



Building a Better MJKO Part III

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A. Background & Introduction

Notably – MJKO was commissioned over a three-year period to get 1,500 youth physically active – and they have succeeded. MJKO succeeded by getting 2,108 youth to enjoy participating in a physically demanding sport activity [non-contact boxing]. And this report [Building a Better MJKO Part III] represents both a culmination and a continuation of the findings and lessons from Building a Better MJKO Parts I and II. In Part I, we reported MJKO had submitted 544 surveys to the Ontario Trillium Foundation (OTF) and reached 625 unique participants in its various programs. Researchers used participatory action research (PAR) principles (see: Chalip, 1997; Frisby et al., 2005; Frisby et al., 1997; Lewin, 1946) to explore – using a focus group and semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders – whether and to what extent MJKO was achieving its goals as outlined within the OTF Grow Grant application [e.g., to develop pro-social life skills including, to develop healthy habits, and to support more active youth]. Findings from that report were based on interviews with Toronto Police Services officers (n=2), Toronto District School Board principals (n=2), MJKO executives (n=2), and a focus group with MJKO participants (n=16). In the year one report, key stakeholders shared

I've seen the progress of how these students have become more social, more active, and more extroverted compared to when they started the program. They were shy – they were introverted – they weren't willing to speak. That's through the relationships that they've built with the staff at MJKO and also their interactions with Toronto Police Services, and their classmates.

One Toronto District School Board principal shared MJKO programs were

Activities that many of our kids – they look forward to it. They build connections – they're enjoying [them] – they're active – they're learning. It motivates many of our kids. They're very excited by the program and they want to be in school that day. They're actively involved, so there's physical activity. With the [MJKO] leaders there are really good connections. [They're] just good roles models. The fact that MJKO brings in the police officers too – those are other solid connections and strong role models – adult role models. Those value pieces along with the physical activity, I mean, if they're not with us at that after-school program often they're just by themselves in the park or they're at home watching TV. So, I think it's a fantastic program.

Toronto Police Services officers indicated

The kids are starting to open up to us too. We help [MJKO] coaches...And I guess using sports is one of the biggest ways to influence them. So it's working really well for us too. That's why we really appreciate the partnership with MJKO.

Toronto Police Services officers also shared that

MJKO is one of the biggest after-school programs that we participate in. Miranda – I mean, we've seen her work [and] it's definitely working. The things she does – it's phenomenal. The kids all respect her, and these are the kids that don't like police. They don't have respect for authority. But I see the same kids go to Miranda's class, and they're totally different kids. So, we participate, and those kids are starting to open up to us too. I guess using sports is one of the biggest

ways to influence them, right. So, it's working really well for us too. That's why we really appreciate the partnership with MJKO.

