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TURNING THE LEADERSHIP CORNER: Introduction to Special Edition on Innovative Youth Engagement Strategies

This special edition of *Insight* spotlights the “Y” in GCYF-Youth. We intend to frame and illustrate strong currents in both youth development practices and community initiatives that move beyond the gloom cast by our culture on today’s youth. Our hope is to stimulate an ongoing, forward-moving discussion about highly promising, innovative ways to think about and support youth—ways that emphasize young people’s talents, perspectives, and most significantly, their leadership in important public arenas and decision-making. In particular, we herald a deep shift in thinking and practice that regards America’s youth not just as assets and resources, but also as leaders and stakeholders in communities. Abandoning the narrow sidelines of inaction and disengagement, growing numbers of youth have already demonstrated the possibilities and power of shared leadership, mutual respect and community transformation.

These young people are tackling critical questions about their difficult and, in too many cases, declining circumstances. Why does my class have only one textbook to use? Why are a huge percentage of my classmates failing high school assessment exams? Why does my school have more police guards than counselors? Why is my community polluted, while other areas remain green and clean? Why doesn’t my neighborhood have a local high school? Where

are the banks for people in my community? These are among the many dilemmas deeply concerning young people today.

Youth are one of the largest, fastest growing and increasingly diverse populations in the U.S. today. Yet this booming population faces shrinking resources and disinvestment in every important public sphere of their lives—at home, school, work, and in neighborhoods. Increasing poverty and decreasing opportuni-

ties, compounded by worsening public perception of adolescents as apathetic at a minimum, or outright criminal at worst, distort and threaten our young people, communities and very democracy. Youth culture, language and preferences seem alien and even frightening for uninformed or disconnected adults, who are left to associate adolescence with an increasing predilection for sex, drugs and violence. Intergenerational misunderstandings, miscommunication, and indeed mistrust are nothing new. But in today’s social and political landscape, such alienation has direct and dire consequences—on young people themselves, on public policy and resource allocation, and on overall community health. Fortunately, emerging trends are steering us towards a more productive course.

Throughout this edition, the authors argue that, far from a simple exercise or “program,” full youth participation in addressing and solving serious social problems can have positive, far-ranging effects. Further, active and meaningful leadership, especially for low-income and underprivileged youth, may well provide new, long-sought pathways toward healthy development—not only for individual young people, but also for whole communities. Simply put, a new generation of organizations is emerging to provide supports and opportu-

nities for youth to develop with *individual* and *public* purpose—to exercise and apply leadership, intelligence and empathy for the betterment of community.

MOST PRESSING CHALLENGES FOR TODAY'S YOUTH

Poverty. No population has felt the erosion of public resources for social services and public infrastructures over the past three decades more keenly than youth. Shifting investments away from public schools, higher education, youth services and employment have perpetuated cross-generational cycles of dismal academic performance, high school dropout, incarceration and increased poverty. In 2001, more children below the age of 18 lived in poverty than 30 years earlier (11.7 million or one out of every six). This year, joblessness among youth rose to 59.1% in June 2003, setting a 55-year record high. At the same time, legislation is being proposed to eliminate workforce training programs for young people in many states. With limited access to needed supports and opportunities, low-income and underprivileged youth—as in previous generations—struggle to find pathways out of poverty.

Education. Students, teachers, parents, policymakers and politicians alike are distressed by the state of public education and poor academic achievement in the United States. School reform efforts, however, often exclude the very population most affected by education issues—young people. A preoccupation with standards testing and punishment often rests blame on students for inadequate learning, and ignores questions of equity and access to quality education, particularly in low-income, urban neighborhoods. Sliding resources for education, coupled with increasing dollars for prison and juvenile detention center construction, point to a low prioritization of education.

Juvenile Justice. As a demonstration of public policy and will, America has built prisons and juvenile facilities at an alarmingly increasing rate for the past 20 years. Too many run-ins with the juvenile justice system have overpopulated one of the fastest growing public/private sectors charged with youth “care” and rehabilitation, particularly with teenagers and young adults from low-income communities of color. Given the past decade’s steady decline in juvenile crime, this sector growth suggests other causal factors, including increased punitive policies and responses to youth indiscretions working in tandem with excessive media representation of young people as delinquents and criminals. A youth group in Oakland, CA collected data reinforcing the argument, pointing out a major local news program’s disproportionate focus on youth and crime (63% of all youth-related stories in a three month period). Crime remains the primary media lens for adult and mainstream audiences into adolescent lives.

FROM DEFICITS TO ASSETS

As illustrated by the articles in this edition, a new generation of dynamic young leaders is confronting these core social challenges and others. Major shifts in youth development theory and practice have converged to bring the much-needed energy and attention of youth and youth allies to these tremendous public problems. Extensive research and literature has documented the shift from a deficit-based approach (young people as a collection of problems and deficiencies) to what is popularly called a “positive youth development” approach (youth as assets).

Over a decade ago, pioneering researchers and youth advocates, Karen Pittman and Michelle Cahill, developed new terminology and models reframing youth as community assets. Opportunities for youth, translated primarily into after-school programming, shifted away from problem prevention (reduce

Rather than wait for a nonspecific time when childhood and adolescence end and adulthood begins, youth development and civic engagement theory demonstrates that young people have the capacity *now* to address serious problems in their institutions and communities.

pregnancy, prevent violence, avoid crime) toward a more positive set of activities (learning, serving, participating). Positive youth development’s reverberations were felt widely, laying fertile ground for young people’s involvement in the civic arena, through service learning, volunteerism, and “youth as resources” programs. Proponents of youth development invited the general public to imagine and actualize young people’s contributions to the community, not simply their drains on it.

FROM ASSETS TO LEADERS: A NEW PARADIGM SHIFT

Building on the first, a second profound paradigm shift is now underway. Young people themselves have pushed development and engagement models further—from community participation to community leadership. The new thinking and strategies are truly innovative, deal more directly with the social and political contexts, and place great emphasis on inclusiveness, collectivity and process, in addition to outcomes and change.

This second paradigm shift rests on three underlying assumptions:

Healthy youth development and healthy community development are inextricable. Youth are central members of a community, and their well being therefore is an irreplaceable ingredient to overall community vibrancy. If community development efforts overlook youth, the community suffers accordingly.

Youth development remains incomplete without the vital interest of young people in their own communities and their participation as community members and leaders. Ensuring this reciprocity can lead to healthier outcomes for both individual youth and communities as a whole.

Youth leadership, therefore, is fundamental to youth and community development, especially for low-income youth. The second paradigm shift underscores the primacy of youth leadership as a developmental imperative. Instead of luxuries or mere extra-curricular pastimes, learning to tackle significant issues affecting the community (poverty, education, justice, opportunity, voice) must come to be seen as part of a direct path to growing up engaged, involved and optimistic. Rather than wait for a nonspecific time when childhood and adolescence end and adulthood begins, youth development and civic engagement theory

demonstrates that young people have the capacity *now* to address serious problems in their institutions and communities. In order to do so, however, they need opportunities, training and adult allies.

Equally important, communities need to look to youth leadership strategies to ensure that institutions, policies and practices are responsive to the needs of young people and their families, and that the principles of democracy are honored and upheld. Who else better understands the impact education policies and school practices have on students and learning than youth themselves? Who else better understands the limitations and challenges of the juvenile justice system than detained youth themselves? In countless arenas, the lack of youth leadership and meaningful youth involvement reinforce intergenerational barriers and misunderstandings, and lead to misinformed and often repressive, anti-youth policymaking.

For low-income youth experiencing heightened isolation and disaffection, the development and exercise of leadership holds deep resonance in combating the seeming hopelessness of their circumstances. Through a new sense of power and self-efficacy obtained through active and collective leadership, these youth begin to understand their lives in the context of larger forces and systems, and the potential for change and improvement.

Finally, contrary to prevailing public perception, youth are not apathetic, just discouraged.

Recent research indicating that the majority of young people are engaged in some level of community service refutes the portrayal of youth as apathetic and indifferent. Dismal rates of electoral participation suggest that youth are instead discouraged, failing to see the relevance and impact of mere voting and turning to service, volunteerism and activism in peak numbers as ways to directly impact the environment around them.

INNOVATIVE YOUTH LEADERSHIP STRATEGIES

We have chosen to highlight three key strategies that embrace the second paradigm shift and operate according to these principles of youth leadership development for community change: youth organizing, youth media and youth participatory research.

YOUTH ORGANIZING

Combining America's long tradition of community organizing with youth development knowledge and practice, a growing roster of advocates are now propounding youth organizing as a powerful strategy that brings relevance, enthusiasm and importance to the skills young people need to acquire. Increasing numbers of community-based groups are embracing youth organizing as a youth development and social change strategy that trains young people in community organizing and advocacy, and assists them in employing these skills to alter power relations and create meaningful system change in their communities.

In "Youth Organizing: A Powerful Approach to Positive Youth Development and Community Change," Jeremy Lahoud from the Southwest Youth Collaborative in Chicago explores why organizing is a necessary strategy for promoting the holistic development of young people, particularly in low-income communities and communities of color. Through activities including leadership and skills training, issue analysis, campaign development, public education, outreach and collective action, he argues that youth organizing builds concrete skills, such as teamwork, conflict resolution, public speaking, critical and analytical thinking and research.

