

Opinion: It takes a team to overcome curve balls

By Virginia Berry

Have you ever made a decision that took you down the wrong path in life? Boy. I sure have.

Have you ever stumbled and fallen when facing challenges that seemed insurmountable? I'm raising my hand.



Virginia Berry

Did life ever throw you a curve ball that you didn't see coming, and perhaps you reacted in a way that didn't serve you well? This has happened to me more times than I can count.

Do you or someone close to you struggle with addiction or mental health challenges? My family and personal relationships certainly haven't been immune to either of these troubling issues.

At Tahoe Youth & Family Services, our young community members and their families face these kinds of struggles on a frequent basis. At-risk youth find themselves in circumstances that seem unreal to them. Experimentation with drugs and alcohol may result in addiction and ultimately a fight for life. Precarious mental health issues bloom into full-on crises. Myriad unforeseen circumstances may lead to homelessness. Young people without strong role models or mentors may make

decisions that keep them from reaching their full potential.

The good news is that you can help in more ways than you may realize.

I retired as a dean from Lake Tahoe Community College last year thinking that my future held glorious mornings of sleeping in and sipping coffee while watching "Good Morning America." I would certainly be hiking every day, working out at the gym, traveling, taking classes at LTCC, and volunteering with local nonprofits.

Then the first of many curve balls came along.

Instead of the leisurely and relaxing days I imagined, I spent my time fighting for justice as a victim of domestic violence. Didn't see that coming. I was humbled to learn the hard way that anything can happen to anyone, at any time. Life is full of curve balls. Standing up for myself and others made me realize that I had retired from LTCC too soon and that I still have a lot to give to our community beyond sleeping in, taking classes, and even volunteering.

The board of Tahoe Youth & Family Services asked me to consider an interim (and possibly permanent) position as executive director. Another curve ball. A few years ago, I had applied for this position, but withdrew from the hiring process when I decided to stay at LTCC. This time around, I knew I needed to re-enter the workforce in a leadership position that provides an opportunity to not only help TYFS, but to truly serve the community I have come to love over the last 25 years.

The curve balls continued. A large, federal Street Outreach Program grant was not renewed for TYFS. Among many things, the grant funded a very robust outreach program to help homeless and semi-homeless ("couch surfing") youths and devoted resources to address the very real problem of sex trafficking in our community. Losing this grant was devastating news to

TYFS, but we made unbelievably difficult financial cuts to weather the storm. We are now looking for creative solutions to regain other grant funding as well as ways to bolster our fundraising and donor efforts.

How can you help?

We are in dire need of foster-certified families in South Lake Tahoe, Alpine County, and Douglas County to serve as host homes in emergency situations for runaway youths. Please call me or Cheyanne Lane at 530.541-2445.

Consider attending our unique fundraiser on Nov. 8, A Night of Magic. Tickets are easily purchased by texting the keyword MAGIC2017 to 91-999 or visiting our **web page** and clicking on the Night of Magic flyer. Can't make it, but would like to make a donation to Tahoe Youth & Family Services? Donations of any size are gratefully accepted by texting the keyword TAHOEYOUTH to 41-444 or visiting our web page.

Interested in volunteering? We always need mentors for at-risk youth or help in a variety of other capacities. What about serving on the TYFS board? I am currently recruiting board members, especially those with experience in education, public safety, finance, and counseling, as well as members who reside in Douglas County or Alpine County.

Let's return to the questions I posed at the beginning of this missive and turn the tables a bit.

Have you ever been helped in your hour of need by a person who believed in you? Someone that told you everything was going to be OK and offered you the support you needed? I am thankful for the many friends and family members who have come to my aid when I needed them the most.

Have you been able to turn around a bad situation and actually discovered that you were grateful for your struggles because they have made you a stronger person? I wouldn't trade one of

my darkest moments for anything because my persistence has always paid off in the long-run.

Have you been blessed with role models, mentors, support systems, and resources that have allowed you to stay strong and do miraculous things with your life? I know that I have. My father was a homeless teenager during the Great Depression and he joined the Navy at the age of 17. When WWII was over, he capitalized on his GI benefits and worked three jobs while attending medical school. His determination to rise above his circumstances still serves as a powerful legacy in my life. His service to others, compassion, and work ethic provided the resources his six children needed to make it through college and pursue rewarding careers.

Despite the trials and tribulations of this wild roller coaster that we call "life," I know I have been blessed. It's time for me to pay my blessings forward by serving our community and doing my very best to strengthen and grow the amazing non-profit agency known as Tahoe Youth & Family Services.

Would you consider paying your blessings forward to assist at-risk youth and their families in our community? Your support and donations will always be used to strengthen and grow services to people who need your help. I firmly believe that every human being has potential beyond what he or she realizes. Please help us unleash that potential and strengthen our community at the same time.

Ideas? Questions? Comments? I'd love to hear from you. Drop me an email at virginia@tahoeyouth.org. Please join me in this journey to create a stronger, kinder, and more compassionate community in South Lake Tahoe, Minden/Gardnerville, and Alpine County.

Virginia Berry is executive director of TY&FS.