



CARING FOR KIDS & FAMILIES  
SINCE 1806

## Graham SLAM

A Pathway to Success for Young People



High school  
graduate Alexis  
with Graham  
SLAM Coach  
Samantha

## Changing the Odds for Young People in the Child Welfare System

Since 1806, Graham Windham has helped New York City children, young people, and families through some of life's most difficult challenges and obstacles. The families we serve have deep wells of strength and courage in the face of personal crises, financial hardship, physical and mental health conditions, substance abuse, and impoverished and unsafe communities. Some were abused as children, and grew up in foster care. They often lack positive role models and supports, and as a result, their own children may be placed in foster care, or may be at risk for foster care placement. Our mission is to work in full partnership with families and communities to make a life-altering difference with these children, young people, and families, by helping to build a strong foundation for life: a safe, loving, permanent family and the opportunity and preparation to thrive in school and in the world.

We believe that young people in the child welfare system, most of whom have known trauma and frequent loss, have all of the same capabilities as children without such experiences, but face multiple obstacles to reaching their full potential. Often, they are more accustomed to transition than stability, and they lack a consistent, positive support system, making it difficult for them to envision and then stick to a productive path all the way to a viable, living-wage career. Public supports for young people in foster care end at age 21, when few young people of any background are ready to be on their own. In addition, findings in neuroscience indicate that brain development is still happening well into the twenties.

While it is typical for young people to make mistakes along the way, the margin of error for the young adults we serve is much narrower. Issues that might be minor in impact for other young adults have much more severe ramifications for young people who lack a safety net. Unless young people have someone to help them, including advocating for them in various systems (educational, justice, housing, etc.), issues may escalate to outcomes such as homelessness, incarceration, and unemployment. Chapin Hall's longitudinal *Midwest Study* showed that among youth who had aged out of foster care, by age 26: 47% of young people were unemployed, compared with 20% of the general population and 36% of young people had been homeless. Only 8% of youth who aged out had attained 2 or 4-year degrees by 26, compared with 41% of the general population.

We launched the *Graham SLAM (Support, Lead, Achieve, and Model)* program in 2014 to provide young people with long-term, comprehensive support to ensure a successful transition to adulthood. *Graham SLAM* is an innovative strategy that provides young people in our child welfare programs with comprehensive resources and strong staff, family, and peer supports from high school (starting at age 16) through post-secondary success and onto a living-wage career path. *Graham SLAM* provides support for youth until age 25; well after they have left the traditional child welfare care.

We have seen the impact of *Graham SLAM* over the past several years, and are working to expand the program to reach close to 1,000 young adults across our programs.

## The Graham SLAM Model: A Continuum of Long-Term, Relationship-Centered Support

*Graham SLAM* develops a strong network of support for each young person through high school and postsecondary education and training (college or a recognized vocational certificate program), and into living-wage employment. A professional coach is accountable for educational and vocational progress for a specific group of young people, using evidence-supported models, and ensures young people receive intensive, structured, outcomes-focused peer support as well as family support.

The overall approach addresses multiple facets of the complex work of getting young people through high school and college and into a living-wage career. It supports young people in taking steps toward their goals, despite the unfamiliarity and uncertainty they face. It, equally importantly, seeks to prevent young people from getting off track and leaving school or employment as a result of small mishaps, such as errors in financial aid or admissions paperwork, or larger challenges such as mental health or substance abuse issues, social isolation, or negative pressures from family or peers. The program celebrates achievements large and small while working to mitigate the potential cost of missteps that all young people make as they progress toward adulthood.

*Graham SLAM* is for young people from 9<sup>th</sup> grade to 26 in Graham's programs, including foster care, foster care prevention, and our community-based afterschool and teen programs. *Graham SLAM* stays with young people even after they leave our other programs (e.g. after they return home to their families from foster care). This long term support is critical for young people who are transitioning to living independently for the first time, or returning to families who, for the most part, do not have the means to substantially support their youth's progress towards a living wage career.

As we have been building our program, we have prioritized and primarily engaged youth in foster care. Our coaches have been working to engage all young people in our foster care program in 9<sup>th</sup> grade and older. There is no application process, or minimum requirements (e.g., GPA) for remaining in the program and therefore, no selection bias. *Graham SLAM* is designed to provide a safety net to young people when they are most vulnerable, and to keeping them on track when they are doing well.

The *Graham SLAM* program includes:

### ***Individual Support & Planning***

Full-time professional Youth Coaches work one-on-one with 20 young people to develop educational, vocational, and social-emotional goals, to create individual plans that are specific, measurable, actionable, realistic and time-oriented, and to provide the consistent support, communication, and follow-through to enable youth to follow their plan and achieve their goals. Coaches use the nationally recognized, evidence-supported model, Motivational Interviewing, to engage the youth's desire and intrinsic motivation to make and sustain the behavior change needed to follow their plans and reach their goals.

