



# Life. As Told By Youth

Overview Brief

## Project Overview

*Life. As Told By Youth* is the Colorado Division of Child Support Services' (DCSS) implementation of the Charting a Course for Economic Mobility and Responsible Parenting Grant, sponsored by the Office of Child Support Services (OCSS). The purpose of the grant is to engage the child support program in encouraging teens and young adults to employ the success sequence and providing young parents with vital information on the legal and financial responsibilities of parenting and the services that are available to support them. The project began in September 2020 and focuses on the creation of original media content that is written, produced, and acted in by Colorado youth producers. The overarching goal of the project is to encourage youth to follow the success sequence through the creation and distribution of original media content.

# Success Sequence

The success sequence refers to a series of milestones that are associated with escaping poverty and achieving economic mobility. These milestones are typically described as:

- ◇ obtaining at least a high school diploma
- ◇ gaining full-time employment
- ◇ entering into a committed relationship before having children<sup>1</sup>

In a survey of youths and young adults who participated in the *Life. As Told By Youth* curriculum development (n=21), 100% of participants indicated that the following factors will determine when they would like to have children, suggesting strong alignment with success sequence components:

- ◇ Being in a committed relationship
- ◇ Having enough money to support a child
- ◇ Finishing one's education
- ◇ Having a good job

Despite the intentions of youth to follow the success sequence, there are several factors that may interfere with adherence to the success sequence including substance abuse, unplanned pregnancy, and failure to complete a high school education.<sup>2</sup> However, research suggests that individuals who follow the success sequence are less likely to experience poverty and are more likely to be economically self-sufficient.<sup>3</sup> *Life. As Told By Youth's* overall approach is to encourage youth to follow the success sequence by identifying barriers that prevent youth from successfully navigating this path.

## ACHIEVE SUCCESS



Marriage Before Having a Child

Secure Employment



Finish Education



## Project Description

*Life. As Told By Youth* is a four-year demonstration project that began in September 2020 and will end in September 2024. The program engages youth in a transformational process of learning and exploration, leading to the creation of original media content. The media content draws on the youth creators' lived experiences of poverty, as well as their family backgrounds. The content is then shared on social media and encourages youth viewers to visit online resources meant to aid them in achieving future economic self-sufficiency, including information on child support, paternity establishment, healthy relationships, responsible parenting, and sexual health.

*Life. As Told By Youth* began with a curriculum development video shoot in February 2022, featuring interviews with a wide range of Colorado youth. The interviews led to a robust video collection of perspectives and experiences on family life, sexual health, intentions to pursue education, plans to parent or not to parent, and ways the youths hope to either emulate the positive parenting they received or avoid maladaptive parenting practices. These interviews were then edited into topical videos featured in the curriculum.

Over the next year and a half, *Life. As Told By Youth* participants completed two implementations of small, group-level interventions, which included the development of two short films with the following partners:

- ◇ The Center at Lookout Mountain (CALM), a Division of Youth Services facility for incarcerated youth. The group of 12 young men aged between 18 and 20 years old convened in June 2022, and the premier of their film occurred in April 2023.
- ◇ The Matthews House, a Fort Collins nonprofit organization serving at-risk youth and families. Nine youths participated in the implementation, which began in June 2023. Four of the youths identified as female, four as male, and one as non-binary. The youths' ages ranged from 14 to 20, with an average age of 16. Their film premiered in October 2023.



The intensity of it is a big part of the magic of it, you are together, and you're talking about really uncomfortable stuff... It's almost like being in a fever dream sometimes. And I think it's a bonding experience for the kids.

- THE MATTHEWS HOUSE STAFF MEMBER



Whenever I see my friends' parents... they always talk to their kid, and they... always... care about them and... make sure they know what they're doing at all times... make sure they're safe at all times. [The parents] care about... their interests and stuff. **It's hard to describe because I've never experienced it.**

- YOUTH INVOLVED IN CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

I would say that my mom made me who I am today because my mom's an independent mom, and she just **taught me a lot of things that I needed to know to become strong and be brave and just know that I'm loved.** And she raised four kids, which is a lot, but she did it on her own.