Lahoud examines youth organizing's ability to promote strong individual development through the crucible of a larger peer group and the lens of community improvement. The collective context and focus on hard realities facing youth mark a shift away from inward-looking individual development towards wider concerns. More than a training ground for decision-making and leadership assumption, youth organizing enables young people to participate in, shape and lead democratic processes, decision-making and innovation that impact their schools, homes and communities. A discussion and examples of how youth organizing brings about transformation on multiple levels is presented in Lahoud's piece later in this newsletter.

YOUTH MEDIA

Everyday, millions of advertisements, television shows and other images bombard young

people, shaping their worldview while simultaneously priming them as consumers. At the same time, negative perceptions of adolescents as listless slackers, amoral consumers or baby criminals abound in the media. In response, a new generation of media organizations is training young people to be creative, thoughtful and savvy re-makers of their own images in the public domain. These projects not only provide outlets for personal identity exploration and expression, they also engage youth and their peers in study, dialogue and reflection about their local and global surroundings.

"Youth Media: Transforming Lives, Building Communities and Fostering Understanding", written by twenty year-old Marianna Hernandez at Youth Communication, underscores the value and importance of empowering young people to reflect and validate genuine, positive images of themselves. The author explores the underlying philosophy and general objectives of youth-produced media, as well as its far-reaching impact on participants, broader audiences and communities. The author also provides a sense of the diverse approaches of youth media organizations, including creative expression and writing, journalism, media advocacy, political education and media accountability. Fundamentally, the imperative to shift public opinion and will toward greater positivity for today's youth compels deeper consideration of mass media influence and the inclusion of youth voice in public discourse.

YOUTH PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH

Change is hard to justify and achieve without adequate, persuasive data and analysis. A new breed of organizations is realizing that information and research are powerful and necessary. But research has been largely inaccessible to youth for promoting community improvement and social justice. Increasingly, organizations are addressing the need for greater community ownership over knowledge, and linking the development of youth through training in research, evaluation and assessment skills, to the development of communities through research application and action.

This arena has emerged as a means both for strengthening academic competencies while deepening young people's capacity to be knowledgeable, articulate leaders. Through meaningful leadership opportunities and a critical analysis of social inequities, young people are generating powerful learning for programmatic, organizational and community improvement, and collaborating and building relationships with adults in mutually beneficial ways. The practice and power of successful

YOUNG MEDIA MAKERS FROM EDUCATIONAL VIDEO CENTER. EVC DEVELOPS THE LITERACY, CRITICAL THINKING AND WORK READINESS SKILLS OF INNER CITY YOUTH THROUGH CREATIVE, COMMUNITY-BASED USE OF VIDEO AND MULTI-MEDIA



youth-led research are discussed by Jonathan London from Youth In Focus in “Youth-led REP: Building Critical Consciousness for Social Change.”

YOUTH LEADERS TAKE ACTION

Disenchanted with electoral politics yet still deeply committed to community life, swelling numbers of youth are seizing these opportunities for leadership and meaningful engagement. Young people are *pushing back* at the social, political, and nonprofit landscapes, debunking stereotypes of depressed, listless and disengaged misfits. They are grabbing the reins and becoming players in their own neighborhoods and institutions. These youth are posing fundamental questions from the vantage point of first-hand experience, investigating the root causes of the inconsistencies and inequities they face, and taking deliberate action to reshape their contexts and change public will.

In doing so, youth are partnering with adults to hold systems, institutions and policy makers accountable to communities and families. At the same time, young people are deepening their leadership skills and building key, developmental competencies to be intelligent, civically minded and responsible community members. How can youth leadership, combined with a deep sense of empathy and compassion, help shape our children, youth, families, communities and society? What visions and practices for the world emerge from such a bold social partnership put forth by the second important paradigm shift? Considering the impact 60 million people between the ages of 10 and 24 have on our world now and into the future, these are critical questions for everyone.

This edition of the Insight is a modest introduction to a crucial, pressing, and provocative conversation we must all have together about the challenges and opportunities experienced by young people today. In brightening the dimmed spotlight on today's young people, our hope is that GCYF will continue to serve as a forum through which discussions and strategies about youth leadership and civic engagement continue to deepen and ripen.

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YOUTH ORGANIZING: A Powerful Approach to Positive Youth Development and Community Change

INTRODUCING...

In 1999, 15 year old Azusena Olaguez attended a community meeting where a local park advisory council rejected proposals for youth representation. The dismaying experience catalyzed Azusena to become a leader in Generation Y, a youth-led organizing project sponsored by Chicago's Southwest Youth Collaborative. Asuzena remembers:

Youth were perceived as inexperienced and not intelligent enough to discuss community programs even though we are the ones who use these programs. The fact that the adults on the council wouldn't let a bunch of youth walk in and make changes actually motivated me to get involved with an organization that would allow young people to make a change. I wanted a chance to prove that we could do something positive. The young people who were involved in Generation Y at the time were very motivated and open-minded towards making a change. You don't meet a lot of peers like that in school. The Youth Organizer also made it clear that things weren't going to change from one day to the next. Making real changes in my community takes a while and knowing that I had dedicated peers encouraged me to stay committed.

Azusena put this energy to practice, helping to lead a campaign to prevent the City of Chicago from eliminating more than 15,000 summer jobs for youth. Because youth leaders conducted research, gave testimonies, and held demonstrations at the Mayor's Office of Workforce Development, the city reversed its plan to drastically downsize the summer jobs program and actually increased the number of jobs provided to low-income youth of color on Chicago's Southwest side. She reflects:

Preparing for a meeting with the Commissioner of Workforce Development

seemed hard, but it gave us the opportunity to sit down and prepare a speech and do our research. We had to have clear reasons for why we needed summer jobs. In debate team at school we did some research, but in organizing we go more in-depth about an issue and look at the root causes and who the issue affects. And facilitating workshops is kind of like being a teacher, but in school they never give us the opportunity to teach our peers in the way we want.

Not only did youth organizing help build Azusena's analytical skills at a deep level, it allowed her to develop strong peer relationships and play a prominent leadership role in collective efforts to apply those skills towards external change. Through organizing, Azusena developed skills and competencies that she might not have otherwise gained.

Now 19, Azusena is a part-time staff organizer for Generation Y, helping young people win a host of positive changes in their schools and community. For the past four years, she has helped to shape Generation Y as an organization, formulating youth-led campaigns, creating her own workshop curriculum, and facilitating the skills development of her peers.

WHAT IS YOUTH ORGANIZING?

As the Lead Organizer for Generation Y, I am often asked, what is youth organizing? How does it work? Can youth really engage



YOUNG LEADERS OF GENERATION Y OF THE SOUTHWEST YOUTH COLLABORATIVE

in policy level change? How does this help young people develop in positive ways? Why is it an important way to engage young people? For me, the answers are clear.

Youth organizing is an innovative approach that builds the leadership and power of young people to organize for community and institutional change. Although community-based social change efforts have involved the leadership of youth for decades, youth organizing emerged as a distinct, recognizable field of organizations and practitioners in the mid-to late-1990s, especially in urban America.

Although a wide range of youth organizing models exist, all approaches integrate several key aspects into their process. **First, all youth organizing models engage in leadership development and skill building among the young leaders and members of the organization.** Formal and informal experiences, such as workshops in the nuts and bolts of community organizing, intensive summer organizing internships, and issue-specific analysis sessions help build the analytical capacity and practical skills young people need to engage in community organizing. Youth leaders also employ strategies to reach out to the community, recruit new members, and broaden the base of the organization. This allows young people to put their new communication and leadership skills into practice.

Second, all youth organizing involves young people in identifying, analyzing, and researching community issues and power relationships. These community assessment and action research practices allow young people to prioritize issues and solutions through a democratic framework that keeps them accountable to their communities.

Third, youth organizing groups develop, conduct, and evaluate campaigns to assess how their community and institutional change efforts influence institutional decision-makers around the issues they determine. Campaign evaluation allows young people to reflect on their own individual and group development and assess the impact of their efforts on the broader community and its institutions.

These models and strategies are often a very natural fit for young people. Adolescence is a time when youth naturally begin to question themselves, authority, and the world around them. For young people who struggle to grow up in the face of poverty and discrimination, understanding the systems and policies surrounding them is not a choice, but an inevitable part of life. Low-income youth, youth of color, young women, and LGBT youth are forced to face larger realities of inequity and discrimination firsthand. Preparing new generations of young people to face this reality *proactively*, rather than reacting in fear and frustration, is how youth organizing meets youth where they are, and challenges them to go further. More than a personal empowerment exercise, young

Young People Organizing for Social Change

CAAAV: Organizing Asian Communities

The Southeast Asian Youth Leadership Project of CAAAV: Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence, rooted in the Cambodian and Vietnamese community of the Northwest Bronx, is a premier example of how youth organizing builds the skills and competencies of working class immigrant youth of color, while providing authentic opportunities to serve as today's leaders on community-wide issues. In a community composed of 60% youth, CAAAV has made a commitment to provide resources and experiences to develop neighborhood youth as bi-cultural, bilingual community leaders. Every year, the Youth Leadership project runs an eight-week summer institute for young people to develop their nuts-and-bolts organizing skills, learn about race, class, and gender issues, and study the history of colonialism in their home countries. At the end of the summer, the youth organize their own community project to apply their knowledge and skills to effect real change in their lives.

