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## **'It doesn't matter where you came from but where you are going': once-troubled teen shares insights with at-risk kids**



photo by: Kathy Hanks

Joe Randolph sits in a Lawrence coffee shop Friday, March 1, 2019, talking about his life and how the people around him let him know he had worth.

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Joe Randolph's self-portrait can be spotted in a permanent mural in the entryway of Van Go Inc. at 715 New Jersey St.

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Joe said it wasn't easy coming up with a likeness back when he and 20 other apprentice artists created the mosaic, which is shaped from tiny pieces of glass.

He was 17 at the time. Despite the challenge of showing facial structure with limited colors and shapes, he persevered with the project — something he has learned to do through life's difficult situations.

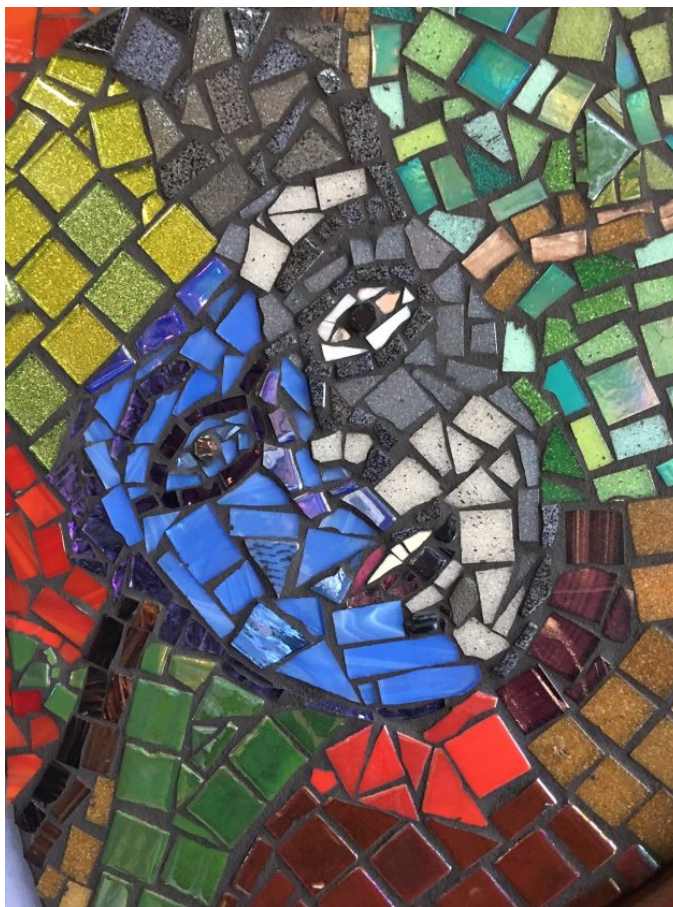


photo by: Kathy Hanks

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For Joe Randolph, creating his self-portrait back in 2009 as part of the mural in the lobby of Van Go Inc. was a challenge, trying to show depth and facial structure using limited colors and shapes of glass.

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Now 26, Joe lives in Shawnee and works at Johnson County Juvenile Services as a youth care adviser, connecting with teens who are going through some of the same struggles he experienced, including moving in and out of foster care. He contributes his time at Van Go, an arts-based social service and job-training agency for 14- to 24-year-olds. It was at Van Go as a kid that he had met people who genuinely cared about him and wanted him to succeed in life, he said.

Joe was 12 when he was taken from his biological mother and stepfather in Franklin County because of lack of care and placed in the state's foster care system. He was sent to live in LeRoy, in Coffey County. He fell in love with his foster family, his classmates and teachers at the small school there.

"It was a turning point for me because I got to be in this structured environment, and I could see this was what a good, functional home looked like," he said.

The day he learned he was being sent back to his biological mother and stepfather, he went out in the hallway of the school and cried. Suddenly his

entire class and teacher were in the hallway crying with him. For a going-away present, they gave him a T-shirt that everyone signed. He still has it.

His experience at home was no better than it had been when he was first taken away. His mother continued with her drug use, ignoring her children, he said. But things always looked OK when a social worker came to visit. Joe became so desperate to get out that he destroyed property and then called the police on himself. He felt living in a youth detention center would be better than living with his mom and her husband.

“It was safe,” Joe said of the detention center. “There was someone there to help me and nutritious meals, and I could get through school.”

### **Surrounded by good people**

Joe lived at the county detention center for three months before being sent to the O'Connell Youth Ranch near Lawrence.

Ryan and Hanna Randolph were the house parents at the ranch, and he quickly could tell they cared about him. Life improved. While at the ranch he attended Lawrence High School and was accepted in the Van Go arts program for at-risk youths.

“I didn't realize at that moment how many services are provided in one place at Van Go,” Joe said. It was there that he also found stability, a family atmosphere, plus an on-site social worker to talk with whenever he needed.

“A lot of it was self-worth building,” he said. Having people buy the art he created — not because it was great but because they wanted to show support — made him feel good.



photo by: Contributed photo

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Joe Randolph works at Van Go Inc. back when he was a student at Lawrence High School in 2009.

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In the last semester of his senior year in 2010, Ryan and Hanna left the ranch so that Ryan could enter a ministerial studies program. They remained close to Joe, and in June 2018 they adopted him, and he took their last name. Even as an adult, Joe said, it's important to have that family connection to someone.

For the remainder of his time in high school, Joe was sent to live with a foster family in Ottawa. At the end of the school year he graduated and aged out of the foster system.

“At 18, I got the boot,” he said.

He didn't have anything, so he went back to where he felt welcomed in LeRoy. He couch-surfed for a bit and worked as a farmhand. By the fall he had enrolled at Ottawa University. He is currently pursuing a degree in sociology with an emphasis in social and behavioral science online from Fort Hays State University.

### **Building a future**

When Joe turned 22, things began to click for him.

"I realized I could do anything," he said. "No matter what, I could have a life I was proud of."

He began working as a corrections officer in the Franklin County Juvenile Detention Center, which was the same center he had lived in for three months. Currently, he works full time at Johnson County Juvenile Services in Olathe.

"There was never a time I didn't think I'd make it because of the people around me," Joe said.

That is something he tries to pass along to the kids he is helping. When they complain about their lot in life, Joe reminds them that life is unfair but they can do well in spite of it.

"I tell them I know kids who have every advantage and everything paid for them, but they aren't happy," Joe said. "It doesn't matter where you came from but where you are going."

Norman Gunn, the shift supervisor with Johnson County Juvenile Services, said Joe's background allowed him to connect with troubled kids.

"What I love about Mr. Randolph is he has a way of connecting to them without dropping the hammer," Gunn told the Journal-World. "Instead he comes across as a big brother, in a humorous way. They definitely listen up when he speaks and are excited to see him.

"He can lighten up the day when there isn't much sunshine," Gunn said.

Over the years music has become very important to Joe. He brings his guitar to work and to Van Go and uses it as therapy.

He even began performing during open mic night at S&S Artisan Pub & Coffeehouse, 2228 Iowa St., in Lawrence. His next performance there will be at 7 p.m. Friday. It will be a big night for him, and his good friends from LeRoy are planning to show up.

As for Van Go, he most recently returned to give a testimonial during a board retreat.

“It was very enlightening for the board members to understand how much our young people count on Van Go — in ways we can’t explain,” said Carol Kobza, Van Go’s executive director.

