Today, CRCD now serves over 300 young people a year. The demographics, I would say, is-- for CRCD, is about 40% African-American, 60% Latino. And primarily young mens of color, are between the ages of 18 to 24. They usually come into our office unemployed and have not completed their high school or high school equivalent diplomas or degrees. And usually they come from very low-income households, and a lot of times we’re finding that our young people come into us homeless and in need of a lot of support services.

When I was thinking about my presentation on this, I was trying to figure out of a metaphor for young people involved in or exposed to gangs or affiliated with gangs. And the only metaphor that I can come up with was the little five balls that bump into each other. It’s called Newton's Cradle. After like an hour of research, I found that out.

They're called a what?

Newton's Cradle.

Newton's Cradle.

And it talks about-- it's pretty much like an explanation of the laws of motion. But the reason that popped into my head was because I felt that there’s so much drama that people are caught up in that you just get hit from every direction and it’s hard to make that stop. You lose control of it. It’s always occurring. And there’s only a couple of ways for it to stop. One of it is that it eventually stops on its own. Or the other one is, somebody comes in and stops it. Puts their finger there and stops it. So what popped into my head was that YouthBuild has a structure, a framework, in place to help young people make it stop or slow down. And I think our goal within YouthBuild is to teach young people the skills to make it stop or slow down on their own. So we have to transitional those skills over to folks.

We're going to focus on today is the fundamentals that I think are necessary to working with young people that are gang exposed. I call these the basics. Do you have a desire to work with gang involved young people and can you work with them in a dignified manner?

The Coalition for Responsible Community Development was actually conceptualized in my living room. With butcher paper and four to five of is that were very committed to really doing something in the Vernon Central neighborhood. For some reason, in this neighborhood, everything goes north, south, east, or west, but none of the resources stay.

Oftentimes, I've heard-- working with YouthBuild programs-- I've heard programs talk about the fact that they don't
Oftentimes, I've heard—working with YouthBuild programs—I've heard programs talk about the fact that they don't want to work with people that are gang involved or in gangs. And I think that's a decision that they made. But you can't pretend to if you don't want to, is the point I'm trying to make here.

I think CRCD is unique because we started our work already understanding that there is a gang epidemic here in Vernon Central community of South Los Angeles.

Why do you want to work with folks that are from neighborhoods? Is it because you want to meet the numbers?

CRCD grew out of the need to fill a void in South LA. There was a huge vacuum. And the void included a lot of resources that were not filtering in into the community. So stakeholders, local politicians, community-based organizations, residents, young people, came together and formed CRCD with the purpose, with the vision of building collaborations. Being intent about partnerships, so that we can maximize resources that would filter in to South LA to make it a better community.

The other is, will your entire staff be cool with it? Oftentimes, especially for programs that have a large number of staff members, there's two or three staff that aren't cool with it, aren't comfortable working with gang involved youth. And I think, more importantly, will your partners honor that decision? Oftentimes we send our young people to work with partners, and they have an issue working with folks that are from neighborhoods. A big issue. And it just complicates things for us.

I think from the very beginning, CRCD is a youth centered organization. So everything that we do, whether it's housing development, economic development, workforce development, neighborhood and community beautification, it's all centered around young people. So working with young people, particularly young people that have high needs, are gang involved, are victims to a lot of the societal ills, is part of the infrastructure of CRCD. CRCD is an organization that is committed to working with this organization of young people that are affiliated with gangs. And so it happens at the board level. It happens that the advisory board level. It happens that the management team level, where-- and with all of our partners that we work with, that is part of the culture of CRCD. So it's not like we have to have meetings on why we should work with this population or have to go and convince a board of why we should work with this. It's part of the infrastructure, it's part of the core of our organization.

And for organizations where that's not a part of their core, it's not being a part of their history, it has to be penetrated at the top level. Meaning the board, the executive director, and the management team, in order for it to work. If you're going to work with gang involved young people and you want a positive transition, it has to happen at those levels. You can't piecemeal this work. This work has to be intricately connected to the core of your organization. CRCD is fortunate because it's always been a part of our core. But I've worked at organizations where it wasn't, and it does become a challenge. And the challenges is not with the program staff, it's not with the
community that we're serving, or the participants or even the funders. It's really at the management and board level. They have to have buy in from the beginning, or it won't work.