### ***College Readiness & Support***

Many of our youth are educationally behind and require intensive support to complete high school and enter and continue in college. Two Education Success Coordinators review transcripts and meet with students individually to discuss progress toward high school graduation, and, for those in college, degree attainment; build relationships with high schools and colleges that are best suited for our students; guide students in selecting schools and programs based on academic, social, and financial needs; assist students in completing applications for admissions, as well as financial aid and scholarships; and coordinate the enrollment process for schools and programs and facilitate transitions between schools (e.g., from a two-year to a four-year school). After youth are enrolled in college, the Education Success Coordinators and Coaches provide support to help orient youth to college and navigate challenges, such as course selection, money management, peer relationships, and social and academic anxieties, to help youth persevere. The team also organizes activities or events to encourage youth to attend college such as an annual College Signing Day.

### ***Employment Readiness & Support***

SLAM prepares youth for work by intentionally supporting youth to gain exposure to career options, to gain the skills needed for success at work through internships and other work experiences, and ultimately to enter a living wage career path. This includes the work of two Employment Success Specialists who run an in-house, mentored internship program; run the Columbia University, evidence-supported Career Club work readiness training; match young people with external internships related to their career interests; develop placements for work experience, work-study, and community service/volunteer opportunities; check in with young people on a regular basis during their employment; and coach youth to achieve success in vocational training programs. Youth also attain job skills through our SOS internship program.

### ***Family Support***

Family support of a young person's goals is critical to long-term success. We have seen that conflicting priorities – for example, a family preferring that their child financially contribute to the household after high school through a job,

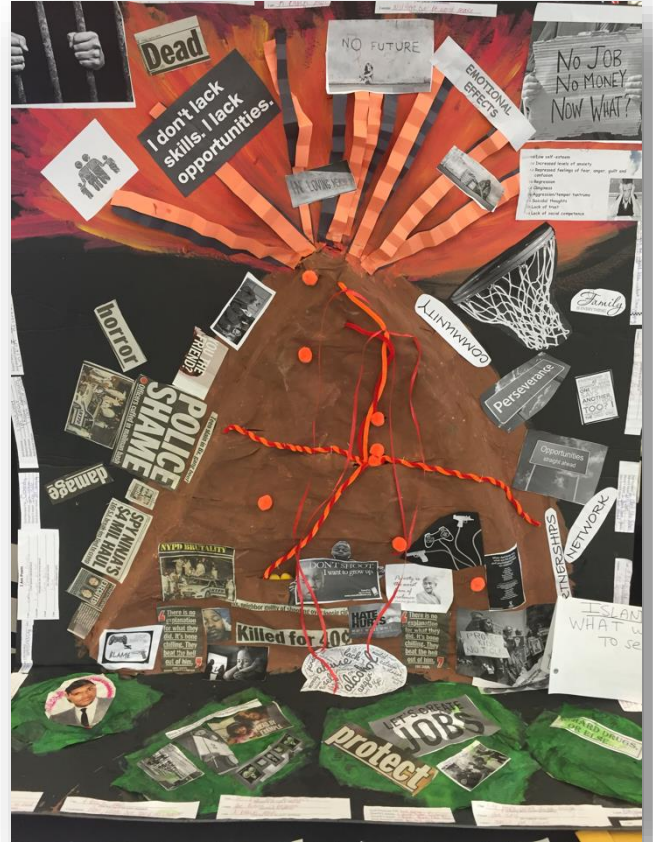
rather than investing in the long-term return of college – can derail a young person from their chosen track. Coaches connect with parents and other family members as needed to engage them in supporting goals and steps in the action plan, and to address issues related to family dynamics, with in-person visits at the family’s home and phone calls and other communication.

### ***Peer Support***

Coaches form and facilitate positive peer groups, including: 1) Network Model Peer Support Groups focusing on helping youth support each other in managing stress and their behavior; youth name the groups that include Pretty Tough Cookies, Ladies that Lunch, and Men of Respect; 2) Bengals Peer Leadership Groups, based on the Positive Peer Culture model, a method of building positive youth subcultures by mobilizing the power of the peer group in a productive manner. The group plans and completes community service projects and recreational activities, to help connect with the community and as a group; and 3) College Crew, a supportive group around completing college applications and attending college tours.

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## **Graham SLAM's Impact**

Graham SLAM was developed and launched in April 2014 to realize Graham's vision for young people that every youth is prepared, supported and provided the opportunity to thrive in adulthood. We aim to reach 900 youth 9<sup>th</sup> grade through 26 years old who are involved in Graham's other programs (i.e. foster care, Family Support and Empowerment, and afterschool/camp).

