Meet Judi Alperin King of The Wily Network

July 2018

Today we’d like to introduce you to Judi Alperin King.

Thanks for sharing your story with us, Judi Alperin King. So, let’s start at the beginning, and we can move on from there.

I came to this work after 32 years with Wediko Children’s Services, beginning as a member of the direct care staff and continuing now as a board member. Early on, I worked in the summer intensive residential treatment program for children with emotional, behavioral and learning disabilities, where my team was responsible for students 24 hours each day. I learned the benefits of focused, consistent, and purposeful interventions. I was drawn to and most effective with students without families—children from failed adoptions, in foster care or otherwise on their own.

After becoming a psychologist, I joined Wediko’s administrative team and worked in a variety of roles. One role was on-campus staff recruiter, travelling to colleges and lecturing about Wediko’s mission. I was drawn to the vibrancy of campus life. College was a setting where I always felt at home, having had personal experiences at Hamilton College, Boston University, Boston College and the University of Pennsylvania. I have never met a college I did not appreciate.

In December 2013, I read an article in the New York Times by Michael Winerip called “Out of Foster Care and Into College.” I knew immediately that this was my mission—to work with the young people with whom I had been so successful, in an environment I loved. I spent the next year visiting college support programs for foster-care alumni in other states, participating in Western Michigan University’s college coaching training—designed specifically for professionals working with foster-care alumni attending college—and then began in earnest to build a Wily Network board, raise money, develop partnerships and enroll our first Wily Scholars. The Wily Network now offers social, emotional and financial support to more than 25 students who are navigating their college careers independently. The network serves as a safety net for college students who have persevered through such experiences as homelessness, foster care, or parents who may be dealing with addiction, mental health issues, and incarceration. The Wily Network offers these promising students weekly coaching, financial assistance, community building, and networking to help them move from surviving to thriving in college.

It doesn’t take much convincing for people to want to support these incredible students—and that positive intervention will be paid back in spades, as students make it to graduation and are ready for life after college. Other successful programs across the country do similar work; my goal is to improve on them in a specific geographic area—the northeastern U.S.—to create a model that other organizations can replicate. Researchers have found that strategies such as one-on-one coaching and tailored supports radically improve the odds that these students will graduate. We are working to reach a sufficient number of Scholars each year—between 40 and 100—so that the Wily Network can become a community in which students can make friends and create their own opportunities at their own schools. The name “Wily” is a tribute to these students’ intelligence, cunning and adaptability. Their skills deserve to be nurtured, so that they translate into meaningful, purpose-filled lives.

We’re always bombarded by how great it is to pursue your passion, etc. — but we’ve spoken with enough people to know that it’s not always easy. Overall, would you say things have been easy for you?

There have been lots of challenges. The Wily Network (TWN) is still in its infancy so, not surprisingly, fundraising is an ongoing concern.
Since founding TWN, I have leveraged my connections in the field and wider community to develop a donor base, reaching out to hundreds of individuals, philanthropies, agencies, CEOs, and community groups to share the stories of, and garner support for, the young people we serve. Our board members—diverse in age, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, and industry—have similarly cast a wide net to attract funding.

Also, because there is no organized network among schools to support this unique population, students who would benefit from our services can be hard to identify, even by the schools themselves. Once we are able to educate schools about unsupported students in their community, the response is immediate. We have come to realize that students are often best at identifying others in their situation. We have reached out to numerous potential Scholars after word-of-mouth referrals from within the Willy Network. This past spring, TWN celebrated the graduation of our first three Scholars. The challenges they have faced—and overcome—in their lives are our inspiration.

So, as you know, we’re impressed with The Willy Network—tell our readers more, for example, what you’re most proud of as an organization and what sets you apart from others.

Young people who have experienced foster care or have a similarly complicated family history have the poorest outcomes of any student population in terms of earning a postsecondary degree. Willy Scholars lack the family support the majority of their college peers depend on during this critical period of development. As a result, our Scholars need reliable, caring adults who will provide financial and emotional support, and assistance with problem solving.

We partner with public and private colleges in New England to develop this support system for interested students. Our mission is to ensure our Scholars have the tools and networks to thrive in four-year residential colleges. Our Scholars attend Boston College, Boston University, Bridgewater State University, M.I.T., Middlebury College, Northeastern University, and the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth. We strive to empower our Scholars to transition successfully into post-college life and become vibrant members of their communities.

Our clinically trained coaches work with Scholars to help them reach their present and future goals, employing a collaborative approach: Do with, not for. Through coaching, we help students identify and secure year-round housing, maintain food security, and access health care to ensure a college experience commensurate with that of their peers. Willy Network staff are on-call 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Most Willy Scholars receive a monthly stipend to cover gaps in their budgets, and supplemental financial assistance is available as needed for expenses not typically covered by the student’s financial aid package. For example, we recently helped one Scholar purchase a basic corporate wardrobe in preparation for his summer internship at a major law firm. Willy staff provide expert assistance managing financial aid packages and completing yearly scholarship applications. In addition, Willy staff, coaches and volunteers offer individual guidance and group training throughout the school year on such financial topics as budgeting, saving, and planning for life after graduation.

Finally, the Willy Network fosters connections among the Scholars and to the larger community. Willy community activities include educational workshops, shared meals, service opportunities, and holiday celebrations. We help students build relationships outside of their college and Willy communities by introducing them to people who can help them with their careers or just be part of their network through college and after graduation.

So, what’s next? Any big plans?

The Willy Network plans to grow our pack to 40 Scholars by the fall of 2018, by reaching our fundraising goal of $450,000. Growing the size of the cohorts at participating schools will enable us to build up our community program component. The more students Willy serves at each college, the greater the opportunities for holding Willy group events on campus and for our Scholars to build a network for peer support and friendship. Willy also plans to host a student-led retreat in the fall for Scholars and staff to work together, socialize, and build a community of peers. We are developing a volunteer program that will include training and opportunities to interact with our Scholars. We are working on growing our gift-giving program to connect donors with individual Scholars for their entire college career. We will continue to share our pride in our Scholars and our admiration for their resilience and the impact they have on their college communities.

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