And

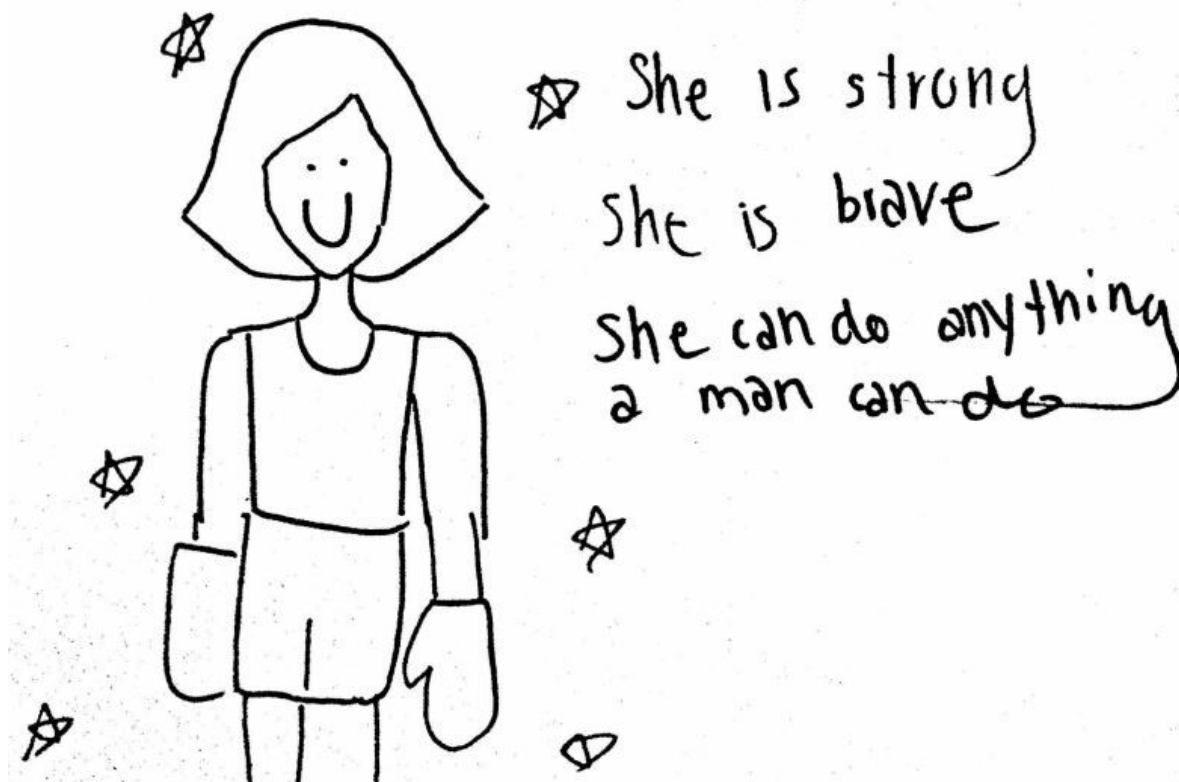
I've been in other programs where they're not as successful [as MJKO], and I just found over the years what it is – it's Miranda and her team there. She basically – she always portrays us in a positive way to the kids. Whenever we do the different activities, you know, one of the things is you lead by example – and that includes everybody – the police officers, the volunteers, everybody...I think she does things in a certain way. She's really good – she has a really good relationship with the kids and a really good handle on things. I don't know how to describe it, but she just – the kids will listen to her. She just knows how to talk to them, and she treats them fairly. She treats them with respect...she goes above and beyond as far as I'm concerned.

Toronto Police Services officers also described how MJKO's consistency and its sustainable programs were important to them, noting that *"MJKO is very consistent. All the time there [are] plenty of kids – the same kids – they all enjoy coming. And things like that we look for...the main thing is consistency."*

Focus group participants indicated they enjoyed MJKO's programs and were able to demonstrate – in varied and creative ways – that they aspired to educational and athletic achievement, and that they were benefiting from MJKO's non-contact boxing and life-skills programs. Participants indicated they were developing self-esteem and their capacity for 'hard work'. For example, one MJKO participant shared

Participating at MJKO makes me feel strong and proud. I feel confident that I can do anything. I also love the opportunity since my family couldn't afford the send me to a boxing program otherwise.

In Building a Better MJKO Part II, we reported MJKO had reached 1,157 new participants through 134 after-school classes. Part II extended the findings from the year-one report, using a focus group with Girls-Only Program participants (n=20), and semi-structured interviews with MJKO volunteers (n=7), the executive (n=1), and key external partners (n=3). Broadly, Girls-Only Program participants shared they were very satisfied with the program. For example, one participant shared that “*all the girls are really supportive and nice,*” while others were able to demonstrate – through artwork – how they felt about their experience in the Girls-Only Program. For example



Girls-Only Program participants also shared that they benefited from the relationships developed at MJKO. They described believing in and experiencing the ‘power of sport’ at MJKO, sharing *“sports are great because I meet every one of my friends at MJKO...[and] without sports I wouldn’t be the person I am today,”* and *“sport is great because it allows you to learn leadership and team qualities – you learn new things and make new friends.”*

In this third and final report – Building a Better MJKO Part III – we report research findings based on on-site observations and reflections from the lead researcher (Ryan Clutterbuck), a focus group with MJKO youth participants (n=12), and semi-structured interviews with MJKO alumni (n=11). We are also pleased to report that MJKO has submitted 1,407 post-surveys to OTF. Key themes [or evidence of organizational effectiveness] that emerged during the observations were (1) positive youth development, (2) social capital formation, (3) volunteers’ energy, enthusiasm, and expertise, and (4) positive contextual factors for sport for development. Key themes that emerged during the focus group activities were (1) combating negative habits, (2) strengthening social capital, and (3) developing pro-social life skills. And, key themes that emerged during the semi-structured interviews were (1) challenges facing youth, (2) strengthening social capital (bonds and bridges), (3) an inclusive and diverse organizational culture, (4) volunteer development/progression, (5) going ‘above and beyond’, (6) the desire to ‘pay it forward’ (see: community champions), (7) ambition to work and pursue higher education, and (8) skills development (e.g., leadership skills, communication skills, teamwork, and self-confidence). We are also pleased to report

that MJKO has conducted 720 hours of its programs with police presence and has [since 2016] served 2,108 youth participants through its non-contact boxing programs.

