

# GOOD-BYE TO FEAR

Julie Traun

*Dear Fear,*

*The day has come for me to declare my independence, I can't keep holding on to this fear. I have to let go and declare my freedom to learn. I have been running all my life from you, but now it is time to declare what I need.*

*You made me afraid to learn and because of that I became negative and lost, but now I have found my way. Letting you control my life made me afraid to read because you told me people will laugh at me and that made me angry. I thought people would laugh at me so I didn't go to class. I asked myself, "Why me? I have gone to school every day and yet I have this problem." Now I'm letting you go and I'm not afraid to learn. Fear is not an option.*

*Good-bye,  
Dominique*

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**F**inding herself at the Youth Guidance Center at age 14, Dominique Dorham was facing trial before Judge Katherine Feinstein. "I had caught multiple drug charges and then I caught a robbery; I knew Judge Feinstein was a tough judge, everyone told me so, but I was completely unaware of the consequences—I had no idea how bad things could get for me, until someone told me I was looking at three to four years in the Youth Authority."

Dominique was in middle school. She was the third of four daughters in a single parent household in which there was zero money to spare; Dominique's mother supported the family of five on her disability check. Dominique's difficulty in school went unaddressed. Learning disabilities affect 15 to 20 percent

of the general population, yet 60 to 75 percent of our incarcerated youth and adults have learning disabilities. Eighty percent of youth in the juvenile justice system have an alcohol or drug problem. Dominique reports that as a fourteen year old she simply needed money, and school was an agonizing and fearful place. “I got caught at fourteen, but I was doing stuff before then.”

“Someone told me about YTEC [Youth Treatment and Education Center], and knowing that was my alternative to the Youth Authority, I said, ‘Sign me up,’ but to be honest, I agreed to pretty much get off.”

YTEC, an alternative to incarceration, combines treatment with education and court supervision to support juvenile offender’s ages fourteen to eighteen with a demonstrated history of substance use or mental illness. Because of YTEC’s success, in 2006, YTEC was expanded and is now part of the San Francisco Unified School District’s Principals’ Center campus. The collaborative high school now serves eighty youth with innovative, integrated treatment and course work.

For Dominique, it was more personal than that. The people at YTEC cared, and cared deeply, about Dominique. She received impressive one-on-one tutoring at YTEC, but specialized remediation was needed. “I don’t know how she did it, but Margot Gibney (director of the Collaborative Courts for Youth and Families) raised the money for me to go to the Reading Clinic,” a private program designed to assist with reading difficulties. “I was in high school, and for the first time, I learned strategies that really helped, and finally I was able to read. This changed everything for me.”

Before graduating from YTEC’s high school program, Dominique cofounded the Leadership Program. The program’s mission: “To develop youth leadership through breaking the chains of an addictive society by offering a positive environment that supports young people’s desire to change, achieve goals, and to address the challenges in

their community.” Leadership Fellows have addressed audiences from Seattle to Philadelphia, San Diego to Washington, D.C., and facilitated substance-abuse workshops in local middle and high schools. These youth know that they need to take charge of their lives, yet they fully appreciate the insurmountable paths most face. They know support must extend far beyond the programs of the court, and luckily the collaborative courts understand this as well.



*Dominique Dorham counseling a client*

The Superior Court in collaboration with YTEC created the Bridge Internship program within the Family Law and Access Self-Help Centers. This innovative program is open to YTEC graduates who have participated in the YTEC Leadership Program and are enrolled in college or vocational programs. The Bridge Internship program is designed to help students make the transition from high schools and youth-oriented programs into sustainable wage careers.

Dominique, now twenty-three years old, and a single mother of a three-year-old son, served this summer as a Bridge intern at the Access Self-Help Center at the court. This fall, she returned to Texas College, a four-year bachelor of arts program with a single-parent component found by Elizabeth Summers, Dominique’s expressive writing teacher at YTEC. A lot of financial aid, a little help from a YTEC scholarship, and summer work make it possible for this young woman, who once faced years of incarceration, to hold an expectation to graduate from college in 2011. She’s the first in her family. She’s also the first in her family to graduate from high school.

Success is hard earned for children facing Dominique’s challenges. As reported by so many, the work at Youth Guidance Center is compelling for it challenges people who work with youth to change lives. Dominique readily credits Margot Gibney, Elizabeth Summers, and one of her YTEC teachers, Helen Parker, with making that difference for her. No doubt Dominique will “pay it forward” for a long time to come, helping younger versions of herself.

Fear is not an option.