One young leader, Borann, remembers, "In 1999, I came to a free karate lesson that CAAAV provided to recruit young people and at the end they ran a discussion about patriarchy and how women are oppressed. The discussion was pretty deep for me at the time, so I decided to stay on and join the summer program." In the summer of 2000, Borann, who arrived in the U.S. with his family as a Cambodian refugee in 1989, played a lead role in CAAAV's campaign around welfare and immigrant rights. To help produce *Eating Welfare*, a 60-minute documentary about Southeast Asian families living on welfare, he and other youth organizers documented their families' experiences and tracked abuses at workfare sites, places where welfare recipients are required to work and provide labor for less than minimum wage. "On the last day of the video project, we organized a sit-in at the welfare office and were able to win translation services for Southeast Asian families at the welfare office," Borann recalls.

In addition to gaining fully bilingual caseworkers, the campaign ensured that no one could be removed from public aid without due process and that educational credit qualified as an alternative to the city's workfare requirement. As a young man who grew up in a household on welfare, Borann was allowed to tackle issues that affected not only him and his family, but many low-income families in his community. "All of the work of our youth is done in partnership with adults," explains Eric Tang, Lead Organizer for CAAAV's Youth Leadership Project, "but none of the issues the youth have ever worked on haven't impacted their lives as well." Borann's experience manifests one of the great strengths of organizing—that the development of individuals and groups of youth has ripple effects, and leads to the development of scores of other youth and the community overall.

Now 21-years old and about to graduate from college, Borann is the lead coordinator for CAAAV's campaign to oppose the increasing deportation of Cambodian refugees since September 11, 2001. "The government is really targeting young folks who bridge the gap between the elders in the community and broader society," comments Borann. Borann recognizes the personal development gained through his four years participating with CAAAV. "It really changed my whole life and how I live my life," he reflects. "I've had the privilege to pursue higher education and I'm actually thinking about becoming a teacher and educating young folks about the history of war and their own history as Southeast Asians." His experience with CAAAV is not an isolated occurrence. Like so many youth organizing projects in working class communities of color, the Youth Leadership Project is one of the few opportunities providing young people with a positive alternative. "A lot of kids in this community who would turn to gangs and violence get involved in CAAAV instead," says Borann. "Nobody else really teaches us about the stuff that CAAAV does."

Steering young people away from an inward, self-interested focus towards an outward concern for the community and world, youth organizing helps young people move from a place of anger, despondency and defeat to one of empathy, compassion and action.

people's organizing efforts are paying off, yielding real victories that address the hardships they and their families endure, as Asuzena's story illustrates. This push is what adds so much to the fields of positive youth development and community organizing.

YOUTH ORGANIZING: ADVANCING NEW POSSIBILITIES

Blending the best practices of positive youth development programs and direct-action community organizing, youth organizing achieves real developmental gains with youth, especially in critical thinking, sense of self-confidence, and positive relationship building with peers and adults. Many of the strategies that young people employ in youth organizing—such as conducting youth-generated surveys on education issues and publishing their research findings in a written report—help youth participants develop critical thinking, problem solving, and written communication skills. A high school student who testifies at a youth-led statewide legislative hearing about her struggle with standardized testing gains important public speaking skills and self-confidence. Common experiences in youth organizing such as facilitating meetings, knocking on neighbors' doors, and planning group actions like a rally or accountability session help build young peoples' social, cultural, and civic competencies.

Going a step beyond many traditional approaches to youth development, youth organizing also fosters a commitment to a vision of social equity, engenders deep strategic thinking and problem solving skills, and involves youth in experiences that directly connect them to their broader community in pursuit of that vision. This pursuit of principles put into practice is based on developing young people's leadership capacity, both in preparation for action and through action itself.

In their forthcoming study, *The Youth Development Experience*, Reed Larson, Kate Walker, and Natasha Watkins at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign intensely examined participants' experiences with development in three programs for high-school-aged youth. Only one of the programs focused on youth organizing in which "young people undertake action campaigns to address problems that directly affect their lives." According to the study, young people involved in the youth organizing program "reported a type of advanced strategic thinking not seen in other programs. The youth gained insights on how to problem-solve, consider contingencies,

and organize steps in their work in order to effectively accomplish an end."

This analytical emphasis and application of problem-solving ability in everyday life is often missing from other approaches to youth development. It is also often the critical "missing link" in engagement for youth making sense of pressing social forces on their lives, their families, and their schools. All models of youth organizing engage young people in analyzing the community and social factors that impact their own lives, assessing the social and political forces that shape community issues, and strategizing how young people can build power to make positive community change. In youth organizing, a collective, democratic decision-making process driven by young people to determine how a community and its institutions should address problems and implement solutions complements this analysis. Finally, youth organizing provides opportunities for young people to take on collective projects contingent on peer and adult relationships and advanced teamwork while actually putting their analyses into action to improve institutional practices and policies.

In a society that, at best, views youth as "the future waiting to happen" and, at worst, as criminals, youth organizing offers a space for young people to make positive meaning out of their lives in connection with others. By connecting individual youth with a dedicated, youth-led collective, youth organizing enlarges the possibilities for them to have an impact. It develops youth, especially underprivileged youth, as community leaders for the here and now, not just for a distant tomorrow. The fact that youth organizing connects the experiences and development of individual young people with broader political and community issues makes it a necessary strategy for promoting the holistic development of youth, particularly low-income youth, youth of color, and other young people facing systemic barriers.

IN CONCLUSION

Across the nation, youth organizing continues to be a strong, developing, yet under-resourced, approach to positive youth development and community change. Steering young people away from an inward, self-interested focus towards an outward concern for the community and world, youth organizing helps young people move from a place of anger, despondency and defeat to one of empathy, compassion and action. Youth organizing helps provide young people and the adults who support them with

a vision for social justice and community change—a challenging vision, but a vision that youth can carry throughout their lives.

In my experience, no other strategy enables young people to simultaneously gain personal competencies, impact their community, and expand their worldview as well as youth organizing. It is a unique approach that deeply emphasizes practical, self-determined solutions for low-income youth of color and other disadvantaged youth struggling with systemic issues affecting their lives. Youth organizing is one of the few engagement strategies that deliberately connects a young person's lived experience with issues affecting the lives of countless other people, building a sense of community, collectivity and compassion. All these reasons and more makes youth organizing a critical strategy to further the development of our young people, communities, and society. It is imperative that youth organizing receive financial, human, and organizational support.

Jeremy Laboud is Lead Organizer for the Southwest Youth Collaborative, a community-based youth and family organization on Chicago's southwest side. Since 1997, he has acted as lead Youth Organizer for Generation Y.

SOME SUGGESTED READINGS ABOUT YOUTH ORGANIZING

FUNDERS' COLLABORATIVE ON YOUTH ORGANIZING: Occasional Paper Series, available for download at www.fcyo.org, about the core principles, practices and impacts of youth organizing.

LISTEN. INC. (www.lisn.org): Forthcoming report based on interviews with 52 youth organizers from across the country.

FORUM FOR YOUTH INVESTMENT (www.forumforyouthinvestment.org): Forthcoming report about "Youth Action for Educational Change" will be available in Summer 2003.

WHAT KIDS CAN DO (www.whatkidscando.org): Online/print publication documenting the value of young people working for a public purpose.

NEW DIRECTIONS FOR YOUTH DEVELOPMENT JOURNAL, Youth Participation: Improving Institutions and Communities. No. 96. (Spring 2003).

NEW YORK UNIVERSITY, INSTITUTE FOR EDUCATION AND SOCIAL POLICY. Organizing for School Reform: How Communities Are Finding Their Voices and Reclaiming Their Public Schools. Medirrata, K., Fruchter, N. and Lewis, A. (2002).

SNEAK PEEK ON RESEARCH: Intersection of Civic Activism and Youth Development

This article presents a snap-shot preview of results from a two-year evaluation of the Youth Leadership Development Initiative (YLDI), an initiative launched by the Ford Foundation and the Innovation Center (IC) for Community and Youth Development. YLDI was designed to inform the youth development field, which has effectively shifted dialogue from problem prevention to support of healthy growth and development of young people. The Ford Foundation and IC recognized that, despite the positive shift in emphasis heralded by the youth development movement, there were some issues yet to be fully addressed within the existing youth development framework. In particular, they believed that youth development practitioners often failed to “deal effectively with the twin issues of youth identity and meaningful engagement of young people in leadership and decision making,” and they perceived that the infusion of these principles into youth development would strengthen the field as a whole. Believing that many civic activism groups are effective at addressing issues of identity and youth leadership, the Ford Foundation and IC argued, “positive youth development can be strengthened by integrating the theory, information and skills of civic activism.”

