

COMMUNITY & YOUTH DEVELOPMENT
Series

Youth Acts, Community Impacts

Stories of
Youth Engagement
with Real Results

Joel Tolman
Karen Pittman

with contributions from

Barbara Cervone
Kathleen Cushman
Lisa Rowley

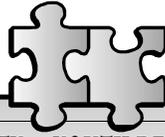
WHAT KIDS CAN DO

and

Sheila Kinkade
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THE FORUM FOR YOUTH INVESTMENT

WITH THE SUPPORT OF
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The Forum for Youth Investment was created to increase the quality and quantity of youth investments and youth involvement by promoting a “big picture” approach to planning, research, advocacy and policy development among the broad range of national organizations that help constituents and communities invest in children, youth and families. To do this, the Forum commits itself to building connections, increasing capacity and tackling persistent challenges across the allied youth fields.

The Forum offers its members tools, intelligence, training, international perspectives and individual supports. It creates opportunities for youth investors to come together in neutral forums to tackle persistent challenges such as shaping public perceptions of young people and strengthening the links between preventing youth problems and promoting youth preparation and development. It helps identify, facilitate and broker relationships among members, offering them new lenses for looking at old issues, supports to turn the ideas into action and vehicles to reflect on lessons learned. It works to ensure that the information, tools and insights generated by the Forum and its members are shaped by and useful to local communities and practitioners. It asks members to contribute commentary, products and time toward the creation of a shared information base. All this work is done in full partnership with Forum members, with the aim of increasing collective learning and action on “big picture” issues — issues that cross traditional sectors and lines, and which are beyond the capacity of any organization to tackle alone.

The Forum for Youth Investment is a U.S. initiative of the International Youth Foundation™

ABOUT THE FORD FOUNDATION'S COMMUNITY YOUTH DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE

Using the positive youth development framework and guiding principles, the Human Development and Reproductive Health unit of the Ford Foundation launched the Community Youth Development Initiative. The term “community youth development” is used to define the process of young people and adults working in partnership to create the necessary conditions that will result in the successful development of young people, their peers, families and communities — the integration of youth development and community development. The Forum's work on youth action is one of several projects funded by the Ford Foundation as part of its Community Youth Development Initiative.

The initiative's goal is to enhance the ability of young people from economically disadvantaged communities to successfully transition from adolescence into responsible adulthood, economic self-sufficiency and engaged citizenship by building the capacity of low-income communities to create supportive environments.

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We would like to extend our deep gratitude to Inca Mohamed and the Ford Foundation for their commitment to the Forum's work to connect the youth and community development fields. This support has been critical to the Forum's organizational development, as well as to the conceptual development reflected in this and other publications.

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We are especially grateful to the staff, volunteers, friends and participants — old and young — engaged in the efforts profiled in this publication. Their work is remarkable, inspiring and courageous.

Thanks, finally, to the skilled and committed individuals who helped us to document these efforts — Barbara Cervone, Kathleen Cushman, Lisa Rowley, Sheila Kinkade, Jeanie Phillips and Sabrina Duque. We are lucky to have the company of such gifted storytellers.

INTRODUCTION

The idea that young people can and should work in partnership with adults to improve conditions in their communities has gained currency in the past decade. Young people are being asked to sit on boards, submit ideas and support community efforts through structured (sometimes required) volunteering. And, increasingly, young people are not waiting to be asked.

But, as with most ideas, it is not always clear why young people are being encouraged to participate. To occupy idle time? To apply academic knowledge and gain real-life work experiences? To give back to communities? To develop lifelong habits?

How often are young people being engaged because we believe they can truly make a difference in the things important to adults? How often are adults really supportive when young people take initiative to move on ideas that are important to them? How much overlap is there in their views of what needs to be done and how?

Over the past three years, with the support of the Ford Foundation, virtually all of the staff at the Forum for Youth Investment (formerly IYF-US) have struggled with these questions, engaging advisors, learning group members and others in the United States and around the world. Fundamental questions of rights and responsibilities. Socio-political questions about expectations and perceptions. Practical and pedagogical questions of youth and adult capacity building. Systemic questions about field building and key institutions.

Youth Acts, Community Impacts captures some of the lessons learned as we struggle with these questions. It focuses on reality, forcing the question of whether or not we have powerful examples of community impacts

that are the result of youth acts. We ask why these are not more frequent, what it might take to support them, and how youth action relates to community building and community development.

