

A F T E R W O R D

While writing this manual, I was frequently challenged to define the parameters of at-risk youth. Throughout the course of my research, I found myself developing a clearer understanding of at-risk youth via information that presented multiple facets and myriad possibilities within this arena. My opinions have changed over time, influenced by my personal and professional experiences, and especially through the writing of this book. I currently believe that we are all “at-risk” individuals to some degree or another, and most always there is a fine line that determines our susceptibility to being at-risk along with the accompanying side effects.

As was stated in the Introduction of this manual, young people are not ‘at-risk’, but are usually placed at-risk by adults. Various human conditions help to promote the level of an individual being at-risk, but in the end we must all be accountable to the quality and infrastructure that we bring to this world. Our greatest risk is to lose our ability to accept, respect and understand each other. Our greatest challenge is to create a climate of appreciation, acceptance, and compassion for all beings.

The spiral ideogram on the cover of this manual is strongly associated with independent movement, potential energy, and a return or homecoming. Like this spiral, at-risk youth move to a different, independent beat. At-risk youth’s potential energy is their greatest asset in gaining reparation to the opportunities and quality of life they deserve. Ensuring access by all youth to school and community learning/living experiences requires the creation of a positive, welcoming environment by all partners – schools, businesses, and community organizations. However, we can often be at a loss as to how to achieve this. Pam Stenhjem, Coordinator, All Means All School-to-Work Project, Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota completed the following book review:

In their book, ***Reclaiming Youth At-Risk: Our Hope for the Future***, authors Brendtro, Brokenleg, and Van Bockern share a model of youth empowerment called, ***The Circle of Courage***. This model is based on three areas of comprehensive research: contemporary developmental findings, the wisdom and teachings of early youth workers and pioneers in the field of human development, and Native American theories about raising children. According to their model, a positive culture or “reclaiming environment” is one that both communicates and shares with youth the following four core values:

1. Belonging: Significance is fostered through a community that acknowledges our universal need for belonging.

2. **Mastery:** Competence is achieved by guaranteed opportunities for mastery.
3. **Independence:** Power is nurtured by a rich respect for each individual's independence.
4. **Generosity:** Integrity and virtue are reflected through the value of generosity.

The Circle of Courage model of youth empowerment promotes and supports a reclaiming environment. To reclaim is to recover and redeem, to restore value to something that has been devalued. A reclaiming environment creates changes that meet the needs of both the young person and society. It embodies ideals that can provide a pathway to leading valuable, meaningful, enriching lives, as well as respect and value for youth. These concepts provide a place to start in our daily work with all youth through school and community learning experiences. In schools, youth organizations, and communities across the country, the "reclaiming environment" approach is being embraced as a way to ensure that all youth are equally valued, and equally valuable.

We must challenge ourselves to promote and develop a welcoming, reclaiming environment for all youth. We all need to be a part of something positive and help to create a lasting, meaningful impact on the lives of the learners with whom we spend our time: at home, in schools, at work, and in all of our communities, and organizations.

My ambition in writing *Risky Business* was that it would help to define at-risk youth; explore strategies and innovations; share ideas on family, community, and business involvement; discuss safe schools and integrated services; and, provide professional development materials and resources. I feel that this manual will help us to actualize the ideas, resources, and strategies that are documented herein; and that it can help to provide a pathway for all youth toward leading valuable, profound, and enriching lives. Through the words of Mark Twain's famous character Huck Finn, I leave you with one final comment:

"...and so there ain't nothing more to write about, and I am rotten glad of it, because if I'd a knowed what a trouble it was to make a book, I wouldn't a tackled it and I ain't agoing to no more. But I reckon I got to light out for the Territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she's agoing to adopt me and sivilize me and I can't stand it. I been there before."

~ MARK TWAIN