- THE MATTHEWS HOUSE YOUTH PARTICIPANT

What kept her going was her kids. She knew that she had to be tough for them and provide for them and **she wouldn't leave her kids by themselves on the streets.** And she would do whatever she could and just support them as much as she could.

- THE MATTHEWS HOUSE YOUTH PARTICIPANT



## The Participants

The young people who participated in developing the video content used in the curriculum, as well as youths who engaged in the *Life. As Told By Youth* interventions, described many severe adverse childhood experiences and negative social determinants. Though not an exhaustive list, these experiences included the following:

- ◇ Poverty
- ◇ Child welfare involvement and foster care
- ◇ Parental absence
- ◇ Parental substance abuse
- ◇ Parental incarceration
- ◇ Youth incarceration

The youths' experiences embody the complex barriers that youth may face on the path to self-sufficiency. Research suggests that the greatest obstacle for youth meeting each of the milestones of the success sequence is unsupportive or dysfunctional family influences.<sup>4</sup> Given the lived experiences of the youths in this project, their voices are especially relevant. Their lived experiences allowed for a deep and challenging exploration of issues such as responsible parenting and the cycle of poverty, resulting in the opportunity to create media messages that are honest, raw, and relevant to youth with similar backgrounds.

# The Curriculum

The *Life. As Told By Youth* curriculum addresses economic mobility, or the ability to improve an individual's economic status, by first building participants' understanding of the cycle of poverty, or the pattern in which poor families remain in poverty for many generations.<sup>5</sup> The curriculum includes five modules that can be adapted to work with any population and delivered in any manner that works for the youth or agency. The curriculum intervention can be implemented with an emphasis on any aspect of the success sequence. For example, one component of the curriculum is the "Wheel of Life" activity where participants engage in a simulation that builds comprehension about the cycle of poverty and other social determinants that either interfere with or enhance economic mobility. Although creating an original film is at the center of this project, participants can be encouraged to make any digital content that demonstrates what they learned in the process. Core elements of the curriculum are discussed in further detail below.



## Positive Youth Development

In all aspects, *Life. As Told By Youth* is grounded in the principles of positive youth development. Though frameworks vary, positive youth development typically involves a strengths-based approach aimed at promoting positive behavior and reducing risky behavior. Research has shown that interventions using positive youth development may lead to improvement in academic achievement and psychological adjustment (e.g., enhanced self-perception and reduced emotional distress).<sup>6</sup> In *Life. As Told By Youth*, the use of positive youth development includes not only engaging youth in skill building and the decision-making necessary to develop assets and personal agency, but also offering robust opportunities for youth to make meaningful contributions within a supportive environment.

Essential to the use of positive youth development, *Life. As Told By Youth* draws on youth voice at every stage of implementation, including:

- ◆ Embedding youth perspective in the curriculum,
- ◆ Youth-driven message and branding creation,
- ◆ Strengths-based youth engagement with all aspects of film creation, including scripting, set design, acting, and other roles, and
- ◆ Organic distribution of the film by youth.

These *Life. As Told by Youth* curriculum messages stand in stark contrast to other prevention campaigns that are often regarded by young people as judgmental, fear based, or threatening to those whom they are targeted. The *Life. As Told by Youth* curriculum uses the infamous antidrug campaign, "This Is Your Brain on Drugs," which depicts a man cracking an egg into a hot frying pan, as an example of a well-known, fear-based prevention message. The *Life. As Told by Youth* curriculum strives to avoid these fear-based messages.