In response to this challenge, *Youth Acts, Community Impacts* offers eight case studies — and a number of short profiles — documenting efforts in the United States and around the world, all connecting the dots between youth action and meaningful community change. The publication begins with reflections on why it is often so hard, especially in the United States, for young people to find the space needed to make a difference in their communities. And it draws lessons from successful efforts, aiming to identify how and why some youth acts do yield positive community impacts:

1. **Lubec Aquaculture Project: Students bring new opportunities to struggling economy.** Lubec High School's aquaculture project grew out of a commitment to student learning and vocational education, but has ended up creating jobs and bringing new hope to a small Maine town.
2. **Cambodian Volunteers for Community Development: Youth and adults building skills, rebuilding neighborhoods, reclaiming a country.** CVCD — a youth-founded grassroots community-based organization — uses education and community service as tools for neighborhood revitalization, economic development and civil society building, mobilizing thousands of young people and adults.
3. **The Food Project: Young people building community from the soil up.** Always working to connect youth development and community agriculture, The Food Project helps community members meet the basic need for healthy, available food.

4. **Philadelphia Student Union: Youth create serious change in troubled urban schools.** PSU is a youth-led, political organizing effort mobilizing inner-city students to address school injustices.
5. **Cefocine: Young leaders turn around their communities — using arts and play.** Using an unlikely combination of play, arts, gang intervention and entrepreneurship, Cefocine's young leaders build local economies, stop violence and revive hope in Ecuador.
6. **Educational Video Center: Young filmmakers shine light on community problems.** EVC is a New York City-based arts education nonprofit, targeting a wide range of community problems and linking with community organizers and advocates to add new momentum to a range of change efforts.
7. **Southeast Alaska Guidance Association: Blending youth development and conservation to change lives and communities.** SAGA, a youth conservation corps with its roots in the outdoors, has broadened its efforts to play a vital role in housing development and human services.
8. **Mathare Youth Sports Association: From recreation to reclamation.** MYSA, a youth recreation program, uses its human and physical resources to take on vital community functions from trash collection to HIV/AIDS education.

Youth action starts in many places. It ends up producing powerful impacts in every aspect of community life. These are the bottom-line lessons of the stories in the pages that follow.

This publication is written as a companion to *Youth Action: Youth Contributing to Communities, Communities Supporting Youth* (Irby, Ferber & Pittman, with Tolman & Yohalem, 2001). Where this publication documents practice, *Youth Action* focuses on theory, developing clear definitions of types and goals of youth action, exploring what it takes to support it and documenting how it relates to youth development and community development. Importantly, while this pub-

lication begins with a discussion of challenges, *Youth Action* focuses on opportunities — describing the trends and fields converging on youth action as a powerful area of work. We hope that the two publications add up to a balanced view of the forces affecting young change makers and their adult allies.

These reports, written by Forum staff and consultants, are bookends to a larger body of work generated with the support of the Ford Foundation, as well as through grants from the Surdna Foundation and the Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund. In 1997, the Ford Foundation and the International Youth Foundation commissioned a series of papers and sponsored a conference to document and discuss the convergence of the goals and strategies of the youth and community development fields. Three publications — the first three volumes in the Community & Youth Development Series — emerged from this early collaboration. In 1998, the two foundations embarked on the development of an ambitious effort to create an international learning group to explore the convergence further. The International Learning Group on Youth and Community Development (ILG) aimed to coordinate structured opportunities for engaged thinkers and doers to create, share, critique and apply research, theory, policies and practices that promote the goal of community and youth development. In 1999 and 2000, the 20 members of the ILG — half from the United States, half from other countries — grappled with this important issue.

The three final volumes of the Community & Youth Development Series¹ — including this one — arise out of the work of the ILG. Members of the ILG contributed to both the search for examples and the frames used to describe them in this volume. But *Youth Acts, Community Impacts* also reaches beyond the experience of the ILG to document experiences and lessons about youth action. In the end, this volume reflects the work of many Forum staff, consultants and key thinkers in and outside of the ILG process.

As a whole, the Forum's publications supported by the Ford Foundation — including the other volumes in the Community & Youth Development Series,

¹ In addition to *Youth Acts, Community Impacts* and *Youth Action*, the insights of the ILG members — especially about their joint learning experience in Latin America — are captured in *Lessons Learned, Lessons Shared: Reflections from the International Learning Group on Youth and Community Development* (Irby, 2001).

regular issues of *International Insights* published in *CYD Journal* and other concept papers, thought pieces and case studies — are catalogued in *Youth Development and Community Change*, a guide that accompanies this publication. Their many pages raise

more questions than they answer. Our hope is that they encourage additional grappling, reflection and refinement — for much is needed if we are to engage young people as full citizens and as change makers in their communities.

