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# Lawyer uses her experience on the street to inspire youth

By Peter Small, AdvocateDaily.com Contributor



Toronto criminal lawyer [Jordana Goldlist](#) is drawing on her past experiences as a street youth to teach life skills to homeless and marginalized young people.

The volunteer work is part of her commitment to social justice that

began when she overcame homelessness 20 years ago, then finished high school, graduated university and became a lawyer.

"I try to teach the youth I meet to stop thinking about their hard times as baggage, weighing them down," says Goldlist, principal of [JHG Criminal Law](#).

"Instead, if they can learn to look at it like a toolbox of experiences and insight that most people in the world don't have, then they can use those lessons to their advantage."

Goldlist leads discussion groups at Covenant House, an organization helping at-risk, trafficked and homeless youth.

She works with men and women in their late teens and early 20s, addressing such topics as legal rights and responsibilities, how to deal with police, time management and goal setting. Her next session is on money management.

The workshops are part of three Covenant House programs: CIBC Rights of Passage (ROP), The P.E.A.C.E. (Peer Education and Connection through Empowerment) Project and "This is Me! Girls Program."

In addition, Goldlist recently led two group discussions at Horizons for Youth, a Toronto shelter for homeless and at-risk young people.

The idea grew out of a workshop she facilitated last summer at Timea's Retreat, a refuge for girls involved with prostitution. "The feedback was amazing so I wanted to see if I could help at different shelters around the city," she says.

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Goldlist's main message is that their struggles, whatever they may be, need not prevent them from living the life they want. "They just need to shift their perspective," she tells [AdvocateDaily.com](http://AdvocateDaily.com).

"Yes, street life sucks — it's hard and it hurts. But there are lessons they can take from it and use to their advantage because most people do not have that same experience in life."

It's a difficult concept to grasp because it demands a complete change of mindset, Goldlist says.

"Instead of trying to 'get over' something you struggled with, you need to recognize what you can learn from it and use that tool in another way," she says. "Sometimes, what you need to 'get over' are painful, horrific experiences. But if you always look at those experiences in the negative, it's impossible to use them to propel you forward in life."

Goldlist recalls her own struggles as a teen.

"I was sent to live in a group home on my 14th birthday. I ran away about seven or eight months later and ended up at Covenant House," she says.

The minimum age for admission to Covenant House was 16 so she lied about how old she was.

"I remember lying on the bottom of a bunk bed in the shelter that night, totally alone, without any of my belongings, no money, no plans, no idea what I would do next, and no one who knew me was aware of where I was."

Staff on the night shift did a police check and learned her age because she had been reported missing. She was sent back to the group home.

"Twenty-four years later and I still remember how I felt that night and many to follow, as I spent most of my teens on the street, a homeless high school dropout," she says.

She emerged from that life at age 20 and was soon active as a youth outreach worker with various agencies around Toronto, including the YMCA and the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH).

Goldlist put her youth work on hold when she entered law school, but she promised herself that once she felt successful in her career she would use her own experiences to try to teach young people how to move up from street life.

Three years ago, she started volunteering as a youth mentor at Covenant House. "I just liked the idea of coming full circle," she says.

Although she doesn't believe her experiences as a criminal lawyer inform her volunteer work, she thinks her profession gives her a measure of credibility. "It lets me explain how I use the lessons I learned on the street to my benefit," she says.

"And that really is the point of my workshops, they need to take all of the horrors of that life and use them to get out of it," she adds. "Those who stay focused on the trauma are the ones who stay stuck."

Goldlist knows she is making a difference because every time she speaks to a group at least one person tells her that something she said changed their entire world view, she says.



Homeless youth need to hear from people who have been through similar experiences and have come back to tell them that they are not powerless and can do better, Goldlist says.

“Rich and privileged kids are being raised to believe that they can do anything they want if they just put their mind to it,” she says. “Youth in shelters, rehab centres and group homes don’t grow up hearing that message but they need it to succeed. I want to be that voice and example.”

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