The only real grounds for any expertise that I have lie in my having been the Executive Director of Freeport West for the past 16 years, a job I love. During that time I have met thousands of young people. And it is in their voices, their stories, their passion for life, for love and for a just and fair world that I trust. I believe they can guide all of us to create humane institutions -my subject matter here.

I want to address several points regarding how we humanize institutions, but I need to begin by acknowledging two assumptions:

• The first is that institutions (shelters, residential treatment centers and jails, for example) are not going to go away. I regularly argue for their elimination but, for the time being, it appears that some people, both children and adults, must live away from their family or loved ones for a period of time or need help in meeting the basic needs of their families. Such situations can arise from behaviors that put others at high risk of harm, circumstances that make a family's home unsafe for children, or circumstances that force whole families to be disrupted.

Please forgive my failure here to address the larger engines driving these conditions, engines such as poverty and war and the promotion of violence for the sake of money. I am only saying that we must make the best of difficult community conditions for some time to come.

• The second assumption I am making is that you all like Gisa, and that you have some knowledge of the principles she has stood for, promoted, and held up to the scrutiny of scholars as well as those viewing the needs of youth from other points of view. I share Gisa's bias about punishment. I believe that punishment (a word used regularly and righteously in corrections terminology and methodology) is simply a sanctioned, sometimes sophisticated form of cruelty. It generally results in the devastation of the spirit and in the loss of the contributions those treated more humanely might have made to all of us.

Gisa has often spoken about factors which humanize institutions -ways to transform places of confinement or places intended to serve the social welfare into places characterized by kindness, mercy and compassion. Most of you have heard them before, and you may take them for granted. Many of you believe that our institutions are humane or, at least, that punishment, cruelty, isolation, and disrespect of youth are rare and isolated events. I am not so sure of that.

For the last year and a half at Freeport, we have been conducting focus groups made up of youth and families who are currently receiving our services. We ask them to be our consultants on a range of topics—everything from services they wish we would provide to banking services they wish were available in the neighborhood. Last August, we asked them about services and institutions for teenagers. Some of the incidents they described clearly involved institutional abuse and have been reported. I want you to hear what these youth had to say.

There are five themes or factors that humanize institutions which are commonly mentioned by youth in our interviews with them:

1. Having choices & control over things that affect their lives;
2. Having a safe place to be themselves;
3. Being treated with dignity and respect (respect for privacy, for culture, for whomever and whatever the youth values);
4. Being offered relationships that create connections, connectedness; and
5. Being surrounded by hope and promise—in attitude, in the art, in the opportunities for success.

Let's take the issue of choices and control first.

Teenagers believe that choices and control over things that affect their lives are essential to a humane environment. Listen as one young girl describes her predicament:

"...There's not enough homes for teenagers. There's lots of times when your parents don't care about their children. They say you've got to leave, 'who cares where you go?' And when you tell some authority that, they act like you must have been something bad. You must have done something wrong. Or they put you in a foster care system that's not doing anything for you, it keeps sending you in St. Joe's and then it takes you out and then it sends you back to St. Joe's. There's not enough homes for teenagers."

Another youth said,

"These people really think that [punishment] is going to solve these kids' problems. They probably did the same thing at home or worse. You've got people telling you what time you've got to go to be in bed, what time you can eat, and you know it's all about restricting communication between young people and adults and it's just going to make kids worse."

Young people need institutions that listen, give real choices.
They need institutions where youth are expected to exercise control over things that affect them. For example, several teens with children criticized Project SOLO for not having any “sipper cups” (those little cups kids use that don’t spill). Yes, I said “criticized.” They did not offer it as a helpful suggestion. They told us to get our act together with a simple program supply that any mom would recognize the need for.

So we went out and bought sipper cups. At a subsequent focus group, one young woman mentioned our coming through. She said it was important to her that the group was not “just talk,” that Project SOLO acted on their complaint, and she thanked us. Youth at SOLO judge our institution and other places for kids by their ability to be heard and to make real choices in their environments.

The second theme we hear from youth regarding institutions is about the need for a safe place to be yourself. Listen to a young girl describe her experience in a local hospital:

“And then, when I was in the hospital, one of the kids, one of my friends that was there, she started going crazy, so they called all these guys, like big huge wrestler dudes in white and they all came up there and restrained her and like tied her to a bed. It was just super crazy, and this guy stomped on her knee, he almost broke her knee, right, so she kicked him, kicked him where it count. They locked her in there for two days because she kicked him, but he almost broke her knee. And that’s not what I’m there to see. I’m trying to deal with all this stuff that’s going on in my life and she’s trying to do the same thing. I’m not in there to see somebody beat up. That’s not something that’s good for somebody that’s in the hospital because they are depressed and want to kill themselves.”

At the same session, a young boy asked, “What do you do if you get injured while they’re restraining you? This one kid, they grabbed him and held him, you know how they do, and they put him on his back and they dropped him on the floor, got on his chest. And he was all red, he was saying, ‘I can’t breathe, I can’t breathe!’ And they said, ‘Tell us you were wrong, tell us you were wrong.’ After they got done, I think he had almost his arm, and they took him to the hospital. What can you do?”