Thus, in 1999 the Ford Foundation funded 12 organizations and IC to engage in a three-year, capacity building, learning group on civic activism, which they described as “a forceful, dynamic strategy that recognizes that young people are capable of addressing societal problems and concerns and [civic activism] provides a forum for them to do so.” In 2001, Social Policy Research Associates (SPR) joined the YLDI learning collaborative to conduct the evaluation of YLDI. Some of our goals were to (1) assess the degree to which civic activism is an effective youth development strategy for vulnerable youth populations, and (2) strengthen the field of youth development by documenting lessons learned and best practices of the 12 YLDI grantees across the nation.

After two years of intensive data collection including youth surveys, observation of program activities, and interviews with YLDI project leaders, staff and youth, we have gained important insights on the influence of civic activism on youth development outcomes. In this article, we highlight some of our emerging findings on *youth organizing* as a strategy for youth development. The full text of our findings across all of the YLDI

organizations can be found in our upcoming report to be disseminated in Fall 2003.

HIGHLIGHTS OF FINDINGS ON YOUTH ORGANIZING GROUPS

Of the 11 community-based organizations in our study, five had a consistent and active focus on youth organizing. Although all YLDI organizations had a community-engagement component to their work, the community change focus of youth organizing groups was more systematic and sustained. We define youth organizing as those organizations that have active and ongoing components of (1) leadership and skills training, (2) identification of pressing issues and campaign development, and (3) mobilization and collective action. These organizations within the YLDI group included Youth United for Community Action (East Palo Alto CA), Asian Immigrant Women Advocates (San Francisco, CA), C-Beyond (Concord, CA), Young Women Project (Washington, DC), and Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice (Bronx, NY).

This article draws considerably from our survey data on youth organizing groups and on data from *non-YLDI* youth development organizations that have administered the same

survey. We have data on 77 youth within 5 youth organizing groups, and 363 youth within 5 youth development organizations. Demographically, the youth organizing group has a *smaller* percentage of white respondents than does the youth development group (12% compared to 30%), and thus a higher percentage of youth of color. At least half of the youth within each set of organizations fell between the ages of 16-19, but this was higher for youth organizing groups (72% compared to 50%). In terms of frequency of attendance, about half (54%) of respondents from youth organizing groups had been at the organization “every day” in the preceding month, which is slightly lower than the non-YLDI organizations (60%). Although they attended the organization slightly less frequently than the non-YLDI respondents, they had been with the organization longer. Only 3% of youth within organizing groups had been with the organization for less than one month, compared to one-fourth (25%) in non-YLDI groups. In sum, respondents within youth organizing groups were on average older, more racially diverse, and more deeply involved in the organization than were respondents in the non-YLDI organizations.

To analyze the survey data, we worked with Dr. Michelle Gambone of Youth Development Strategies Inc (YDSI) to determine if youth were getting a *consistently high* level (optimal) or an *inconsistent* level of supports and opportunities in each of six key developmental areas: relationship building, safety, youth leadership, skill building, community involvement/civic activism, and identity. These areas parallel the features of positive developmental settings recently identified by the National Research Council. Below, we highlight our most provocative findings on youth organizing groups.

FINDING 1: YOUTH INVOLVED IN ORGANIZING SHOW HIGH LEVELS OF YOUTH LEADERSHIP.

Our survey results show that 28% of youth involved in youth organizing have consistent (optimal) opportunities for leadership development. Results for the youth organizing group are *seven times higher* than those reported in other youth development organizations (4% optimal). We know that, from our work with youth development agencies, promoting authentic youth leadership is difficult for youth practitioners. Youth organizing, however, appears to be very effective in this area, primarily due to the fields’ emphasis on grassroots leadership, which in turn leads to more authentic youth involvement in organizational decision-making. Youth organizing groups were more likely than other youth development organizations to be youth-led or to have youth-led projects; this was in large part responsible for their positive youth leadership results.

“An activist is someone who fights for the rights of people. They gather a group of people to fight for a cause that is just. Activism is not about the individual—it’s about the whole team. You can’t make changes on your own. You need a group of people to work with you. It’s like basketball—Michael Jordan is nothing without his team.”

—*Youth, Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice.*

“What we do here becomes internalized. The logic, the tools of organizing, the research, the evaluation, planning ahead, all of that influences them. So, if they have a family problem, they can apply these techniques to their everyday life.”

—*Young Adult Staff, Youth United for Community Action*

FINDING 2: YOUTH INVOLVED IN ORGANIZING SHOW HIGH LEVELS OF COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT.

Youth organizing groups excelled in community involvement and civic activism—with more than half (57%) of young people within these groups reporting consistent opportunities to engage in their community. These results are *almost three times* higher than other youth development organizations that have administered this survey. Youth organizers were not only knowledgeable about their communities and ways to take action, they were also able to cite tangible community outcomes stemming from their efforts. For example, youth from the Young Women’s Project helped develop a sexual discrimination policy in Washington D.C. schools, while youth at C-Beyond defeated a city council effort to put a daytime curfew in effect for teens. Impressively, youth organizers at Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice secured \$500,000 from the New York Parks Department to clean up the polluted Bronx River. These victories contributed to a sense of collective or group empowerment.

FINDINGS 3: YOUTH INVOLVED IN ORGANIZING SHOW HIGH LEVELS OF RELATIONSHIP BUILDING.

Our data indicates that youth organizing groups were successful at building caring and supportive relationships. Seventy-one percent of youth involved in organizing groups consis-

tently experience meaningful relationships with adults and peers within their organizations, compared to 33% of youth within the non-YLDI youth organizations that have administered the survey. Particularly notable is the high percentage of youth who reported knowing other youth well (78% optimal). This is consistent with the youth organizing practice of engaging youth in intensive, small, cooperative group settings with much emphasis on increasing peer-to-peer knowledge.

AREAS FOR REFLECTION

Although our results clearly show that youth organizing holds great promise for supporting authentic youth leadership, as well as actively engaging youth in community change, there are some areas for youth organizing leaders to consider. First, it should be noted that youth organizing staff tend to intentionally focus on working with a small core of youth to train them to lead their large membership. Along with the organizing focus and leadership structure, *the more intensive focus of staff time and resources on fewer youth may be a significant factor in the positive results reported above.* A formal cost-benefit analysis of youth organizing, which takes into account the significance of community change victories, as well as outcomes within the membership-base of youth organizing groups, would be helpful for understanding the impact of youth organizing compared to other youth intervention strategies.

Although a much less significant difference than other findings reported in this article, some young people in youth organizing groups reported a “*less than optimal*” sense

of physical safety in their organizations compared to youth in youth development organizations (38% compared to 48% for other organizations within YLDI that serve youth in similar urbanized, low-income communities). It should be noted, however, that *none* of youth organizing youth report “*insufficient*” levels of physical safety. From some of the qualitative data, youth leaders did express some concerns about doing outreach in different settings (i.e., garment factories, some parts of their neighborhoods) that they felt were unsafe, as well as some apprehension at attending rallies and demonstrations for the first time and dialoguing with people they did not know. This finding warrants more exploration to determine how youth organizing staff address issues of perceived threats to physical safety when working with young people in neighborhood and community settings outside of the organization.

Finally in the arena of skill building, *youth organizers report being less interested and challenged* by program activities than do youth within other YLDI organizations that were surveyed. At first glimpse, this seems contradictory to our qualitative results, where young people from youth organizing groups discussed passionately their interest in the issues they study, as well as the challenges of engaging directly in community work. On further reflection, the results seem in keeping with the difficult, often tedious and demanding nature of organizing work (such as setting up meetings and passing out flyers). Thus, while “events” and “actions” can be exciting, the *lead up* to such events involves a lot of hard work. The implication of these results is that youth involved in organizing may not feel consistently challenged and engaged. Program staff stated that they continually remind youth of the larger purpose of organizing and try to create intermediate or definable wins so that youth can connect their daily experiences with broader community improvement goals. Additionally, organizing work teaches youth patience, commitment and focus, and that change takes time.

These reflect some of our *preliminary* findings and will be published in a series of papers, as well as in the Youth Leadership Development Initiative Final Report (available in the Fall of 2003). For more information on upcoming publications, contact Dr. Hanh Cao Yu (SPR: 510.763.1499/hanh_cao_yu@spra.com) or Wendy Wheeler (IC: 301.270.1700/wwheeler@theinnovationcenter.org).

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MURAL FROM URBAN ARTS SUMMER PROGRAM, COURTESY OF WIRETAP MAGAZINE. AN INDEPENDENT INFORMATION SOURCE BY AND FOR SOCIALLY CONSCIOUS YOUTH



YOUTH-LED REP: Building Critical Consciousness for Social Change

If knowledge is power, then to lack knowledge is to lack power, and to build knowledge is to build power. This seemingly basic notion is at the source of diverse streams of theory and practice-variously named participatory action research, community-based research, counter-mapping, popular education and empowerment evaluation. These practices, while distinct, all represent attempts to build the power and capacity of those at the margins of society to examine, define, and ultimately shape their worlds according to their own needs, visions and values. It is from these historical, political and methodological headwaters that a new stream of work called youth-led research, evaluation and planning (Youth REP) arises.