B. Research Methods

This report follows participatory action research (PAR) principles (see: Ferkins et al., 2009; Frisby et al., 2005). Notably, researchers and participants – acting as co-researchers – planned and developed the research questions and methods used in a collaborative back-and-forth process. Data were collected using (1) on-site observations by the lead researcher (following Glesne, 2011), (2) a focus group with MJKO youth participants (following Morgan, 2004), and (3) semi-structured interviews with MJKO alumni (following Patton, 2015). On-site observations were used to validate and verify what was [and has been] said during the focus groups and in individual semi-structured interviews. In preparation for, during, and after, the on-site observations, the lead researcher wrote detailed fieldnotes to capture the experience as it unfolded in real time. The lead researcher was also able to reflect on their positionality as both insider and an outsider to the research setting (see also: Rich & Misener, 2017). For example, on June 11, 2019 the lead researcher noted there were

aspects of the Parkdale community that were concerning. The homelessness and poverty circumstances [people are experiencing] are clear, as is the drug problem...to a degree that I am unfamiliar with – even as a Torontonian.

And on May 14th, 2019 the lead researcher noted

I started my observations and note-taking in the main room – and I quickly felt that this was not appropriate [because] I'm not part of the MJKO community, and

*it's likely that if I was introduced to participants...they may feel uncomfortable.
So, I'm now located in the MJKO office.*

Key themes from the on-site observations and reflections are offered in the next section.

On March 15, 2019 MJKO participants (n=12) joined the lead researcher and co-researchers from MJKO at the Champion Centre for approximately 90 minutes to discuss their experiences at MJKO. According to Glesne, *“group interviews are particularly useful in active and evaluation where participants can express multiple perspectives on a similar experience”* (2011, p. 130). Focus group participants ranged from six to 15 years old, and consent from a parent/guardian for their participation was obtained by MJKO prior to the focus group. Participants were asked to reflect on their experiences at MJKO in ways that were meaningful to them. Some wrote short stories while others wrote poems – following Cousin et al. (2005) who suggests that

Inviting people to recount their experiences in the story genre appears to create license for [participants] to express themselves freely...it reveals the intensity of [their] feelings towards their experiences. (p. 115)

Some particularly younger participants preferred to draw their responses to questions posed by the lead researcher, and Photovoice techniques were also used with the older participants to facilitate even deeper discussions (Wang & Burris, 1997). Data collected throughout the focus group (e.g., audio transcripts, written responses, and photographs) were analyzed using emergent [open] coding by the lead researcher (following Saldaña, 2015). The key themes and illustrative quotations from the focus group activities are presented in the next section.

Semi-structured interviews following Patton (2015), were conducted with a purposeful sample of MJKO alumni, who were selected to share their insights regarding MJKO's programs and their impact. According to Patton

The logic and power of purposeful sampling...leads to selecting information-rich cases for study in-depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance... (2002, p.46)

Alumni were asked to reflect on their experiences at MJKO, and aspects of the programs that were more [or less] useful to them in their current roles [e.g., as students, volunteers, and/or as workers]. They were asked whether they considered themselves to be '*community champions*', and whether they utilized life skills learned at MJKO. The semi-structured format allowed for probing follow-up questions to "*encourage the respondent to provide more information or to elaborate*" (DePoy & Gitlin, 2011, p. 189) on themes and issues that were most important and/or most relevant to them. With the participants' consent, the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Emergent [open] coding was undertaken by the lead researcher to identify themes within each transcript. Identified themes were then grouped into categories, notably: challenges facing youth; strengthening social capital; volunteer development; and going 'above and beyond'. Illustrative and representative quotations from the MJKO alumni are provided in the following section in "*rich, thick description...that allows the reader to enter the research context*" (Glesne, 2011, p. 49).