Our Vision Goals for youth are:

- Young people graduate high school by 21
- All of our high school graduates will enter a post-secondary program, and complete a Bachelor's, Associate's, or Industry-Recognized Vocational Credential
- All young people will be in a living wage career path by 26

### ***Participation***

In FY21, Graham SLAM served 391 young people, most of whom are or were in foster care. Our goal for FY22 is to serve 500 youth (400 intensively coached, 100 receiving targeted support or participating in groups only), including expanding to additional youth in our Family Support and Empowerment Program program. Ultimately, our goal is to expand to reach 900 youth over the next several years.

### ***Latest Outcomes***

- Pre-pandemic, over 90% of Graham SLAM participants graduated from high school by 21 years old (compared to 22% of youth in foster who do not have coaches).
- Last year with the school disruption and remote learning due to Covid, 77% graduated high school by 21.
- The majority of SLAM youth enter post-secondary programs, compared with only 12% of youth who have aged out of foster care who do not have coaches. This year, 61 youth are working toward their degrees.
- 80% of youth enrolled in college for the Fall 2020 semester continued to Spring 2021.

## Kurt's Story

Kurt is a young man who entered foster care at age 16, and was one of the first young people in the Graham SLAM program when it launched in 2014. At the time, he was a freshman in college. He remembers his coach introducing herself to him, letting him know that she was there to help him as he made his way through college. He let her know that he was already in college, and that he didn't need any help. She continued to reach out to him, and in time, he began to turn to her for support. Within a few months, he told us, "Every kid in foster care should have a coach."

After persisting in college, Kurt earned his associate's degree in accounting – his dream career. Pilar Larancuent, Graham SLAM Director, has been a part of Graham SLAM since it launched, starting as a Youth Coach before becoming the program director. She said:

"I've been here since the beginning – Kurt was one of the first young people we started working with – and you can see that the extra support, whether it's financial, or just checking in, does matter and does have an impact."

"Kurt told me, 'If I had this support when I was 15 or 16, my interest in education would have been different. I wouldn't have felt alone – I would have had a group of young people.'"

"That we get to be part of this story that they're writing is amazing," she added. "I was crying watching Kurt walk at his graduation ceremony."

After earning his associate's degree, Kurt continued to Brooklyn College, to pursue his bachelor's degree. Before he went, he checked in with Pilar to make sure Graham SLAM would still be there.

"He said 'I'm going to Brooklyn College – are you all staying around?'"

"We said we're here, for better or for worse."



## Kurt's Graduation Speech

*Below is the speech Kurt gave at our graduation celebration, sharing his story and offering his congratulations and encouragement to fellow young people in Graham Windham's programs who graduated from middle school, high school, and college.*

"I'd like to think that most of you know me or have seen me around through different Graham Windham events. To the ones that don't know me, my name is Kurt. I am a recent graduate like you all are. I just graduated from the Borough of Manhattan Community College with my associate degree in accounting. I was previously a foster youth here at Graham Windham just like you all are, and in fact I made a successful transition from foster care back in February and I am now currently living in my own apartment.

"To my fellow graduates, I am here today for two reasons:

- a) I am here today because I am very proud of you all, as I am of myself, for being recent graduates.
- b) I am also proud of you guys because I understand the struggle it took for you guys to get where you are now.

"I understand your struggle because I too was a foster child and I too had to face similar challenges as you all. I was in foster care ever since I was 16 and was recently aged out because I am now 21.

"Throughout the 5 years of me being in foster care some of the struggles I faced was not being able to go home and see my six siblings, parent-teacher meetings, living with strangers, people stealing my clothes. Moving to different homes, etc. etc.

"However, the largest issue I had was the lack of support from my actual family, who told me ahead of time I would be a failure. This issue was actually preventing me from succeeding because at the time, all I knew was my family. During my time of dealing with this problem I learned from my foster mother that I should accept the ones that are there for me and stop letting myself be depressed over the ones that are not there for me. With this valuable lesson that she taught me, I was able to accept the fact that my parents would not be there for me and also accept the ones that were, such as my foster mother herself, who has was there for me throughout and still is even though I don't live with her anymore; Mrs. Pilar who has always been there for me to talk to whenever I was fed up with school; and the assistance of great educational coaches such as Shelby and Ashley who pushed me to points where I thought was my limit and showed me where I shouldn't settle for less.

"I would not even be a high school graduate if I did not have the support I received from these people here at Graham Windham. Today, because of them I have my associate degree and will continue to pursue my bachelor degree at Brooklyn College with continued support from these people.

"My fellow graduates, just as I have, I encourage you all to look towards these coaches for the support you need as you continue on your different journeys. I also want you all to know that you have my full support if needed and I hope that everyone here today continues to strive towards bigger better things than just this diploma, whether it be certification for a job, or you plan on joining the military, or you plan on attending high school or college. I encourage you guys to keep up the good work, and do not let anything stop you, because you started at the bottom and now you're on your own specialized pathway to the top."



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