Youth REP is a term developed by Youth In Focus-a non-profit consulting and training intermediary based in the Central Valley and San Francisco Bay Area- to describe its work. Youth REP is rooted in the belief that youth can effectively partner with adults to address social and organizational challenges, and that these partnerships are crucial to making just, democratic and sustainable social change. More broadly, Youth REP refers to youth involvement in the generation and application of knowledge. It shares an affinity with a growing edge of youth development that emphasizes youth leadership, empowerment and organizing as crucial elements of both healthy individuals and a more just society.

Youth-led evaluation can be understood as the convergence of two broad streams of theory and practice. One stream derives from the field of positive youth development, and represents an extension into the realms of research and evaluation. This stream incorporates the notion of youth as resources and works in progress (as opposed to problems or risks); creating contexts with enabling supports and opportunities; a value on youth leadership and youth action; and a social justice lens on youth development. The other stream arises from the fields of research and evaluation, and represents an extension of their participatory, action and empowerment-oriented dimensions to include youth as researchers/evaluators. Together, these two streams define a region of theory and practice that values both the rigor of the informational products of the inquiry and the empowerment processes experienced by its participants.

This article will introduce concepts and pedagogy of Youth REP; demonstrate why Youth REP is an important element of positive Youth Development; share one case study; and discuss the emergence of Youth REP as a field.

CASE STUDY: YOUTH TOGETHER (RICHMOND CALIFORNIA)

Since 1990, Youth In Focus has helped develop

Youth REP projects with hundreds of organizations dedicated to the empowerment and well-being of youth. The following collaboration with Youth Together-a multi-racial youth empowerment organization- illustrates the ways in which Youth REP increases the capacity of youth to take well-informed and strategic action on issues they research, and thereby develop greater contexts for positive development.

Shocked by a wave of murders of their peers in Richmond, CA, young leaders from Youth Together began to organize to stop the violence. They decided that documenting youth needs would help mobilize support for their violence prevention efforts, and

屋崙華埠的老人正被逼遷!
STOP EVICTIONS OF OUR ELDERLY IN CHINATOWN

The owner of the Pacific Renaissance Plaza, Lawrence Chen, wants to evict 50 families from their homes at 600 Wacker Street. These tenants are our neighbors. They are low-income people, seniors and disabled people from the Asian community.

The tenants of the Pacific Renaissance want to stay in their homes. They want the evictions to stop. They want affordable housing. Help us write this history for the whole community.

STOP CHINATOWN EVICTIONS COMMITTEE
For more info, email stop@chinatownevictions.com or call 510-763-3477 (just South Oakland).

Many organizations from the Asian community and from the tenants' movement have united with the tenants of the Pacific Renaissance to keep them in their homes.

富商中心業主陳文爵正在逼遷五十戶家庭，當中包括低收入人士、老人，及傷殘人士。這些人很多需要華埠的醫療服務，所以他們不能搬出原有居所。請不要強迫這些家庭離開。他們的收入低微，不能應付唐人街鄰近昂貴的租金。他們需要低收入房屋，請為他們伸出援手，他們想住在現在的家。富商中心

華埠停止逼遷協會
如有任何問題及建議，請電：
中文熱線：組合亞裔力量 (PAC) 510-634-6926 內線 308
很多亞裔及住戶行動組織以聯合行動幫助這些被逼遷的住戶。請支持我們

POSTER FOR JUST CAUSE OAKLAND BY CHRISTINE WONG OF YO! YOUTH OUTLOOK, A LITERARY MONTHLY JOURNAL ABOUT YOUTH LIFE IN THE BAY AREA

approached Youth In Focus to provide training to launch a community action research project.

The Youth REP “Stepping Stones” curriculum guided the experiential learning process for youth as they designed, implemented and applied their action research project. At each step, Youth In Focus facilitated training and planning meetings for Youth Together staff, as well as trainings for youth to acquire the skills and concepts needed for each phase of the research. Committed to youth leadership, empowerment and agency, Youth In Focus

products. Presented with a variety of research methods and tools, the team chose to conduct a youth survey in Richmond and neighboring San Pablo, and worked with Youth In Focus to develop, test, and refine a survey tool and a system to document and analyze survey data.

Learning techniques in sampling, survey administration and data collection, the youth team collected 1600 surveys in less than two months from youth at high schools, middle schools, and community centers. Youth In Focus supported the team in organizing and

A Resource Handbook for Youth by Youth,” students presented the manifesto for their action research project.

“Most of the time youth are seen as part of the problem of violence in the cities of Richmond and San Pablo; yet youth are not usually given the chance to voice opinions in finding solutions...As a result of the forum and community needs survey, Richmond and San Pablo youth said that creating safe spaces that would provide youth empowerment, employment and support activities can help in preventing youth violence.”

Youth-led evaluation can be understood as the convergence of two broad streams of theory and practice...positive youth development and...the fields of research and evaluation. Together, these two streams define a region of theory and practice that values both the rigor of the informational *products* of the inquiry and the empowerment *processes* experienced by its participants.

encourages organizations to ideally involve youth in intensive decision-making roles and throughout all phases of the project.

To secure a broad understanding of violence and measures to reduce it, the Youth Together research team engaged in a process of “mapping” the issue, community context, and levers of power that needed to be accessed. Youth conducted preliminary interviews with key community leaders and resource people, and reviewed related research so that they could identify themselves and their project as part of a community and lineage of action researchers, as opposed to an isolated effort. The team articulated its mission:

“We as members of the community know from our experiences and research what youth need. Youth are an important voice. Most plans and ideas for Richmond come from outside the community. The Youth Together community action research is about hearing from youth voices on how to make things better for youth.”

In the design phase of the project, the team articulated their research questions and prioritized an exploration of: the root causes of community violence; the ways that youth factor into the causes and solutions; and creative responses to violence. The team also articulated an interest in learning about the cultural diversity of their communities and integrating arts and culture into their final

interpreting their data, and developing findings and recommendations. With many of the findings providing near unanimous support, a multi-functional “Youth Café” with resources for job training, computer access and tutoring, as well as recreation, dance and performance, emerged as one of the major recommendations. Youth Together developed a series of presentations about their findings and recommendations to community leaders, including the City Council and local School Boards. In a youth-produced resource guide called “The Past, The Present, The Future and Us:

Youth Together went further in advocating that Youth Cafés be run by youth: “The youth need to be involved in establishing and operating these spaces so that they truly express the vision that youth want for safe, academic and recreational spaces to socialize.” Youth Together has also been working with local allies to develop and run one or more Youth Cafés at school sites in the community.

BENEFITS OF YOUTH REP

As evidenced in the case study of Youth Together, multiple levels and types of outcomes emerge from Youth REP—for youth participants, host organization and surrounding communities. These outcomes are well-described in the language of positive youth development, including skill development, leadership/empowerment, youth-adult relationships and identity formation. While not every outcome is produced by every Youth REP project, the overall process equips youth with skills, knowledge and self-efficacy, which significantly



PHOTOGRAPH TAKEN BY SPENCER PETERSON: FEATURED IN A PHOTO-NARRATIVE EXHIBIT BY LYRIC AND GAY-STRAIGHT ALLIANCE NETWORK. A YOUTH-LED ORGANIZATION CONNECTING SCHOOL-BASED GAY-STRAIGHT ALLIANCES TO EACH OTHER AND TO COMMUNITY RESOURCES TO CREATE SAFE ENVIRONMENTS IN SCHOOLS. EDUCATE COMMUNITIES ABOUT HOMOPHOBIA, GENDER IDENTITY AND SEXUAL ORIENTATION ISSUES, AND FIGHT DISCRIMINATION, HARASSMENT, AND VIOLENCE

The following chart summarizes the multiple outcomes of Youth REP:

BENEFITS OF YOUTH REP	YOUTH PARTICIPANTS	ORGANIZATIONS	COMMUNITIES
SKILL/ KNOWLEDGE BUILDING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Develop strong research, analytical and writing skills applicable to academic performance *Gain work experience, job-readiness skills, and networks of professional contacts. *Learn about institutional context/community history. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Learn the process and tools of knowledge production, synthesis and community change. *Develop staff and institutional capacity to support youth-led evaluation and planning on a sustainable basis. *Improve program, effectiveness and organizational culture through incorporating youth perspectives. *Gain a new understanding of community issues and increase the relevancy of organizational activities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Gain understanding of local challenges and assess strategies to creatively address youth and broader community needs. *Increase capacity to support intergenerational partnerships and youth leadership.
LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT/ EMPOWERMENT/ AGENCY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Obtain civic leadership experience, transferable to a variety of community settings. *Hone outreach, public communication, organizing, and advocacy abilities. *Gain opportunities for youth to mentor other youth researchers/ evaluators. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Create a ladder of leadership development to draw a pool of new and future staff and leaders *Benefit from youth serving as organization problem-solvers, developers, and visionaries. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Build social capital through a new generation with civic responsibility, analytical skills, organizing skills and empowerment to address community issues. *Develop new models for engaging all members in decision-making and leadership.
RELATIONSHIP DEVELOPMENT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Build mutually caring and respectful relationships with peers and adult facilitators. *Enhance mentoring relationships with professional researchers and evaluators, and community leaders. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Enhance partnerships between CBOs and youth . *Engage youth that might otherwise remain on the margins or outside of the organization. *Strengthen relationships with and engage a broad range of community members. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Improve intergenerational communication, respect and collaboration.
IDENTITY-FORMATION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Empower themselves as evaluators, planners and organizers, instead of passive recipients of services. * Enhance critical consciousness of political, social, cultural and economic factors shaping their lives and how they can address them. * Achieve a sense of self-efficacy and empowerment from experiencing their ideas translated into action. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Develop an organizational culture of reflective inquiry and adaptive learning. *Enhance the youth-centered and/or intergenerational character of the organization. *Build an organizational culture respectful and celebratory of racial, ethnic, gender, sexual orientation difference and pro-active in dealing with related issues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Promote a pro-active and creative approach to community building. *Build community culture respectful and celebratory of racial, ethnic, gender, sexual orientation difference and pro-active about dealing with related issues.

bolster their ability to engage in community leadership and organizing activities.