C. Research Findings

i. Observations

This report includes the first in-person observations and reflections from the lead researcher to date. The key themes [or evidence for organizational effectiveness] that emerged throughout this process were: (1) positive youth development; (2) social capital formation; (3) volunteers' energy, enthusiasm, and expertise; and (4) positive contextual factors for sport for development.

According to Gould and Carson (2008) positive youth development (PYD) is *Developing a general sense of self-worth, having a positive future orientation and learning how to adapt to different educational and working environments...the development of psychological attributes and dispositions (e.g., a sense of optimism or hope) and specific skills (e.g., the ability to set goals...)*. (p. 59)

Examples from the lead researchers' on-site evaluation notes, include

Safia is helping to set goals with youth who are now in a circle across the room. She is telling them about SMART goals and what that means. She asks participants to reflect on what their goals are and what they want to learn today. They respond: "To learn new things!" and "Learn boxing techniques!"

And

A participant who I interviewed comes into the office to shake my hand. He's the one who was banned from the gym for a year...the young man with [past] behavioural issues seems to be a pleasant and respectful person.

Social capital – the view that networks and norms of reciprocity have value (Putnam, 2000) – was evident within the lead researchers' fieldnotes. For example

Two brothers arrive [at the Champion Centre] wearing identical outfits. Safia indicates that they may be eligible to apply for jobs [at MJKO as part of a] Canada Summer Jobs Grant and that MJKO is conducting interviews today.

The lead researcher also identified the MJKO staff and volunteers' [e.g., Safia, Jimmy, and Miranda, among others'] energy, enthusiasm, and expertise during the on-site evaluations. For example, regarding volunteers' energy

It's five pm now and Miranda is working closely with an athlete. She's asking for more – 10 push-ups – jumps with two feet together – soft on the landing. Miranda comes into the office to grab her crossing guard jacket and is about to leave to take a child home [safe]...Miranda returns from her trip to walk the child home. She drops her crossing guard coat off and immediately re-joins the class.

Regarding volunteers' [e.g., Safia and Jimmy's] enthusiasm

IT IS MADNESS IN THE GYM AS BOXERS COMPLETE THE [DRILLS] MOVING FROM STATION TO STATION AS INSTRUCTED. "HANDS UP! HANDS UP! LET'S GO! LET'S GO!" AND – TIME.

And with respect to volunteers' expertise

It's amazing to see a former 8X Canadian Champion [Ibrahim] with the patience for these young people...Ibrahim seems to be role-modelling the sorts of

behaviours he's looking for from the students [e.g., confidence, focus, and composure].

Examples of the positive contextual factors for sport for development are

Miranda is able to provide one-on-one instruction to a youth boy with gloves and is face-to-face coaching and communicating with the young person. This does not happen in football or in other sports [that I am aware of] where coaching takes place in the huddle but not while participating in the sport itself.

As well as

Older participants arrive from outside where they were jumping rope. Now, they work together in the [boxing] ring while the youth play foot-tag. Note: they are leading their own workouts while the youth program continues.

ii. MJKO Focus Group III

Researchers utilized a variety of data gathering tools as part of the third focus group with MJKO participants on March 15th, 2019, including drawing activities (Yonas et al., 2009), personal narrative writing exercises (Cousin et al., 2005), and photovoice (Wang & Burris, 1997). Participants were asked to reflect on their experiences at MJKO and how those experiences impacted their daily lives. The key themes that emerged from the focus group were: (1) combating negative [generational] habits; (2) strengthening social capital; and (3) developing pro-social life skills (e.g., physical

literacy, self-confidence, and resilience). Regarding the importance of combating negative [generational] habits, one participant shared

I am now 12 years old and I will be talking about my life. Some things I like to do are...play tag, play games on my tablet, watch YouTube, and sleep...in grade four I had a friend who was in boxing [and] she told me it was fun and that I should join too. After joining boxing, I actually enjoyed it [and] then boxing became a big thing to me.

With respect to strengthening social capital, one youth shared that “MJKO helped me build great friendships,” while another indicated [via storytelling]

[At MJKO] I learned the art (or sport) of boxing. But that was not what I came here for. I came to learn to achieve my dreams through resilience and persistence – stuff taught in boxing...I have to be very persistent. Luckily there were people to help me out in times of distress.

