

“THEY COULD HAVE MADE IT MORE FUN”

Roberto's Story

“He’s only 14 now and it’s been just over a year since he got in trouble,” I was told by the Alliance Worker who provided me with the first information about my next interviewee. “You will be talking with him about our “First Offenders” program.” First Offenders. Sounds serious. Well, this would be a new challenge, I figured, as all of my interviews to date had been with individuals whose contact had been with *other* programs in the Alliance for Excellence. What motivates someone, 13 years old at the time, to strike a match and start a field afire, I wondered? After all, arson is a serious offense.

The “first offender” in this case was Roberto, a young man whose frame indicates he is fast becoming a man but whose face cannot belie his youthfulness. I liked him right away, and almost as quickly regretted not continuing with my Spanish classes. Roberto is bilingual but speaks only Spanish in the home that he shares with his mother. We both tried, as best we could, but there were times when we struggled to express our thoughts. And I wanted to be careful not to put words in Roberto’s mouth.

He is the youngest of his mother’s many children, and the only one who still lives at home with her. She, I understand from the social worker involved in his case, had Roberto at an advanced age. She also suffers from ill health. Her experiences and Roberto’s must be quite dissimilar, and, I believe, he feels their differences. I accepted it as truth when he told me he wasn’t sure why he did it.

“I started a little field on fire,” he said. “I was bored, and so I was out on my bike. I had some matches. I stopped and ‘turned one on’,” he admits. “But then I ‘turned it off’, or at least I thought I did. It was smoking, but I put it out and went away.”



I had to give this young man credit for agreeing to be both videotaped and audio taped, and the videotape reiterates his concern as it captures him frequently sneaking a peak at the “bubble” on the ceiling, trying to figure out just where that camera lens was and how much it was catching. The camera doesn’t lie, I thought, and I felt the same way about Roberto.

“Some lady who lived nearby remembered seeing me there and reported me to the police.” I was suddenly flooded with thoughts of all the stupid, boredom-induced situations I had found myself in at age 13, and I understood Roberto’s desire to beat a hasty retreat after believing that the situation was under control. The difference between us was that, in Roberto’s case, he got caught. “Tell me about what happened after you got caught, Roberto,” I prodded.

Roberto had to go to court and stand before a judge. Before one year is up, he will see that judge a total of three times. He has been assigned to a social worker and, while not officially on probation, Roberto believes she is his “PO” (probation officer). The goal, as I see it, is to give these young offenders another chance by staying involved in their lives and by identifying ways for them

to give back to their community. In Roberto's case, he completed close to 40 hours doing a variety of tasks assigned for him at the local St. Vincent de Paul Thrift Shop. He worked his hours off quickly and pedaled himself to and from his service work on his bicycle. Everyone enjoyed Roberto's level of commitment, and Roberto enjoyed working. This coming summer he hopes to find more ways to stay active through some means of gainful employment.

"How do you know you won't get bored again?" I asked. No answer. Was Roberto having difficulty understanding the question? He nervously eyed the camera again, and I rephrased the question.

"What if you were out on your bike and found some matches in your pocket. Would you light them?"

He quickly responded, "*No.*"

"How come? What's changed? What did you learn?... Roberto?"

"*It was scary,*" he replied.

Disappointed that Roberto seemed to be reporting that he "learned his lesson" solely as a result of being afraid of the consequences, I focused my questions on the services he was provided as a result of being in the First Offenders program.

"*What is First Offenders?*" he said with a questioning look on his face.

Oh dear. It hadn't occurred to me that Roberto had not asked about the structure of services he was receiving – or, rather, that they hadn't been explained to him in detail. I weighed my own overwhelming desire to "know all the facts" against Roberto's apparent willingness to follow the plan of action charted out for him by others -- or was it, rather, a fear of what could happen if he did not follow the prescribed program. I wondered how much I wasn't understanding, but, more importantly, I wondered how much Roberto lost as a result of not better understanding the services he was receiving. And how much well deserved recognition does the Alliance for Excellence lose through inadvertent client misidentification?

That's when I was struck by the importance of two important variables. The gathering and sharing of personal histories, and the importance of bilingual (or multilingual) service providers. From the Alliance for Excellence's point of view, it is important to share these stories not so much to sing their praises in print, but rather to show others hopeful of emulating such services just what works and what doesn't. From the client's perspective, services are enhanced when individuals working with you share your language and more fully understand your culture. I believe in this instance, I could have gathered a more accurate picture of Roberto's personal history and perhaps he would have been more comfortable sharing it.

From what I could gather, Roberto's story did include more than just being "scared straight" even if some things were lost in the writing. Through his community service involvement, Roberto had been

had been given the opportunity to demonstrate his own level of personal responsibility. He didn't fail that test. An Individual Education Plan, or IEP, was outlined for Roberto and his social worker informs me that his grades have improved as a result. He was further partnered with a mentor in concert with an affiliation between the Alliance for Excellence and a local television station. But what's most impressive to me is the value placed on making personal contact and the degree to which the parties involved have a genuine regard for each other. In Roberto's case I believe this is enhanced by the fact that his social worker speaks the language of Roberto and his mother and that she has known them both for many years.

When asked what Roberto felt could be done to make this experience more helpful for others like himself who are faced with similar circumstances, he replied (in typical 14-year-old fashion), "*They could have made it more fun.*" I couldn't help thinking, under different circumstances, they could have made it a whole lot more scary.

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Interviewer