In the case of Youth Together, the Youth REP project provided young people with a unique skill-set of research, data collection and analysis. It also generated a relatively rigorous set of data-backed recommendations to advance the violence prevention campaign and reinforce the organization's strong political education, multi-racial history and organizing training. In addition, the project developed a model of research that could be used in other campaigns and communities. The communities of Richmond and San Pablo gained a cadre of skilled youth leaders with detailed knowledge and proven commitments to finding creative solutions to reduce violence and improve community health.

YOUTH REP: TOWARDS A FIELD

While having deep historical roots, only in the last decade has youth-led research, evaluation, and planning begun to emerge as a field in its

own right. Diverse conceptual and disciplinary sources have produced a growing body of practices, curricula, and other resources for Youth REP. A forthcoming special edition of *New Directions in Evaluation* focuses on youth-led evaluation, capturing the learning from a session organized by Kim Sabo from CUNY at the 1998 American Evaluation Association conference. In 2001, Barry Checkoway at the University of Michigan gathered researchers and practitioners to discuss youth involvement in community research and evaluation, and in the following year, expanded the group for a working conference hosted by the Wingspread Foundation. Participants developed a set of principles for youth-engagement in community research and evaluation. In the last five years, these instances of increased communication, relationship building and collaboration among a number of practitioners have begun to build an emerging field.

To more fully realize its potential, Youth REP needs several additional elements. First,

organizations must typically squeeze funds from existing program and evaluation budgets to engage in youth-led REP, as funding awarded specifically for these purposes is scarce. If Youth REP is to go beyond being a one-time project and to fulfill its potential for continuous program improvement and community change, organizations need sufficient funding to institutionalize and sustain these processes. Second, relationships between professional researchers, evaluators and practitioners of Youth REP need to be expanded and deepened to develop new modes of collaboration that draw on the strengths of both youth and adults. This should include an increased appreciation for qualitative data derived from interactive methods such as interviews, focus groups and participant observation, alongside of quantitative survey and record data.

Youth-led REP has demonstrated its ability to provide supports and opportunities for positive youth development in the context of building youth power to affect real changes in communities. With greater resources and commitments, youth-led REP may serve as an even more compelling way to support youth as they become well-informed, skillful and creative agents of social change.

Jonathan London is Co-founder and Executive Director of Youth in Focus.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR YOUTH REP

ACADEMY FOR EDUCATION DEVELOPMENT
Youth community mapping
www.aed.org

BUREAU OF APPLIED RESEARCH IN ANTHROPOLOGY, UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA
Youth-led research on educational equity
<http://bara.arizona.edu>

INSTITUTE FOR COMMUNITY RESEARCH
"Participatory Action Research Curriculum for Empowering Youth"
www.incommunityresearch.org

JOHN GARDNER CENTER FOR YOUTH AND THEIR COMMUNITIES, STANFORD UNIVERSITY
"Youth Engaged in Leadership & Learning:" Handbook for Supporting Community Youth Researchers <http://gardnercenter.stanford.edu>

MICHELE FINE, CITY COLLEGE OF NEW YORK
Youth action research in small schools
<http://web.gc.cuny.edu/Psychology/faculty/mfine.htm>

SEARCH INSTITUTE
Youth Assets Mapping
www.searchinstitute.org



YOUTH MEDIA: Transforming Lives, Building Communities, and Fostering Understanding

When Antwaun first came to Represent Magazine—a magazine written by and for teens in foster care in New York City, he remembers being angry and frustrated by all he had been through. Raised by a mother who struggled with a drug addiction and a father in jail, Antwaun and his little sister went to foster care when he was nine. He recalls his aunt standing with a suitcase in hand, his three-month-old baby sister, Shante, dressed and packed, and his mom telling him that he and Shante would stay at their aunt’s house for a couple of months. A couple of months turned into years.

By the time Antwaun joined Represent Magazine, he had been living with his aunt in foster care for nine years. He struggled with mixed feelings of anger and sympathy for his parents. “I was always angry,” says Antwaun. “A friend once asked me, are you angry at the world? And that’s when I realized that I was.” He also felt depressed and isolated, and searched desperately for an outlet to vent his emotions.

Writing his first article about entering foster care helped Antwaun to let go of the burst of emotion that he held inside. “The pad and pen understood me in a positive way. It made me look forward to the future,” Antwaun remembers.

His first article expresses not only his pain about leaving behind his family, but also the new opportunities he found living with his aunt. Writing gave him a chance to release a lot of frustration, but most importantly it made him understand that he wasn’t alone. Once published, the article touched others. “A little boy walked up to me in my neighborhood with one of my articles, asking me for an autograph,” Antwaun remembers. “He said he had a dad in jail too and that he read all my articles. People around us thought I was some kind of a celebrity. I signed it for him, but I was shocked. It gave me motivation. I wanted to write more.”

Even though Antwaun is still dealing with his anger, writing about all he’s been through has shown him that little by little he can communicate more with his parents, let go of the past, and move on. “I had grown from that block-hearted 9 year-old, selling weed in the streets, with no sense of life, to a person who cares and who has a sense of direction,” Antwaun wrote.

FINDING A VOICE

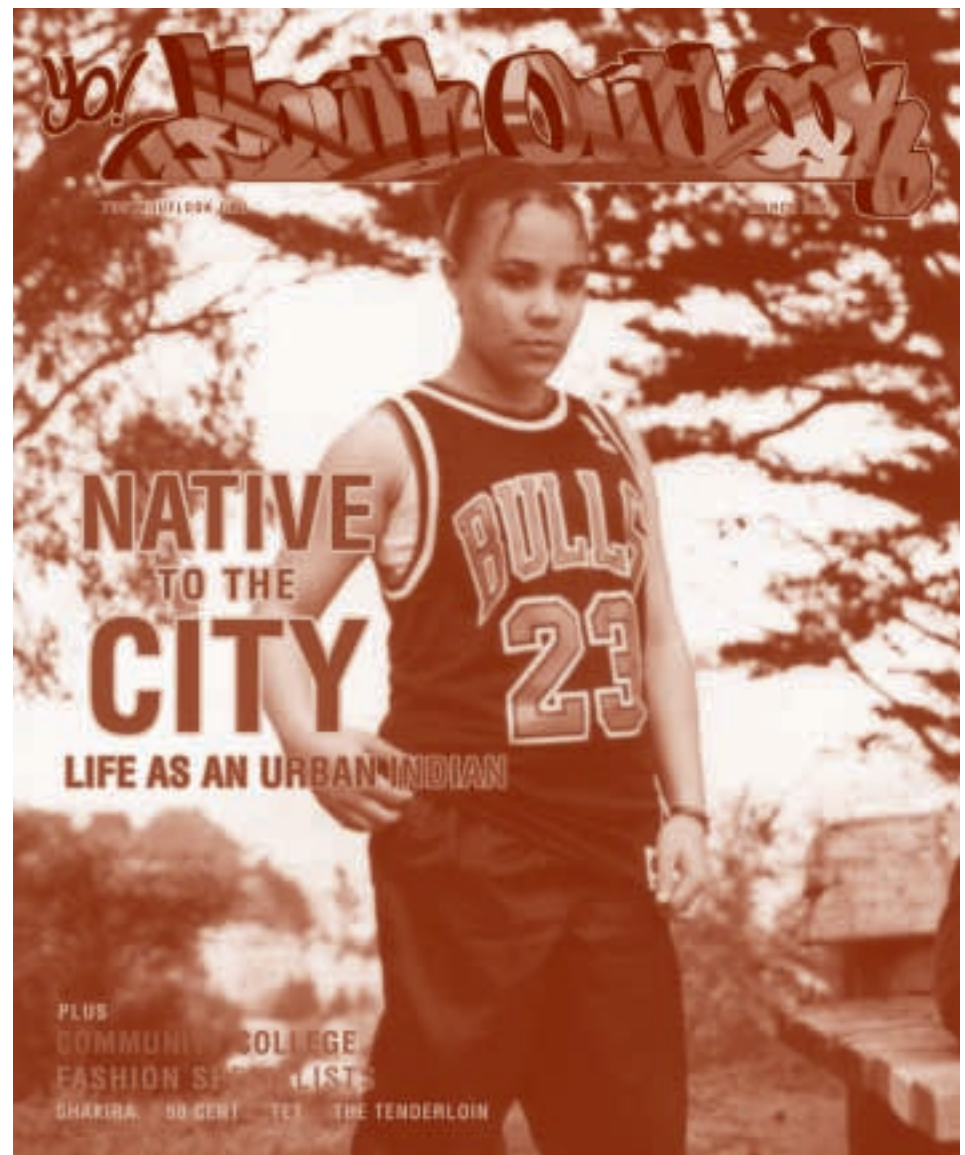
Teens make up about 11% of this country’s population, or over 30 million people. But too often, what most people know about us is negative or misinformed. When adult journalists write about us, they often only talk about the negative things that some, not all, teens do—like join gangs, take drugs or have