SECTION I

YOUTH ACTS WITH COMMUNITY IMPACTS

Noticed? Valued? Believed?

Around the world, young people are taking amazing steps to improve their conditions and their communities.

- In the Karnataka state in **India**, working children organized their own 13,000 member union, Bhima Sangha, to fight for their rights as workers and as children — conducting studies of working conditions, inspiring parents and adults to form unions and advocate for reforms and preserving the natural environment through a combination of advocacy and hard work.
- In Nairobi, **Kenya**, young boys and girls use garbage trucks owned by their soccer club to rid their streets of garbage, creating the first regular trash collection service in their community.
- In **Argentina**, young people trained as reproductive health educators have come together to organize a national network to share practices, lobby for laws that increase adolescents' confidential access to services and ramp up HIV/AIDS education across the country.
- In **Ecuador**, the young leaders of an organization called Cefocine use artistic expression to start new businesses, create alternatives to gang violence, educate a thousand children and rebuild impoverished communities.

Stories like these usually inspire but rarely surprise Americans. Somehow, we expect change efforts in other countries to be led by young people. The U.S. foreign news diet reinforces images of young people sitting on the cusp between crumbling traditions and evolving cyber cultures, corrupt governments and emerging democracies. Through these lenses we have come to expect young people to lead the way in countries with rapidly changing economies, governments and cultures.

But what about here? What roles do Americans expect young people to play in the United States? Again, the media have firmly instilled the image of the young technocrats — young people who, at 22, 18, 15 have revolutionized technology and made (and in many cases, lost) millions. And it occasionally brings us glimpses of young humanitarians — primarily affluent young people like Makenzie Snyder, who started a project at age eight to ensure that children in foster care have suitcases² — responding to the plight of those less fortunate.

But U.S. citizens are rarely exposed to the day-to-day stories of marginalized young people who, like the working children in India or rural youth in Oaxaca, have come together with adults to find lasting solutions to deep problems that affect their quality of life and

² The *Washington Post* (September 15 and October 4, 1999) covered this story after Makenzie received a \$15,000 grant from the Freddie Mac Foundation to continue her work. Makenzie was inspired by a movie in which a foster child went to her new home without a suitcase. At the time of the *Washington Post* articles, Makenzie and her peers had helped to distribute over 1,000 suitcases.

that of their families.³ Stories of collective action — rather than individual initiative — are in particularly short supply in the U.S. media.

Organizations and programs like YouthBuild, Do Something, Americorps and Public Allies may not be household names, but they are frequently in the national spotlight, and for good reason. They are solid, well established, widely replicated examples of what can happen when the goals of youth development and community change are intertwined. And long-standing local organizations like Banana Kelly, Coleman Advocates and Youth Force are well recognized among those “in the field.” But there are many, many more examples.

- Throughout **New York City**, young filmmakers create documentaries that both win awards and change lives — sparking legal action on issues of school equity and tenant rights and igniting long-overdue community discussions about racism and poverty.
- In **Philadelphia**, disenfranchised students come together through the Philadelphia Student Union to identify and address inequities in public education — getting up-to-date textbooks in schools, improving teacher quality and winning state policy battles.
- In southeast **Alaska**, Native American young people take leadership roles in a small conservation corps — building community pride as they construct houses and preserve a threatened natural environment.
- In **Lubec, Maine**, high school students put their heads together to find ways to bring new technology to their town’s declining fishing industry — because of their research, advocacy and hard work, the school now has a state-of-the-art aquaculture center, the town is attracting public and private investors, and the adults have more hope than they have had in decades.

The impact of these efforts is felt in their communities, but these stories are not known nationally and are

One goal of *Youth Acts, Community Impacts* is to highlight organizations and efforts that are not yet well known for their roles in making community change. A number of grassroots local organizations — nationally recognized for the “youth acts” they encourage and support — clearly demonstrate that young people can do vital community development work. Some of their contributions are highlighted here. To learn more, look to the contacts list at the back of this publication.

- The young people of Youth Force in New York City have mobilized hundreds of tenants to form tenant associations and demand needed repairs; created a Community Justice Center that has pulled 650 youth out of the criminal justice system in two years; and took The New York Times to task for misrepresenting young people in the media.
- Youth involved in Coleman Advocates for Children and Youth spearheaded the 1991 drive that led to the passage of the Children’s Amendment — directing \$140 million to programs over the last ten years. Youth were also critical to the 2001 reauthorization of the act.
- ROCA, Inc. in Chelsea, Massachusetts, has brought young people, school district leadership and other city leaders into “peacemaking circles” that have shattered the barriers between city decision makers and young people, securing new commitments and building new relationships
- Youth Action Program — the organization on which the national YouthBuild model was based — has renovated dozens of buildings for use by low-income residents of New York City.