## MyMediaLife

Central to *Life. As Told By Youth's* small group implementation is the use of MyMediaLife, a positive youth development intervention created by Connected Health Solutions, Inc. The intervention engages a small sample of youth in a comprehensive curriculum on developing messages for new media (i.e., mass communication via digital technology) and the effective use of social marketing to influence other youth's attitudes and behaviors.<sup>7</sup>

MyMediaLife provides the opportunity for youth to engage with new media and explore topics specific to *Life. As Told By Youth*, including an exploration of:

- ◇ poverty
- ◇ early family life
- ◇ obstacles to and resources for responsible parenting
- ◇ healthy relationships
- ◇ reproductive options
- ◇ other issues

MyMediaLife culminates with the youth-led creation of a professionally produced, message-driven short film for distribution through social media and other platforms.

### Evidence-Based Intervention Strategies

*The Life. As Told By Youth* curriculum is also informed by other curricula, including content from Parenting and Paternity Awareness (p.a.p.a.)<sup>8</sup> and engagement strategies from Street Smart<sup>9</sup> and Community Promise.<sup>10</sup> These curricula utilize social learning theory for youth, including participatory skill building activities around solving problems, negotiating relationships, and being aware of and coping with uncomfortable feelings. The curriculum is further informed by DCSS' 2Gen (or whole family) approach to the delivery of child support services, where family well-being is addressed by working with both children and parents together.

I think it's important to have people that... went through the same kind of experience because we're really speaking on that.... poverty cycle. **And we're really trying to show that you can change because we all come from the same thing.**

- CALM PARTICIPANT

Well, I think youth should be ... leading because we have the actual experience. We know ourselves best. And if this is a film directed towards youth, then obviously we're going to be the best at that. We can relate to other people. We've been in these situations that they've been in that they might be going through currently. **So I think it's honestly best because we know what they've been going through so we can best reflect that in the film.**

-THE MATTHEWS HOUSE PARTICIPANT



# The Social Marketing Messages

## The Films

As part of the small group interventions, *Life. As Told By Youth* produced two films, each approximately 15 minutes long, written, produced, and acted in by the youth producers.

**PLEASE JOIN US FOR THE PREMIERE OF**

# WHAT GOT US HERE

A short film conceived, scripted, and produced by young men participating in the Restorative Justice Program at the Colorado Division of Youth Services Campus at Lookout Mountain.

**WEDNESDAY, APRIL 26, 2023**  
**2:45 P.M.**

**THE CAMPUS AT LOOKOUT MOUNTAIN – AUDITORIUM**  
**2901 FORD ST. – GOLDEN, CO 80401**

What Got Us Here follows a young father committed to the Division of Youth Services who, after being shaken by the reveal of a lifelong secret, sets out to overcome the mistakes of his past.

This film was developed in partnership with the Colorado Division of Youth Services and the Colorado Division of Child Support Services, through the Trailblazing: A Youth-Produced Approach to Independence / Life. As Told By Youth Project.

Arrival Instructions: Please arrive a few minutes early to allow for security check-in. Colorado Department of Human Services employees must bring their badges to the venue. All other attendees will need to provide their driver's license as identification. Cell phones and personal items must be stored in a car or a locker at the gatehouse.

RSVPs and questions to:  
Maggie Spain at  
maggie@spearcademver.com

**COLORADO**  
Division of Youth Services  
Office of Children, Youth & Families

**COLORADO**  
Division of Economic Security  
Office of Child Support Services

**LIFE AS TOLD BY YOUTH!**

Funding provided by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families grant #90FD0235-01-01.

*What Got Us Here* follows a young, incarcerated father who, after being shaken by the reveal of a lifelong secret, sets out to overcome the mistakes of his past. The film portrays multiple generations of criminal behavior, incarceration, and absent fathers. The film climaxes when the protagonist sets out to change, motivated by the desire to be a part of his young son's life. The film ends with the powerful tagline: "Be the father you deserved."<sup>11</sup>

*Eclipsed* is a coming-of-age story that chronicles three teenagers who receive a mysterious invitation to a house party. Once there, they are presented with startling revelations about what the future might have in store for them, based on their current behavior. These revelations prompt the youth to pause and reconsider these behaviors and the impact they could have on their life paths.

**YOU'RE INVITED TO THE WORLD PREMIERE OF**

# ECLIPSED

A mysterious invitation to a house party brings three teens face-to-face with startling revelations about what the future might hold for them.