babies before we’re ready. And more often than not, journalists do not bother soliciting a teen’s point of view in the stories. They don’t

really know what we’re going through. Partly as a result, we teens feel invisible, disregarded and dismissed. We may have a lot to say about issues in the media or have a unique point of view, but mainstream presses or the adults in our lives too often fail to take our opinions seriously.

Today, an increasing number of youth media programs are taking youth seriously and recognizing their worth. These programs provide the tools, training and guidance young people need to find their voice, make that voice heard, and make connections between their own lives and the world around them. Many are also building the leadership of youth intentionally by involving them in key decision-making roles throughout the entire

We teens feel invisible, disregarded and dismissed. We may have a lot to say about issues in the media or have a unique point of view, but mainstream presses or the adults in our lives too often fail to take our opinions seriously.



COVER BY ANGELIKA GOMEZ OF YO! YOUTH OUTLOOK, A LITERARY MONTHLY JOURNAL ABOUT YOUTH LIFE IN THE BAY AREA

production process, from determining content to designing layout to managing distribution. Youth media projects are also challenging the negative biases against youth in mainstream media and sparking conversation among adults about youth-related issues.

Many youth media programs have a special niche. Represent Magazine, for instance, is written by and for teens in foster care. Similarly, the Beat Within is a print magazine produced by and for incarcerated youth in California. Youth Radio, in Berkeley, CA, gives young people a chance to produce their own radio shows and learn both technical and general life skills to serve them into the future. Youth Outlook, L.A. Youth, New Youth Connections and The Write Connection are publications written by local teens and distributed mainly through high schools and libraries. Programs like Youth Media Council in Oakland, CA, monitor the mainstream media and its coverage of youth, and also train other youth organizations to do media work.

PERSONAL CHANGE

I can relate to Antwaun's story, because writing for youth media changed me too. When I wrote my first article for New Youth Connections, based in New York City, I suffered from chronic fatigue syndrome and felt very isolated and alone. While my peers attended school and hung out with their friends, I spent my days in bed. By writing for a youth paper, I was able to express my feelings and help others learn about my condition. Putting what I was going through in words made me feel more in control of my life. Knowing that others would read it helped me feel less alone. Eventually, the process gave me power to take the initiative of starting my own e-zine, Voices of Tomorrow.

Participating in youth media can be such a life-changing experience for teens like Antwaun and myself. It teaches us to experience the world differently. We work with adults who take our opinions seriously. We suddenly feel heard. We feel like our voices do matter, and we learn to make sense of the world we live in.

We also learn skills that will help us build careers and continue to contribute to society. While having unique processes for training teens to become leaders, most youth media programs build partnerships between youth and adults who have media or journalism backgrounds. The youth bring their personal experiences, opinions and ideas. The adults bring their work experience and expertise. Together they shape the young people's ideas into persuasive, high-quality articles or radio shows. Producing a show or an article can take months, but in the meantime, we teens learn countless skills. Nzinga Moore, an associate news producer at Youth Radio, remembers, "I learned to write the story to the audio, to get sound bites, to develop characters of the story

Young People Organizing for Social Change

A Profile of Californians for Justice

In Californians for Justice (CFJ), youth organizing and leadership development at the local level has provided the basis for young people to impact policies at a statewide and even national level. Started in 1996 in response to ballot initiatives attacking immigrant rights and affirmative action, CFJ builds power in communities of color across the state. In 2000, as part of their strategic planning process that included youth leaders, CFJ made a five-year commitment to focus on public education in the state. According to CFJ, problems in the educational system are closely linked to other issues of economic justice, racial justice, and power for low-income communities of color.

Since its inception, CFJ has developed local high-school based youth organizing projects and campaigns across the state, including chapters in San Jose, Long Beach, San Diego, and Fresno. In San Jose, young people spent the past two summers in CFJ's local summer youth leadership academy, receiving trainings in campaign strategies, facilitation, public speaking, media representation, and fundraising. The summer program also offers youth issue analysis sessions on topics such as institutional racism in schools and testing, and standards versus school resources and conditions. Youth in CFJ are responsible for organizing their own event at the culmination of the program.

San Jose's program last summer focused on preparation for and access to college for low-income students of color and persuading the school district to offer bilingual certification for students fluent in their home language and English. "The combination of local campaign victories and the summer academy brought a whole new bunch of youth leaders to a new level and depth of organizing," recalls organizer Cathy Rion. Igdalia Rojas, a student leader in San Jose and recent high school graduate, attended a CFJ event with friends last year. "I realized that CFJ was making a change for disadvantaged youth at school," she observes. "Now I know the issues we're working on are really important. Before I didn't really like to talk, but now I'm not really shy. I wouldn't be in big groups, but now I'm comfortable facilitating meetings and calling other youth for actions."

The leadership development of hundreds of youth has allowed CFJ to launch a powerful statewide campaign challenging the California High School Exit Exam. "Californians for Justice has joined with other organizations in the Campaign for Quality Education to challenge the State Board of Education to fix the real problems in California schools instead of using the Exit Exam to deny diplomas," says Yvonne Paul, CFJ organizer in Long Beach. Samantha Knox, a sixteen-year-old African American student at Polytechnic High School in Long Beach, argues, "I felt like the students themselves worked so hard to get all their credits in order to graduate and then this one test determines whether or not you graduate. That's outrageous!"

Like other local CFJ youth leaders, Samantha stepped forward to help organize a statewide bus tour of students, parents and allies for the Campaign for Quality Education. The tour culminated in Sacramento and featured a legislative briefing on education issues, allowing student leaders to testify and expose the linkages between local education issues, including the lack of resources for schools in low-income communities, and unjust state policies, such as the Exit Exam. Youth engage in CFJ in other capacities as well. "Our youth leaders play an important role in reaching out to local allies in the campaign," says Lisa Castellanos, a statewide coordinator for CFJ. At each bus tour stop, youth leaders organized their own community speak-outs and events, employing creativity and innovation to devise organizing approaches. Across California, youth leaders with CFJ spent this summer organizing to put pressure on the State Board to delay the Exit Exam until the quality of local education is improved. On July 9, the campaign organized an energetic, statewide event in Sacramento and succeeded in getting the State Board to hold off on implementing the Exit Exam for two years, so that more immediate issues of educational quality and access can be addressed.



through the computer, to hold a microphone, to create imagery to take viewers into the scene.” Not only do youth write and produce the media, in many cases they are also leading the meetings, setting the agendas, and making the decisions with adult mentoring and support.

When our articles get published or our shows produced, young people learn that we can make a difference, that if we step forward and write a painful article about our own experience, for instance speaking up about abuse, chances are that the story may help one of our readers. Learning and sharing our stories can give young people an enormous sense of confidence in their ability to make a difference in the world. We realize that we can become leaders.

Participating in youth media can be such a life-changing experience for teens...It teaches us to experience the world differently. We work with adults who take our opinions seriously. We suddenly feel heard. We feel like our voices do matter, and we learn to make sense of the world we live in.

COMMUNITY CHANGE

For teens and the adults who work in youth media, it's a no-brainer that teens need to be listened to—and not just to make teens' feel better. “If you don't listen to young people, then you're ignoring half of the population, and you can't make a social change,” explains Jacinda Abcarian, who has worked both as a teen and now as an adult at Youth Radio.

Teens are often blamed for many of our social problems, yet are not included enough in solving those problems. If youth disagree with the laws or policies that are made today, they may ignore those decisions now, and possibly reverse them as adults. When young people feel like we have input or ownership,

we are more likely to support and cooperate with laws and policies that affect us.

Youth media shows the world that we teens are capable and willing to help solve social problems. It shows that there's more running through a teen's head than Britney Spears' lyrics. By providing an important window into the lives of teens, youth media challenges adults to include youth perspectives and leadership in mainstream conversations and the community in general. “We let the people know the other side of the story, something that the mainstream media doesn't necessarily cover,” explains Kevin Weston, editor of Youth Outlook in San Francisco.