In addition to these local efforts, a number of national organizations — most founded in the last decade — are focusing their energy squarely on supporting youth acts with community impacts. For more information on these national organizations, see *Youth Action: Annotated Bibliography & Key Resources* (The Forum for Youth Investment, 2001).

³ Even when the public is offered stories of young people making a difference, they tend to discount these stories — particularly if young people of color are involved. The ground-breaking work of Susan Bales and her colleagues at the Frameworks Institute indicate that the public’s negative perceptions of young people are so strong that they will often discount both personal narratives and statistics that convey positive images of young people (Bales, 2000).

sometimes not publicized locally. As a consequence, the power of young people to systematically make a difference is not understood or imagined even within the institutions where they spend their time — such as school — and the contributions of young people are not always sought or welcomed even in communities where change is desperately needed.

Why? Powerful examples like these are not as frequent as they could be. But they are not as infrequent as most adults, or even most young people, might believe. Young people can and are working to make a difference in their communities — preserving their culture, improving housing and sanitation conditions, addressing educational deficiencies, restoring safety, creating funding streams, providing health education, rebuilding sagging economies and connecting neighbors. Frequently, youth are involved as relatively uninformed volunteers, providing labor but not leadership. But there are also occasions when they are the leaders, working with adults to create sophisticated strategies for achieving significant, sustainable results.

Why aren't young people seen as a bigger part of the community change equation? And what will help to change that perception?

We explore some of the reasons in this chapter. First, primarily for the sake of thoroughness, we restate the evidence that young people are indeed interested in community change. We then turn to the question of whether the various institutions and fields that focus on community change are interested in and supportive of youth as change agents — exploring past and recent opportunities for young people to be involved in traditional community development corporations (CDCs) and in the growing community-building movement. Our conclusion: There is room, but the challenge seems to emanate from the fact that while resident involvement is the mantra of community development and especially community-building efforts, (1) “resident” translates into adult in most of the literature, and (2) broad resident engagement is a newly revived theme. Combined, these realities limit the visibility of young people as potential community leaders. Turning the corner to examine emerging fields that are engaging youth, we look at youth organizing, drawing heavily on the work of Lisa Sullivan, founder of LISTEN, Inc.

We end with a response to the question posed by Inca Mohamed of the Ford Foundation, who called for this chapter by asking “Is there space for young people to make a difference in this country?” Our answer: Yes, but these spaces are not as wide and visible in the U.S. as they are in other countries. They are complex spaces that require young people to have not only the desire to make change, but skills, connections, opportunities and resources.

ARE YOUTH INTERESTED IN COMMUNITY CHANGE?

A 1998 study conducted by pollster Peter Hart found that almost three quarters (72 percent) of young people participate in community activities through organized groups or associations and that almost two thirds (64 percent) say that “feeling as though you give back to your community” is extremely important to them.

These findings alone do not suggest the depth of their interest and commitment to community change, but they do counter one deeply ingrained myth held about young people:

Myth 1: Young people lack the motivation to become involved. This myth is captured most aptly in the media hype about Generation X syndrome, which describes young people as a socially inert, self-absorbed group with little or no interest in the political process. It is true that many young Americans over 18 do not vote or show interest in the conventional modes of political expression via political parties. But, as the Hart data suggest, young people are showing great interest in political issues and are constantly searching for different ways to express themselves. Hart goes on to assert that this rejection of traditional means of involvement, like voting, does not mean that young people are apathetic: “Contrary to the popular portrayal of young Americans as self-absorbed and socially inert, this generation is not seeking to distance itself from community, but is instead looking for new and distinctive ways to connect to the people and issues surrounding them.”

The case studies presented in this report confirm scores of other real-life examples that counter a second myth:

Myth 2: Young people lack the skills needed to handle the “serious” issues of power and politics or make significant differences through their work. Long-standing assumptions that young people aren't yet ready for “adult” roles are only strengthened by educational testing, slanted media accounts and wary adults that together lament the “de-skilling” and inadequacy of youth. But when asked, both young people themselves and the organizations that engage them believe they have the skills needed to make a difference. According to two 1998 surveys conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates for Do Something:

- 73 percent of young people ages 15–29 believe that they can have a big or moderate impact

on making their community a better place to live (compared to 66 percent of adults 30 or older (1998b).