Restraint remains a common institutional practice. Youth tell us that they hate it. At Freeport, I won’t allow it. It is my observation that force is used most often by adults bigger and stronger than the child they are restraining. Those of us who are little in stature have learned other methods to de-escalate or to earn trust and truth from young people. It is probably true that at times restraint removes other youth from immediate danger. But the larger message sent to all youth in the institution is that it is not safe here; it is particularly risky to be yourself. Such practices are to ensuring a humane environment for youth.

A third theme we hear from youth regards their need to be treated with dignity and respect. That includes respect for their privacy, respect for their culture, for whomever and whatever a young person considers valuable.

Listen to a teen mom tell about her visit to get some financial help:

“I wouldn’t go to the Emergency Assistance for nothing... because every time I go down there they look at me like I’m crazy. And the first time I had signed up for welfare they told me, ‘I think you’re just a young mother trying to have a baby just to get a check.’ I know I made a mistake and had a child, but ain’t no way I have a kid for no funky $437 a month. I’d rather be single and working two jobs.”

Listen to another teenager’s insight:

“Sometimes when you’re in school, they always make you look like the bad person all the time, or you talk about something that may be going on at home and you’re trying to get out of it or you’re trying to help your mother if she have a drug problem or something like that, it’s as though you always have to be the one with the problem... That kind of attention, when the kids try to express their feelings and the professionals just block them off or just say, ‘Oh, yeah, I hear you, but I don’t want to pay any attention to you.’ That kind of stuff that’s why we get teenage molesters and killers and gang-hangers. That’s the result of being ignored and coming up from a bad family because there ain’t nobody out there to listen to these kids so its like, ‘Well, nobody cares so why should I? If I kill you, oh well,’ you know.”

Young people know when a place treats them with dignity and respect. It’s a place where they can see their friends, a place where they are listened to and believed. It is also a place that respects their privacy and the dignity of ownership of their own bodies.

Listen to another youth’s experience in a hospital:

“One time, me and this girl were fighting, I guess. Anyways, they locked us both up in different seclusion rooms on the unit... They locked us both up, and they take off all your clothes and all your jewelry and all that and give you those little robes; you’ve got on no underwear, no bra, nothing, and then they lock you up in this room, there ain’t no bathroom in there or nothin’. So then something happened. I think I was screaming because I wanted to get out. They took my robe, they took my robe and made me sit right in the middle of the room, and there’s this little window in there, so they come by and look in there and I had to sit in the middle of the room just like that, no robe or nothing.”
Being treated with dignity and respect is an essential element of the humane institution.

A fourth theme teens raise when talking about kind and compassionate institutions is relationships that create connectedness. Such relationships go beyond “this is just my job”; they are about caring between human beings.

“This happened to a friend of mine. She was at a shelter. She was working with a staff person. Then about five years later, the staff met this girl again and she was homeless. She had no place to stay, no food or nothing. She was getting beat up and everything. She was real sick. So the staff said you can come stay at my house a couple of days until we can get you hooked up with some programs and stuff. The shelter found out about it and they fired her. They fired her for taking this girl off the street when nobody else would help her. That is crazy.”

Temporary caring doesn’t cut it with the youth I talk to. They are looking for more, they value being connected, need caring that lasts. That takes great skill and commitment on the part of youth workers and so-called “caregivers.” What does enduring care look like? It means being able to come back to the institution even when you screwed up the first time. It means more than one chance to get it right. It takes a lot of patience. It means less worrying about rules and more worrying about teens getting what they need in order to thrive. It means that kindness, compassion and mercy come first.

Finally, teens in humane institutions value the presence of hope and promise.

There are lots of ways to make sure that hope and promise are in the air. Youth workers need to project high energy and a belief in the value of each youth’s contribution. They need to say, often and clearly, that they believe in young people. They need to mean it.

Our institutions need to be environments where art and beauty are valued, where paintings and drawings are on the walls, where dancing happens spontaneously, where people tell jokes and laugh and have a lot of fun.

Our institutions need to be places where there are lots of small opportunities to be successful and to be praised for succeeding. We need to stop seeing everything as problems to be solved and focus our energies on discovering and building on the strengths each youth brings. When hope and promise is in the air, youth thrive.

We know when children are thriving in institutions. There is light in their eyes. They are engaged with and connected to others—both adults and peers. They dare to try new things and are present during the experience. They participate in the creation of their lives. They have a hunger for learning and mastery and move into those modes without prodding. They can afford to be kind to others.

In the preface of Gisa’s autobiography, Courage and Love, she says, “I want to convey a basic conviction about human beings: They carry in them the seeds of destruction as well as great love and giving. It will depend on us, each person within each generation at all times, what we help to bring forth. This is an unending task.”

We have a lot of work to do. If we listen to what these youth have said to us, we must all look at our institutions and ask ourselves hard questions about our practices and the environments we have created. If youth are to thrive, if what we do is to have value, we have to do it right. We have to create institutions that are truly kind, compassionate and merciful.