And I think this other one is important, too. Can you provide youth the support that they're going to need for several years. I honestly think, if you can't provide support for young people for several years, then I feel like you shouldn't be working with them. Or you should have a mechanism in place that can replace the work that you're offering them.

One of great things at La Causa for young people that complete our program and they transition from gangs or not-- maybe they weren't in gangs-- but one of the great components that I think we have is that we have alumni services. And we have an open door policy. Even though a young person has graduated from our program, they can always come back and know that this is their home. And they build the strong relationships with our staff, where we become their mentors. Whether it was intentional or not, we begin these relationships, we continue to talk with them, whether it be through MySpace, Facebook, texting, coming in, going to their weddings, going to the hospitals when they deliver their children, maybe going to their court appearances with them still. We continue to offer support services to our young people. We don't say, OK, we helped you, you graduate, and we're done. Our work is never done with our young people. We continue to support them.

We have somebody who's responsible for alumni services, who helps them with college enrollment, job employment. He takes them to job fairs. And as well as him, there's other staff that are on-- that and also take the time to work with somebody. Maybe that person doesn't feel comfortable-- a person doesn't feel comfortable necessarily just going to our alumni coordinator. Maybe they established a good relationship with the construction manager. So they'll go to our construction manager and our staff continue to offer them support, even though it might take time out of their work or may increase their workload. It doesn't matter, because we know that we've asked this young person to trust us, and we said that we're going to be here to support them, so our work will never be done with them. It could be 10 years from now that they may call us and ask us for help, and we're still going to be there. Regardless if we're here La Causa or not. Because I know that there is alumni that have relationships with people who've left La Causa. And at the end of the day, they'll still help them, whether they're here or not.

It's very helpful. I think, looking back on my relationship with my program manager, my case manager, I think just that one-on-one relationship I had with her was really important. Knowing that the first Monday of every month, at 10:00 AM, I was to leave class and go to her office, and have my hour session with her, and talk about my future goals and and what's my transition plan for when I left La Causa, and her knowing more about me and how to support me, that was really helpful.
In my new role as the Director of Mentoring Services, my work really consists of out in the community, meeting mentors, recruiting mentors, establishing partnerships for strengthening our mentor program. And also individually meeting with the students. I get to focus a lot more one-on-one time with the students right now, finding out what are their individual needs and what are they looking for in a mentor.

And the last thing is, do you have patience? Patience, you're going to make mistakes. So you've got to realize that people are going to make mistakes, and you can't kick them out right away when the make a mistake. Do you want to share your experience you mentioned yesterday?

Yeah. Our second week of school, we had-- we're in [INAUDIBLE] area, which is highly gang involved. We currently have seven different gangs represented in our campus. And they were really having a hard time just trying to be cool with each other and respect that our property's neutral. So they broke out into a fight. It started out with just a couple, then more jumped in. It turned out to be nine students involved. It was really tough that day, after we got everything settled, as far as what decision to make. So what we decided to do-- even some of our students that were on campus took off to go home. Because their parents said, if anything breaks out, go home where it's safe. That just pierced my heart. Because we're trying to work so hard to create a safe environment on our YouthBuild property.

So we decided to go ahead and dismiss the students from our program for that rest of the trimester. But we gave them action steps on how, if they check into our local communities and schools, attend anger management classes, meet with me once a week for a half hour session. Then they can return back and re-enroll for the next trimester, which was just a couple months away. Which really-- it felt good because I was able to not completely give up on the young people, but then gave them action steps on how they can make their way back home to our YouthBuild program. And so, of the nine, five of the students have started taking those action steps.

So the next thing that you definitely need to have is respect for your input and experience. And we've been talking about that over the last couple of days.

I think it's really important whether, they're from the neighborhood or not, that the staff can treat young people, particularly young people that are getting involved, with dignity, respect, and have a whole lot of patience. It's really important, also, when working with getting involved youth, to be non-judgmental. We all make mistakes. Young people that are gang involved have heard that judgment. They don't want to keep hearing it. In particular when they go into a program that is going to support them. So if you can find somebody that can be non-judgmental, provide young people with the respect that they deserve, treat them with dignity, and somebody that can listen and have a whole lot of patience, I think it-- that'd be the perfect candidate for your program.