREASED RISK OF FACING THESE CHALLENGES:

6. Lack of social connections. Permanent relationships with positive adults are a powerful protective factor against negative outcomes and can provide critical support to youth as they transition to adulthood. Youth in state care often rely on adults who have provided professional supports through their roles in the child welfare system. Although an emancipating youth may desire autonomy from adult supervision, the transition is more successful when he or she has a strong connection to a trusted adult supporter. Establishing this relationship prior to emancipation is important, albeit not easy, given that many youths have had turbulent experiences with adults in the past.

7. Justice system involvement. Youth emancipating from state care may be at greater risk of becoming involved with the criminal justice system due to lack of support networks, low employment skills, and unstable living arrangements. Within the NiNa program there have been thus far two young ladies entering the justice system post-St Jude's.



RECOMMENDATIONS

At the SECOND SESSION OF THE ELEVENTH PARLIAMENT (2016/2017) on the Treatment of Child Offenders at the Youth Training Centre, St. Michael's Interim Rehabilitation Centre for Young Male Offenders and St. Jude's Interim Rehabilitation Centre for Young Female Offenders Joint Select Committee – Human Rights Equality and Diversity, the recommendations for St Jude's also touched on the importance of a transition program. The Committee recommends that remedial teaching methods adopted by St. Jude's and YTC need to be tailored to improve and encourage the transition into other mainstream education/vocational institutions upon exit of the institution.

Many of the girls are not ready to leave the facility, however, must leave at eighteen (18) years, according to the law. Many of the girls housed at the facility do not receive visits or phone calls from their parents.

Many of the young ladies cannot return to their homes upon leaving the facility. As such, the staff tries to assist by finding rooms at the Salvation Army Hostel and half way homes.

**MANY OF THE GIRLS
ARE NOT READY TO
LEAVE THE FACILITY,
HOWEVER, MUST LEAVE
AT EIGHTEEN (18)
YEARS,
ACCORDING TO THE
LAW**

NINA RECOMMENDS:

1. Introduction of a mandatory transition programme to the young ladies who are within six to eight months of leaving state care. The program is to include life skills training: for example how to set up a bank account, how to apply and receive national identification; on the job training; and relevant social skills.
2. Linkages to safe and seamless transition spaces – spaces to include a safe and secure place to live, mentors, and peer counsellors. Different types of therapy ought to be made available and mandatory.
3. Partnerships with Government agencies such as Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, Family Planning, On the Job Training Programme, NEDCO, YTEPP, MIC Institute of Technology and other Technical Vocational Training Centres
4. Work in partnership with the Private Sector to support job training and mentorship opportunities.
5. There are many abandoned Government houses and quarters throughout Trinidad. Transition homes can be set up using these properties, particularly the ones in the areas of Trinidad that are conducive to holistic living and healing- Chaguaramas, Couva, Point A Pierre, Beach Camp.

Young adults exiting state care need emotional support as they navigate the transition to independent adulthood

I Love Everything about the programme.

I do not, not like anything about the programme!!

What I like about this is Everything, What I don't like is the food because it is too healthy.

What I like about NINA:

- I love the effort given to help young ladies.
- I love the yoga, it makes me accept that I am here, alive and well. It makes me appreciate life more and myself with every deep breath I take or hug I give to myself.
- I love that there's always something new; it can be the environment, activities, people, lesson. I love that there's always something new to learn or experience.

I Love everything about this program. The activities, The energy, The love we receive. All the different places we go. Nature, water flowers, peace. About the food I understand why we eat healthy so I don't mind but we need Juice.♥ I love how I am able to laugh, be free and have fun. I love how we are able to grow and become stronger & wiser in all aspects of life.

Young

I Love Everything about the program

- the people
- places
- Conversations that are kept
- Food



I love the way this program inspires you to be a better version of yourself.

I love the inspiration & motivational things they talk to us about

I love how this program help me become and "eye opener" towards certain aspects in life.

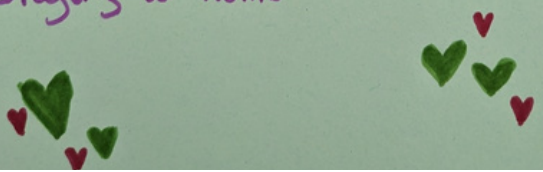
What I like about NiNa



The sessions of Yoga, Even though it a lot sometimes it relieves tensions built up for weeks and makes my body feel alive & energized

The sessions with Sonji are an ~~enlighten~~ enlightening experience though I know why I do the things I do I get food for thought to help my growth

The different spacious environmental setting helps me feel relaxed and its also a pleasure I get to go to many places rather than staying at home





THANK YOU



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