Participants also shared that they were benefiting from developing pro-social life skills. For example, with respect to physical activity/physical literacy one participant shared they “like MJKO because you get to learn many things and I love the people who take care of me everyday. I love punching the bags and pads and I love skipping.” Regarding developing their self-confidence

When I came to MJKO I was really shy, but I got less shy when I met the people at MJKO. They are very kind and funny. I was really scared to try boxing but once I tried it I instantly fell in love with the sport. MJKO taught me to try new things and never be afraid because things will get better (eventually!).

Participants also indicated they developed resilience at MJKO, sharing

I will remember MJKO and how it helped me become a [athlete]. MJKO taught me how to try my hardest and never give up. They also taught me that girls can do anything just as well as boys.

Another participant shared [via poem] how they felt at MJKO

Here I am at last

MJKO will be fun

Now I'll go back home

This is a sports place

Here we are really healthy

This can be my place

-MJKO Participant

iii. MJKO Semi-structured Interviews [The Legacy Project]

For the first time in three years, in-depth semi-structured interviews were used to gather insights and to share the experiences of MJKO alumni [and/also volunteers].

There is a dearth of longitudinal research in sport for development and few studies championing the voice of participants in this way, so this represents a unique

contribution to the literature/scholarly community (see: Clutterbuck & Doherty, 2019;

Schulenkorf, 2017; and Sherry, Schulenkorf, & Chalip, 2015). The experiences of program participants also validate the mission of the organization to offer sport for development programs that impact youth in the Parkdale community – creating community champions – using a variety of sport-plus initiatives (Coalter, 2010). Key themes [or evidence of organizational effectiveness] that emerged during the semi-structured interviews are: (1) challenges facing youth; (2) strengthening social capital (bonds and bridges); (3) an inclusive and diverse organizational culture; (4) volunteer development/progression; (5) going ‘above and beyond’; (6) the desire to pay it forward (see: community champions); (7) ambition to work and pursue higher education; and (8) skills development (e.g., leadership, communication, teamwork, and self-confidence). Several alumni noted the challenges facing MJKO youth, including one who shared

I joined MJKO [3-5] years ago [and] I was in depression. My dad brought me to MJKO to help me get out of my depression [because] he thought that boxing would be a good way for me to get better...and after three months I was happy again. I got out of my depression – I got to meet lots of new people and make friends and do some physical activity. MJKO really changed my life for the better.

Several alumni shared stories about strengthening relationships at MJKO. For example

I joined MJKO [3-5 years ago]...[and] I stay because I found MJKO was a good place – a good place to, you know, hide yourself from trouble – from all of the distractions that’s going on. Every Saturday I make sure that when I’m down there boxing and meeting new people, I go to chat with a police officer because I’m interested in policing, and I really liked it since I’ve been going.

Another participant shared

I know a lot of people [at MJKO] – Safia for example. She’s great. I’ve been friends with her and Rio and Jimmy and all of them. All the coaches and some of the kids as well. Whenever I see them around the community they always say hi and say what’s up and you know, catch up. Yeah, we’re definitely friends.

Several participants indicated that MJKO was successful because of its diverse staff and volunteers and its inclusive culture. For example, one alumni participant shared their experience finding a ‘comfort zone’ at MJKO

My mom signed me up for it through Youth Assisting Youth, and she forced to go and I did not like [it] – I get very comfortable with certain areas and I don’t like to leave my comfort zone...my mom was trying to get me to do all these clubs or anything she could sign me up for so she could get me out of the apartment and make new friends...she forced me to go, but I ended up enjoying it and staying.

Another alumnus [and current volunteer] shared

[At] MJKO most of the employees are female. We have very diverse staffing and very diverse athletes. So when you walk in people are probably aren’t going to say it – but in the back of your head you’re like these people know boxing?

Several alumni [also current volunteers] noted the development opportunities they received as part of their new roles with the organization, including through new training and certifications. For example, one MJKO alumnus shared

I just started off as just like a participant – like a normal athlete. Then I joined the junior coaching program [where] I learned how to be a coach...And then last year was [the first] year I worked here!

