



AGING OUT Case Study: Campaign Strategy and Flexibility

“To me, getting an education is the only way out, and it’s the only way you’re going to succeed.” – Risa Bejarano

AGING OUT Documentary

Navigating the transition from adolescence to adulthood is challenging for even the most mature and privileged youth. For three young people in New York and Los Angeles, making the transition to independent living is considerably more difficult as they “age out” of the foster care system and suddenly discover, for the first time, that they are on their own. Despite their struggles, the film also shows these teenagers using the resiliency they developed during their years in the system to take control of their lives.

One of three youth, **Risa Bejarano**, managed to become the first member of her family to advance past the tenth grade, despite shuttling between a dozen different Los Angeles foster homes after being abused and molested as a child. The cameras record Risa as she attends her high school prom and graduates with several scholarships, but they also capture her quiet battle with drug addiction and a devastating emotional breakdown during her freshman year at the University of California at Santa Barbara. When we last see her, Risa is enrolled in a community college.

A Production of Public Policy Productions, Inc., for WNET/New York, AGING OUT is written, produced, and directed by Roger Weisberg. Vanessa Roth is the co-producer/co-director. It was broadcast on PBS in May 2005.

AGING OUT Outreach Campaign

The overall purpose of the AGING OUT campaign was to expand public awareness and dialogue, as well as work in partnership with public television stations and organizations engaged in solution-based activities to improve outcomes for youth in foster care. Primary outreach audiences included service providers, child welfare officials, leaders in the business and banking communities, policymakers, civic leaders, teens in foster care, and the general public.

The Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative (JCYOI) functioned as the lead content provider (partner) with expertise in foster care emancipation. As part of its involvement in the outreach campaign, JCYOI also designated the local outreach partners for stations – selecting those with expertise in foster care and emancipation. These organizations included state child welfare departments (e.g., Michigan Family Independence Agency); universities (e.g., Chapin Hall for Children, University of Chicago; Vanderbilt Child and Family Policy Center, Vanderbilt University); private foundations (e.g., Lumina Foundation for Education); United Way agencies; and others.

Outreach grants to 21 public television stations engaged local communities in issues related to the emancipation of youth from the foster care system. The original campaign priorities were employment, education, and connections to caring adults. The campaign also urged communities to give special attention to the needs for youth leaving foster care to have access to physical and mental health services and safe, stable housing. Stations and their local partners, however, were able to develop customized plans to meet the specific needs of their local foster care communities. For most sites, the process engaged emancipating/emancipated youth; empowering these youth and supporting youth leadership were important aspects of the campaign.

Campaign media resources included:

- Grant Application Package (including research information)
- Video Shorts (individual stories of three youth in AGING OUT, plus two additional youth)

- Public Radio Documentaries/Program Segments
- Discussion Guide for Youth, Communities, and Employers
- Communications / Technical Assistance
- Book / Book Tour: *On Their Own: What Happens to Kids When They Leave Foster Care* (Westview Press, 2004) by Martha Shirk and Gary Stangler.
- Web sites

The AGING OUT campaign was funded by the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, a national foundation whose mission is to help youth in foster care make successful transitions to adulthood. The Annie E. Casey Foundation provided targeted funding to specific Making Connections sites.

Case Study Situation

Risa Bejarano

In early June 2004, Risa found herself with no place to live. On June 5, she was discovered shot and killed in an alley in the South Gate section of Los Angeles. Her body remained unclaimed at the city morgue for over three weeks. The City of Los Angeles was about to have her cremated and buried in a public grave.

Outreach Campaign Status

In early June 2004, the national outreach campaign for AGING OUT was ten days away from its official launch. Both Risa and Daniella Rin Hover, the other young woman in AGING OUT*, were very interested in participating in the campaign. Because of Risa's heritage, approximately half of the 21 public television station grantees and their partners were interested in working with Risa to reach Latino youth and families. Station events had been planned based on Risa's anticipated attendance. Risa was also scheduled to accompany the producers of the documentary to New Mexico where they planned to show the film to the National Governors Association. Risa's plan had been to tell the governors that it's important to offer independent living services to emancipated youth as well as to involve biological family members in service planning and delivery. To support Risa's participation in the campaign, Outreach Extensions had recommended translating the AGING OUT Discussion Guide into Spanish.

- The Discussion Guide had been completed and both English and Spanish versions were available.
- Videocassettes of the three separate stories of the youth in AGING OUT had been distributed to stations as Video Shorts for use in outreach; each included an epilogue of the youth's current situation.
- Web site content was available on the sites of the outreach campaign, production company, and funder/content partner.
- Stations had attended a campaign orientation in March 2004 at the Making Connections Media Outreach Initiative meeting on the day prior to the National Center for Outreach Meeting. The campaign had also been presented to NCO attendees.

* The third youth in the film, David Griffin, was not available to participate in the campaign.

Action Steps Taken by the Outreach Campaign

1. Following Risa's death, a telephone conference call brought together the producers, funders, and outreach team to make decisions. In addition to recommending specific actions related to the outreach campaign, Outreach Extensions (OE) expressed concerns that youth viewing the film might need emotional support in dealing with Risa's death.

2. The first decision/action was to take care of Risa's burial. With help from Risa's sister, Alejandra, and financial support from the funders of the film, the producers arranged a private funeral for Risa's family and friends. Members of the outreach team, the producers, and funders attended.
3. Stations with AGING OUT outreach grants and their partners were immediately informed about Risa's death. As quickly as possible, they were sent guidelines on how to present this situation to audiences, especially youth, who attended screenings.
4. The focus of the campaign was expanded to include the need for safe and affordable housing. Content was added to the Discussion Guide to cover this issue as well as to provide suggestions on how to inform youth about Risa's death during station and partner events that included screenings. The revised Guide was distributed.
5. A new epilogue was written for the AGING OUT Video Short on Risa as well as for the full documentary. These videos were redistributed to stations and their partners. A more comprehensive epilogue on Risa was written by the producers and placed on the Public Policy Productions Web site.
6. The outreach team worked with both **promotions** and **station relations** to advise them on how to handle the situation. A new press release was written and sent out.
7. OE assigned the outreach project director to inform Daniella Rin Hover about Risa's death, listen to her concerns, and prepare her to take a larger role in the campaign. Stations that had planned to work with Risa were expected to alter their campaigns to tie into Daniella's story.
8. OE expanded the role of the outreach project director to work with Daniella on a continuing basis to support her involvement in the campaign. Daniella usually traveled with her husband Veasna, who was also in AGING OUT, and their two young children to participate in outreach events.
9. OE remained in constant communication with the funders to resolve all issues related to needed changes in the outreach campaign. This was particularly important in managing the relationship with the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, which was also the content expert on foster care. JCYOI had to be flexible in adjusting its earlier priorities such as including housing as a campaign issue.

Outcomes

The intensive planning and care taken to inform all stakeholders as well as redesign the outreach campaign as quickly as possible following Risa's death helped to set the stage for the successful engagement of stations, partners, and participants. At the conclusion of the campaign, Outreach Extensions produced a DVD showcasing all projects and highlighting local outcomes.

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