



Cameron's Story

Picture this: Flashing blue lights in the back window. You've just been pulled over for speeding. You were doing 78 in a 40mph speed zone. The next thing you know, you are being handcuffed and charged with a criminal offense. Now, picture this: You are 16 years old and facing charges for a crime that has a maximum sentence of one year in jail and a one thousand dollar fine. You have never been in trouble before and you're a decent kid. You never thought this would happen to you.

This isn't just a story used to scare kids into driving responsibly. This is a true story, this was my life, and had it not been for the Bangor Y's JumpStart program, I would have entered adulthood with a criminal record. The JumpStart Diversion Program offered through the Bangor Y is an eight week, one-on-one mentoring program designed for 10 to 18 year-old first time non-violent juvenile offenders who are at-risk of entering the juvenile justice system. Youth are referred to the program through local police departments and the Maine Department of Corrections after being arrested. Their only other option is to go through the court system – which means they will have a criminal record that will limit their options in the future.

The purpose of JumpStart is to make youth answerable to their community, and for the community to accept ownership of their youth and their problems. As a participant in the JumpStart Diversion Program, I met with a probation officer and signed an agreement that I would complete all of the requirements of the program. I began by writing letters of apology to the parents of the passengers riding in the car with me the night of my arrest. In addition, I agreed to abide by a 7pm nightly curfew, to perform 40 hours of community service, and to attend a class at the Y and work with a mentor for 1 1/2 hours each week for 8 weeks. In class and with our mentors, we talked about the factors that prevent us from making good decisions and the importance of taking responsibility for our actions. We followed a five step process that encouraged us to explore our personal values and goals, and taught us how to examine all the possible responses to a situation.

As a lesson in responsibility, we were given a marble to carry with us at all times for the entire 8 weeks of the program, and told that we must present the marble whenever we saw one of the program's mentors. I lost my marble after the first week. As a consequence, I had to teach the entire group, participants and mentors alike, a new skill. I decided to teach everyone how to field a ground ball. To fulfill my 40 hours of community service, I had volunteered as an assistant coach for a little league baseball team, and this is one of the skills I had been helping the young ball players to learn. My education had come full circle. The JumpStart program had made an impression on me in more ways than one. I learned that every decision I make affects not only me, but others as well. And, I learned that we all must take responsibility for our decisions for the good of all. I ended up volunteering with that little league team for 3 more years.

What happened to me could happen to anyone. Everyone at some point in their life makes a poor decision. We all make mistakes. I am grateful for the opportunity that the JumpStart program gave me to learn from my mistake. When the program ended, I felt like I wanted to do something to help other kids who found themselves in the same situation I did – a teenager facing a criminal record and hoping for a second chance. I talked with the program's director and was approved to participate again, this time as a mentor. I enjoyed my experience mentoring other kids, and looked forward to meeting with the group each week. The program made me realize that there is so much more that we can do for young people in our community. I am thankful for all that the JumpStart program has done for me and for the opportunity to give back. I look forward to continuing as a mentor for JumpStart and hope that others will consider being a mentor too. There are so many kids who need our help.

Cameron continues to volunteer as a mentor with the JumpStart program. He is also a full-time college student and has been an employee of the Bangor Y for the past two and a half years in our childcare, summer camp, and rec sports programs as well as at our welcome centers.