**THURSDAY, OCTOBER 26**

**MAGNOLIA THEATRE AT LINCOLN CENTER**  
417 West Magnolia Street | Fort Collins, CO 80521

**6:00 P.M.** Appetizers and red carpet photos (Bring your glam!)

**6:30 P.M.** Watch *Eclipsed* and interviews with the youth producers and then join a conversation with the cast and filmmakers

**CLICK TO RSVP**

Eclipsed is a short film created by and for Colorado teens. Come support us and The Matthews House!

**The Matthews House**

Funding provided by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families grant #90FD0235-01-01.

**LIFE AS TOLD BY YOUTH!**

## Life. As Told by Youth Brand and Website

*Life. As Told By Youth* created a website and the branded project name to support and enhance the distribution of the youth-created media. The youth advisory group worked with the project’s marketing consultant to create the brand and public-facing name of the project. The website offers media-rich resources supporting economic mobility and responsible parenting, including connections to child support services and the establishment of paternity (or legal fatherhood).



## Film Distribution and Social Media Campaign

Youth in the community were invited to view *Eclipsed* and related materials during both an organic and a paid social media campaign. The paid campaign was conducted for 10 weeks from July 9 - September 13, 2024. The social media messages reached thousands of youth viewers in the Denver metro counties, Fort Collins, and Mesa and El Paso counties, prompting thousands of views of the film and curriculum videos and visits to the *Life. As Told By Youth* website.

This brief is the first of three describing *Life. As Told By Youth* and the evaluation of the process of implementing the project and assessing its outcomes. The Center for Policy Research developed the content for this and other evaluation briefs. For more information, contact [dstarcher@centerforpolicyresearch.org](mailto:dstarcher@centerforpolicyresearch.org).

***Life. As Told By Youth* is a project of:**



Funding provided by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families grant #90FD0235-01-01.



# Resources

- <sup>1</sup> Goesling, B., Inanc, H., and Rachidi, A. (2020). *Success Sequence: A Synthesis of the Literature*, OPRE Report 2020-41, Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
- <sup>2</sup> Inanc, H., Spitzer A., and Starks, B. (2023). *What Influences the Success Sequence and Economic Self-Sufficiency? Findings from a Mixed-Method Study*. OPRE Report # 2023-251, Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
- <sup>3</sup> Inanc, H., Spitzer, A., and Starks, B. (2023). *What Influences the Success Sequence and Economic Self-Sufficiency? Findings from a Mixed-Method Study*.
- <sup>4</sup> Inanc, H., Spitzer, A., and Starks, B. (2023). *What Influences the Success Sequence and Economic Self-Sufficiency? Findings from a Mixed-Method Study*.
- <sup>5</sup> *The vicious cycle of poverty explained*. (n.d.). Concern Worldwide. <https://www.concern.org.uk/news/vicious-cycle-poverty-explained>
- <sup>6</sup> Ciocanel, O., Power, K., Eriksen, A., & Gillings, K. (2016). Effectiveness of Positive Youth Development Interventions: A Meta-Analysis of Randomized Controlled Trials. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 46(3), 483-504. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-016-0555-6>
- <sup>7</sup> *MyMediaLife*. Connected Health Solutions. <https://www.connectedhealthsolutions.com/mymedialife>
- <sup>8</sup> *Parenting and paternity awareness*. Texas Attorney General. <https://www.texasattorneygeneral.gov/child-support/programs-and-initiatives/parenting-and-paternity-awareness>
- <sup>9</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2020a). *Street smart*. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. <https://www.cdc.gov/hiv/research/interventionresearch/rep/packages/streetsmart.html>
- <sup>10</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2020b). *Community promise*. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. <https://www.cdc.gov/hiv/research/interventionresearch/rep/packages/promise.html>
- <sup>11</sup> *What Got Us Here* is not available for public viewing in order to protect the privacy of the youth actors who were committed at a Division of Youth Services facility.