Rosalind Pace, editor of The Write Connection in Cape Cod, MA, agrees.

“In our town, teens are a minority. And anything anyone can do to make the wider community familiar with the incredible sensitivity and creativity that young people have is good,” she says. Part of what youth media tries to challenge is the tendency for adults to treat young people as a separate entity, apart from the community. Through our different stories and expressions, we are making connections between people regardless of age.

As in other places across the country, including youth perspectives in Cape Cod's media has helped to stimulate dialogue and bring attention to youth issues and needs. For instance, the relationship between police and youth in Cape Cod has been strained for some time. Because

ARTWORK BY KATHERINE OF THE BEAT WITHIN.
A PUBLICATION OF WRITINGS AND ART BY
INCARCERATED YOUTH

the police gear their attention toward senior citizens, who make up about 60 percent of the city's population, they often lack respect and sensitivity when dealing with teens.

In the Cape's Eldridge Park, where few hang out spots for teens exist, youth were asked repeatedly to leave public spaces, even though they were doing harmless activities like playing Frisbee or buying soda at the supermarket. No one got hurt or arrested in the incidents, but the kids were infuriated and felt profiled. A young writer from the Write Connection wrote about what was happening in an article picked up by the adult-written Cape Cod Voice. Soon the whole community was talking about teens being profiled, calling a conference of youth, police, and other residents to discuss the problem and ultimately making way for a much better relationship between the young people and the cops. Without youth media, Pace notes, the teens may have continued to be profiled by local police, and may have never found a way to persuasively and respectfully explain what they experienced.

Similarly, in Oakland, teens were holding sideshow-car stunt driving expositions every weekend. Mainstream media only covered one side of the story, focusing on why expositions were dangerous. Youth Outlook challenged the media's take on the event by running a story exploring what need the shows served in the community. A teen reporter interviewed participants in the show as well as spectators, people who the mainstream presses didn't bother to talk to. It turned out that there was little for local young people to do on the weekends or after-school. The article pointed out a major issue in Oakland—the lack of resources and funding to provide youth with programs and activities that would keep them off the streets.

It challenged local authorities to consider young people's concerns in the community, and provide them with more spaces for recreation. "By doing the article we got the community talking about it," Weston remembers.

FOSTERING UNDERSTANDING

But if many teens often feel overlooked and misunderstood, incarcerated youth and kids in foster care especially do. That's why David Inocencio feels it is so important to have outlets like The Beat Within and Represent for these teens to let their voices be heard. The Beat Within staff conducts weekly writing workshops in juvenile halls and prints the teen's poetry in a weekly e-zine. "We help them engage in disclosures with adults. It's therapeutic for their anger and frustration," says Inocencio. "It's important to give them a voice, it breaks down walls."

And knowing that adults care not only helps the teens open up, it also shows them that they can be part of a conversation with adults and the world beyond juvenile hall. They begin to learn that they can be participating members of society. Inocencio explains, "If we give them that power, they step up as leaders. The Beat Within gives them the support and hope to be part of civic life." And that, he says, helps them make better choices in their lives.

The magazine's writings were recently published on the popular website Salon.com, giving readers a rare window into the emotional life of incarcerated youth. Inocencio is pleased when more mainstream presses pick up his writers' stories. "It raises awareness and opens doors for people who are blind to the system," he says. "They stop seeing kids in

ARTWORK BY LIL' WIL OF THE BEAT WITHIN.
A PUBLICATION OF WRITINGS AND ART BY
INCARCERATED YOUTH



juvenile hall as murderers, rapists or drug addicts. They now look at them as real kids."

More often than not, working for youth media also teaches a teen to see past his or her own stereotypes and points of view. When Abcarian began researching her first story on curfews for Youth Radio, she had strong opinions on the subject. San Francisco had recently mandated a curfew for teens, a policy that infuriated her and her peers. They felt it was unjust and unnecessary. To develop a radio program on the subject, her producer instructed Abcarian to accompany a police officer patrolling the streets at night to make sure no teen violated the curfew. "Here I am pissed off at the whole curfew idea and at the same time driving around with a cop," she remembers, laughing.

Suddenly, they received an emergency call on the radio and had to rush to a crime scene. When they arrived, a group of guys were fighting with blood splattered everywhere. The cop ran out of the car to break up the fight. The fear Abcarian felt watching that fight and the police trying to break it up gave her new insight. "I started to see the perspective of the police and how hard their job is," she recalls. "I learned that it's not as simple as they make it seem on the news." And that, says Abcarian, "opened up my world."

By allowing youth like Abcarian a serious means to share their own experiences and thoughts with adults, youth become more open to understanding the concerns and experiences of adults, and vice versa. But maybe the best thing we teens get from participating in youth media is the sense that we're somebody. Discovering that we can speak out and touch dozens of lives through our work is a priceless treasure. It teaches us to be leaders and gives us the desire to work hard to develop our skills and pass on our knowledge to as many people as possible.

Writing for New Youth Connections helped raise my confidence and self-assurance. It made me more aware of my self-capacity and how powerful writing can be. Each time I discovered something new about myself by writing and revising (and revising and revising) a personal story, I also learned more about the world. Eventually it inspired me to write not only about my own experiences, but also about the important issues affecting my peers and my community.

I hope that my new online publication, Voices of Tomorrow, will help impact as many lives as other youth media programs. And I hope that one day youth media will not only challenge, but also be a strong contender in mainstream media and take its rightful place on the market stands.

Marianna Hernandez, 20, has written for Youth Communication for three years. She recently graduated from high school and plans to study journalism at Kingsborough Community College.

ORGANIZATIONS MENTIONED

ASIAN IMMIGRANT WOMEN ADVOCATES
(San Francisco, CA)
www.aiwa.org

THE BEAT WITHIN AND YO!YOUTH OUTLOOK
(San Francisco, CA)
www.pacificnews.org

CAAIV: COMMUNITIES AGAINST
ANTI-ASIAN VIOLENCE (Bronx, NY)
www.caaiv.org

CALIFORNIANS FOR JUSTICE (statewide)
www.caljustice.org

C-BEYOND (Concord, CA)
www.youthec.org/cbeyond

EDUCATIONAL VIDEO CENTER (New York, NY)
www.evc.org

GAY-STRAIGHT ALLIANCE NETWORK
(San Francisco, CA)
www.gsanetwork.org

L.A. YOUTH (Los Angeles, CA)
www.layouth.com

SOUTHWEST YOUTH COLLABORATIVE/
GENERATION Y (Chicago, IL)
www.swyc.org

WIRETAP (San Francisco, CA)
www.wiretapmag.org

THE WRITE CONNECTION (Orleans, MA)
twcmagazine@hotmail.com

YOUTH IN FOCUS (Oakland, CA)
www.youthinfocus.net

YOUNG WOMEN PROJECT (Washington, DC)
www.youngwomensproject.org

YOUTH MEDIA COUNCIL (Oakland, CA)
www.youthmediaacouncil.org

YOUTH MINISTRIES FOR PEACE AND JUSTICE
(Bronx, NY)
www.geocities.com/ympj_ny

YOUTH COMMUNICATION (New York, NY)
www.youthcomm.org

YOUTH RADIO (Oakland, CA)
www.youthradio.org

YOUTH UNITED FOR COMMUNITY ACTION
(East Palo Alto CA)
www.youthunitd.net



ABOUT GRANTMAKERS FOR CHILDREN, YOUTH AND FAMILIES

Grantmakers for Children, Youth & Families' (GCYF) is a membership association of over 400 grantmaking institutions with an interest in supporting and strengthening children, youth and families. Founded in 1985, GCYF's *mission is to increase the ability of organized philanthropy to improve the well-being of children, youth and families*. We serve as a forum to review and analyze grantmaking strategies, exchange information about effective programs, examine public policy developments and maintain ongoing discussions with national leaders. GCYF offers its members an engaging and informative set of member benefits—Learning Circles, Colleague Clusters, Annual Conferences, and publications—designed to strengthen their knowledge, skills, and practice and, to promote awareness, understanding and engagement concerning children, youth and families within philanthropy at large. We invite your participation in GCYF. To learn more, visit www.gcyf.org.

Guest Editors



ABOUT THE FUNDERS' COLLABORATIVE ON YOUTH ORGANIZING:

The Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing (FCYO) is a collective of national, regional, and local foundations, and youth organizing practitioners whose mission is to substantially increase the philanthropic investment in, and strengthen the organizational capacities of, groups engaging young people in community organizing across the country.

For more information about the Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing, visit the FCYO web site at www.fcyo.org, or call 212.213.2113 ext 21.

The Edward W. Hazen Foundation

ABOUT EDWARD W. HAZEN FOUNDATION

The Edward W. Hazen Foundation is a private, independent foundation that seeks to assist young people, particularly minorities and those disadvantaged by poverty, to achieve their full potential as individuals and as active participants in a democratic society.

For more information about the Hazen Foundation and our Youth Development program area, visit our website at www.hazenfoundation.org or call Nat Chioke Williams at 212-889-3034 ext.26.



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