



WHY ARE WE STALKING YOU? TO KEEP YOU OUT OF JAIL

TEDx Talk by Molly Baldwin, Roca founder & CEO

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Molly Baldwin is addressing one of America's most painful issues: how to keep young men in urban communities from going to jail again and again? Roca, an organization she started in Massachusetts three decades ago, developed in intervention model that engages the highest-risk young people, those who don't even consider change. Through relentless outreach, a "get-your-life-together school", and wrapping around these young men, Roca helps them stay out of harm's way and go to work. A data-driven organization, Roca runs the nation's largest Pay for Success project and proves every day that change is possible, even for the highest risk young people.

The talk will be available at www.tedxpennsylvaniaavenue.com by the end of February.

(The talk begins with a 1:43 minute video of young people and police officers sharing their experiences of Roca's "relentless outreach").

Yes, we are all those things: relentless, annoying, persistent – really we are a pain in the ass! But these guys in the video know, and we know, that this is the only way to reach them.

People are afraid of them. They are in gangs. On drugs. In and out of jail. Every criminal justice system and politician blames them for causing the most harm – to themselves, their families, and our communities – and tragically, this can be true.

Whether we understand why or why not, whether we like it or not, something has gone terribly wrong for so many of the young people in our country. In Chicago and Baltimore, in New York and New Orleans, too many of them have learned that violence is the only way to live, that shooting gains respect, that guns are normal, and that dying young is just what happens.

For these young people, 29 years ago and a day, we started Roca.

We started in a small city near Boston called Chelsea. But our story is not only about how to reach these young people – it is also about fundamentally changing ourselves. It is about learning what it takes to be truly worthy of working with them. It is about sticking with the ones who want nothing to do with us, being clear that relapse is part of change, and using data.

The beginning was actually a lot of fun. We did outreach, organizing, leadership development, programs, and events. And I hope we did more good than bad – but like most organizations, we had no idea.

At some point we knew 100's of gang members, and they would come to Roca, take classes, sit in circles, feel good about themselves – and then, go home, deal drugs and shoot people.

This was not the point.

We needed a big time change. We brought the organization to a halt, did some research, looked at our failures, and focused on what we did well. We were painfully honest.

We knew that the world is full of great programs for young people and even young people in trouble who show up: “come do your GED and go to training every Tuesday and we’ll teach you to be a chef.” But we also knew that no one really works with the young people who are not ready, willing or able to go to a program or keep a job. Those who never show up.

They are angry, they are left out, they are depressed, and they often cause harm – and no one wants to be with them.

This became the whole purpose of our work.

Someone walks into Roca ready to participate, we show them the door. Run from us, tell us to go to hell – you’re in!

So first, we get their name and maybe an address. We go to courts and jails, we ask the police for the 50 young people they arrest the most, and we roam the streets.

We call what we do “relentless outreach” – it’s really stalking, but that’s not legal.

We go look for the people on our lists over and over, knock on their doors, and we don’t even care if they like us. We brush off the FUs and find them even when they’re hiding from us. We don’t really put a GPS in your drink, but we do go again and again.

Our youth workers are from jail or Yale, and they are awesome and committed in either case. We train them that “no” just means that they should try again, and that being relentless is the key the job.

Only then, after knocking on the door a million times, the real work can begin. For all of us change only happens in the context of a relationship; because we all need help, we all need a push, and we all need support. So we work to build relationships to build real trust, and to invite them into new skills and opportunities.

The challenge, however, is that we spend time with people who don’t show up, so working on education and job skills becomes an interesting task.

We have essentially built a get-your-life-together school. We run educational classes and pre-vocational programs, and we drag young people out of bed. They can come for a day or for a week, get mad at us, threaten us, get high, disappear, and we go back and get them again.

Some young people are in such dangerous gang relationships that they can't even come into programming, so we take it to their homes with a roaming teacher or provide a workforce readiness lesson on the corner!

They don't have to be at Roca every day and remember if they show up every day in the beginning they should be at a different program or a job. We use data to learn about change over time, understand relapse, and help young people see that they can learn to show up, gain skills and go to work.

We are always trying, to get better at one thing or another.

First it was learning how to teach young people to hold a job. We started running work crews, where we pay the minimum wage, and teach young people to learn how to go to work for 60 days in a row, which we think is a good idea before we place them in a job outside of Roca. It takes them an average of a year-and-a-half, and losing their work slot 5-7 times before they get to the 60 days. This is where building in relapse really help. They need a safe place to learn, fail and succeed because they never had it.

Next, it became painfully clear that we had to figure out how to work with the police to help keep the young people alive. This was no easy thing as we started out as the traditional street outreach group, believing in "us vs. them" and "love the kids and hate the cops!"

But we need to learn. And now we love the cops – we believe that everyone belongs– so everyone belongs! Even the cops!

We build relationships with every institution which is either in the lives of our young people, or should be – even if they don't like us. We are relentless with them too, so that together we can wrap around young people. Like the Captain says, once we get ahold of you, we don't let go.

Our most recent obsession is helping young people learn how to identify and manage their emotions, so they can learn to think differently to act differently. We worked with Mass General Hospital, and stripped down all the science about cognitive-behavioral therapy to 10 core emotional regulation skills. They have numbers and funny names like "fill your tank" and "feel your feelings", but we've learned that simple is better. So we teach the young people and ourselves these skills, and are hoping to teach the cops!

We are also data nuts. We believe we owe it to our young people. So we track them and we track ourselves, to figure out if what we are doing is actually helpful.

In fact, we have gotten so good at data, that we are one of the nation's first and largest pay for success contracts. The project will evaluate our ability to help young people stay out of prison, as compared to a random group of similar young people, five years later. And because putting people in jail is so expensive, it could save the government a lot of money.

This project is financed – yes, I said financed – by investors such as Goldman Sachs and the Laura and John Arnold Foundation. If the evaluator says we’re successful after five years, the government pays, and the investors get their money back. It’s a new way to do business, and this is no small thing – we’re talking about over 1,000 young men and potentially saving the government millions. It is both a great honor and responsibility to do this work.

The data also shows that we’re onto something. When Harvard looked at our numbers, they found that in three years, Roca reduced future incarceration by 35% as compared to a similar group of young people and that Roca was on track for a 65% reduction over five years. These young people can change!

The data isn’t just data, our numbers are real lives!

Last fall, one of our youth workers got a call from Joe, a young person he chased in the streets and in and out of prison, for almost two years. Joe told his youth worker, “hey, this Roca thing actually works!”.

He shared that he had been in the park the night before with his girlfriend, when another young person looked at him from across the park. Joe took it as big time disrespect and called one of his friends to bring him his backpack, his mask and a gun.

And then Joe says – “I’m sitting at the park and thinking ‘skill 8 - flex your thinking’, maybe this guy didn’t even see me; and then ‘skill 9 - problem solving, maybe shooting him isn’t such a good idea.”

And Joe decided not to shoot.

He did not shoot.

That moment is worth all the years of relentless outreach, every change we had to make, every painful moment and every difficult conversation with young people, our partners and ourselves.

When I look back at the last 30 years and forward to the next 10, I know that change is possible. And change means changing ourselves first, so we can help the young people change. And they can change.

We have to stop pretending that it’s OK that so many young men of color are murdered.

We have to stop pretending that jail is the solution.

We have to stop getting in each other’s way as institutions and programs, and we have to start using data to do things that matter.

And we’d better be relentless, and drive each other crazy until we get it right.

Because every young person, no matter how angry, matters. They are our children.

Thank you.