Others shared similar experiences growing with MJKO

I started as an athlete and I started to develop a relationship with the kids and then I started working. Then, once I got hired I did my level one boxing coach [certification] and that's when I started coaching.

Some described MJKO [and Miranda and Ibrahim by name] as going 'above and beyond' in terms of their attention to both volunteers' and youth development. For example, one MJKO alumnus recalled

Miranda and Ibrahim – they went out of their way a lot of times to help me more than they necessarily needed to. More than above and beyond what would be [expected] for someone in their position as a boxing coach. They wanted to help me through tough times when I was going to be put in a group home. I remember at one point Miranda offered me a place to stay if I had to leave the group home because I didn't want to stay there anymore. I know most people would not – not many people would do that. Not many people would make an offer like [that]...I've seen many times that they've gone out of their way to help kids here.

Another alumnus shared

The coaches and everybody go out of their way to make sure kids have fun and can attend everything because a lot of the time they'll go pick up kids who can't

come because maybe their parents can't drop them off...they make sure that everybody has a chance to experience what everybody else experiences.

Several alumni indicated they planned to 'pay it forward' – acting as 'community champions' – having learned and benefited from MJKO programs themselves

You have certain values that you were taught while being at MJKO. It leaves an imprint that you take with you. It doesn't matter where you go – you spread it without actually really trying to – it just comes naturally. So I definitely consider myself a community champion because if there's anyway that I can help out in an event or [help] a person or group I love to do it. I love helping people and that's something I learned at MJKO.

Several alumni indicated their ambition to pursue higher education and careers in sport management, education, engineering, law, and medicine. One alumnus indicated they planned to “*continue with physical activity...maintaining connections...and being involved more with the community*” over the next five years. Another shared

I would see Miranda [and] I would always look up to her. I was like she's so cool – I want to do a job where I wake up every morning being like I can't wait to get to that job! Because a lot of people do jobs but they're not exactly happy. So I looked up to her and I want to be doing something like that.

Several alumni reflected on the skills learned at MJKO and how they impacted their education, their volunteering, and their professional lives. They shared what they felt was most impactful, including learning how to lead, how to communicate, how to cooperate through team building, and how to be more confident. Regarding leadership

I really make a point to have a relationship with the kids...no matter who comes in the gym – if I know you or if I don't know you – I try to make them feel welcome. I hate seeing anybody alone or by themselves, so the minute I see anybody even if they're just resting, I'm like come rest over here with us. I don't want them to ever feel excluded.

Another alumnus shared

I think being a leader and a role model. I think that's kind of in everybody. Everybody can be a leader, and everybody can be a role model. But what I think MJKO does is refine that idea and teach more aspects to it...I feel like [the coaching program in particular] really opened my eyes and showed me what happens that you really don't notice that coaches have to go through.

Regarding the importance of communication skills learned at MJKO

Something that is very weird is that the time where I feel like everybody talks casually the most is when we are 'wrapping'. When you are wrapping your hands...that's when everybody is together. You're all in the same area and you're all doing the same thing and you're talking as you're doing it.

Another MJKO alumnus shared

I think that was one of the biggest skills that I've gained – being able to communicate clearly. Because in university you have to write a lot of emails...or maybe you call your teammate or text them. [MJKO] helped with that.

Regarding developing teamwork skills in an individual sport

Even if we're sparring together...we are still on the same team and we're trying to help each other improve.

And

It's not just like hitting a bag or hitting each other...You learn to respect the fighter and you learn confidence. You might come to the gym – you might hit the bag – but if you look around, you'll see the people – they all work together.

In terms of developing self-confidence, several alumni described how being involved at MJKO had impacted their lives for the better

I don't exactly have the highest self-esteem...I was bullied a lot in middle school and in every sport that I tried...I just felt bad about myself. At MJKO they never made me feel that way even though I at the time I wasn't very athletic. I tried my best every time and they made me feel good about myself even if I was just doing the best I could. It's hard for me to explain – but for me I just felt more comfortable there.

Another alumnus shared MJKO taught them to

Be confident with yourself and never give up...You always keep fighting even when you're down. A lot of kids have mental issues, right. I've seen kids get bullied every time in high school. So you have to be confident. Don't give up on yourself...[non-contact boxing] teaches you to be self confident and to be comfortable in your own skin...no matter what – be confident and never give up!

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