

GIVING YOUNG LIVES A NEW DIRECTION

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"Most of these kids just haven't had the opportunities I've had. They deserve a chance." —Meghan Coleman



At 23, **Meghan Coleman** knows what it feels like to launch a teenager into the world. She just spent the last year working one-on-one with “Kyle,” an emotionally troubled 14-year-old living in a group home, before seeing him released to foster care.

“The biggest challenge for me is forming attachments with clients and then having to let go,” says Coleman, who graduated from Rivier in 2008 with a bachelor’s degree in human development and a minor in social work.

She entered the program at Rivier knowing she wanted to pursue human service work, but was unsure which population she wanted to work with. “As I progressed through my studies, I became interested in working with inner city youth, particularly teens,” she says. During her junior year at Rivier, an internship with the Key Program, Inc. in Massachusetts solidified her decision.

The Key Program’s mission is to help troubled youth and their families to develop useful skills so they can go on to live productive lives. The 30-year-old agency has built a successful track record with both residential and non-residential programs in Massachusetts and Rhode Island—providing counseling, educational support, and coordination of a wide range of services.

Through her internship at New Directions—Key Program’s group home for boys in Methuen, MA—Coleman quickly realized she’d found her niche. Key Program officials agreed. As soon as she completed a three-month internship in her junior year, they offered her a part-time job at New Directions, working as a residential case worker for boys ages 12 to 19. After she graduated from Rivier, she was quickly promoted to full-time case manager.

Coleman was also the first person in the region to receive the agency’s William G. Lyttle Human Service Professional Award—a \$2500 award designated for graduates or undergraduates who successfully complete an internship and then accept full-time employment with the Key Program. “It was cool to be the first one,” she says.

Sally Booth, assistant professor and director of Rivier’s social work program, says she’s not surprised by Coleman’s early success in the field. “Meghan has a deep interest in understanding people and she’s a good listener,” she says, adding, “She is a student who learns from each experience.”

Her Inspiration: Her Family

Coleman, who lives in Hollis and is a graduate of Hollis-Brookline High School, was first inspired to pursue human service work after seeing a family member struggle with emotional issues. “I wanted to do something to help others going through similar situations,” she says.

She gets emotional when she talks about “Kyle,” her client for one year at New Directions. Kyle’s mother, who had a crack cocaine addiction, terminated her parental rights when Kyle was five and his sister was three. Kyle bounced from “state program to state program,” never knowing what it meant to have a stable home and family. When he landed at the New Directions home at age 14, Coleman says he was depressed and was functioning academically at a second grade level. She was assigned to work one-on-one with him, but she didn’t address his problems alone.

Coleman worked with a team of professionals to be sure that Kyle received counseling and medication for depression and anxiety. She also made sure he had academic support to improve his reading and writing skills while attending an alternative school. When he wasn’t in counseling or at school, Coleman worked with him to develop life skills like doing laundry and cooking. He resisted at first, but “eventually, he came to like cooking,” she says.

Since a goal of the Key Program is to keep families together, Coleman also arranged for Kyle and his younger sister to have monthly visits. After a year at New Directions, Kyle was placed in a foster home—the only true home he’d known since age 5.

“It was hard to see him go,” says Coleman. At the same time, she says the biggest reward of her work is to “see kids reunited with their families or placed in less structured settings.”

Connecting classes to career

Coleman credits some of her early career successes with her professors and her undergraduate classes, which exposed her to new opportunities and ideas. Assistant Professor Sally Booth and Adjunct Professor Lynn Kegley were both “very supportive” during her academic career.

Kegley’s class, Working with Families and Children, made an impression on her, as did the reading assignment, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*—a story about a Hmong immigrant family. “The book had a big impact on me,” she says, adding that it sparked classroom discussion about how to work with different cultures—a perspective that has been invaluable in her work with Hispanic clients at New Directions.

Another pivotal class for Coleman was her internship seminar. “It gave me the opportunity to hear from other students about the different settings they were working in and it helped me to realize that I loved where I was.”

While she’s enjoyed the past year, working one-on-one with teenage boys in a group setting, she’s also looking ahead to where she can have the greatest impact in the future. This fall, Coleman will start in the master’s in social work program at Simmons College. “I’m going to pursue a clinical practice,” she says. “I’m not sure if that will be in private practice or in a group setting like New Directions.”

One thing is certain, however. No matter where Meghan Coleman decides to take her career, she’ll continue to have a positive influence on young lives. “Most of these kids just haven’t had the opportunities I’ve had. They deserve a chance.” says Meghan Coleman. ■

* **LUCIE BRYAR** earned a B.A. in English Communications from Rivier College in 1976. She has more than 20 years experience in news-writing, marketing, and public relations, including 14 years as a staff writer for Rivier College. In her current position as a writer for Southern New Hampshire Medical Center, Bryar produces the employee newsletter. She also writes for the hospital magazine, as well as contributes to the production of collateral marketing material.