- 78 percent of community organizations reject the assertion that young people do not have the necessary skills to be volunteers (1998a).

Some believe that behind this “incompetence” defense lies a deeper issue. Sociologist Mike Males sums up the problem bluntly in *The Scapegoat Generation* (1996). Comparing youth to other disenfranchised groups (women, ethnic minorities, gays and lesbians) that have been denied a place at the political table, Males asserts that “young people are the last group we are allowed to systematically exclude.”

Far from being apathetic or incompetent, there is evidence that young people are interested in commu-

BHIMA SANGHA: A WORKING CHILDREN'S UNION

When working children in the Karnataka state in India realized that they were not recognized as workers by the state, legislation and trade unions, they decided to form their own union to fight for their rights as workers and as children. Bhima Sangha (sangha = union) — the result of their efforts — is an independent association of, by and for working children supported by The Concerned for Working Children in South India. Launched in 1990, Bhima Sangha has a membership of 13,000 working children, a number that continues to grow.

Members of Bhima Sangha have made remarkable contributions to the plight of working children and their communities. They have interfaced with Ministers of State, government officials and the police to bring about changes that have bettered their lives. They have formed inquiry commissions and conducted in-depth studies collecting firsthand information on circumstances of accidents that have proved fatal to other working children. These children have had a tremendous impact on other social actors such as the media, policy makers and the community at large. They have inspired their parents and adults in the community to form unions and to act together to solve their problems and demand services. They have recognized the need to participate in political processes and have chosen and supported candidates for local elections. They have received political recognition in eight local governments (Panchayats) and are playing an active role in the micro-planning of their Panchayats.

Linking Idealism, Research and Advocacy

The depth and scale of Bhima Sanha's impact is astounding — as is the way that the union combines children's optimism, impressive research and sophisticated advocacy in order to reach its goals. One story — told by Nandana Reddy, Development Director of The Concerned for Working Children — is demonstrative.

Using a methodology called Participatory Rapid Appraisal, “Bhima Sangha members mapped the course of the river Varahi from source to mouth, documenting information on natural resources, infrastructure, history, demographics and culture. The children of Bhima Sangha met to discuss their findings. They realized that massive destruction of the environment including the felling of forests had led to

continues . . .

nity change and, in fact, see this level of civic engagement as more authentic and rewarding than do adults. Young people are finding new ways of “connecting to people and issues,” as Hart puts it — leading to the creation of powerful forces for change as different as the Philadelphia Student Union and The Food Project. The Peter Hart survey (1998) documents a profound shift in the notion of leadership and the perceived role that young people can play in changing circumstances that face them:

- 71 percent of the young people surveyed think that the best model for leadership is to build from the bottom up, to encourage many people to share in the responsibility for making decisions and moving forward.
- 78 percent think that no one group is mostly responsible for solving the social problems, rather that communities and individuals are responsible for solving their own problems.

- 79 percent also believe that ordinary people have the resources and practical know-how to solve most of their problems.

There is little doubt that adult attitudes play a role in limiting opportunities for youth action and dampening recognition of it when it occurs. Reading between the lines however, these survey findings suggest that there may be a more basic and perhaps more malleable reason why young people are not seen as a bigger part of the community change equation, even when they are present and willing to be engaged. There is a fundamental disconnect between the goals and assumptions of the two young but well-established fields of youth development and community development — creating a dead zone that makes it difficult for practitioners and advocates in both fields to imagine and support community youth action in its fullest forms.

BHIMA SANGHA: A WORKING CHILDREN'S UNION, *continued*

a scarcity of raw material for the production of traditional crafts such as baskets and mats. There was also a paucity of green manure, medicinal herbs, firewood and fodder for their cattle.

“There was a small child at this meeting, a boy called Dinesh, who seemed 6 but was actually 9. I felt he looked too young to participate. Then he began to speak. He said, ‘The answer to this is to grow our own forest. We will plant all the trees we need including medicinal herbs. We will let loose all the birds and animals our parents told us once lived here. We will not ever cut any trees, only branches and we will protect this forest for our children.’

“I said, ‘Where will you get the land?’ He said, ‘We will ask the Commissioner.’ I said, ‘What if he does not give it to you?’ He said, ‘We will sit in his chamber until he does — after all we are Bhima Sangha children.’

“Dinesh’s dream has come true. In 100 acres of land, a forest planted by little working fingers has begun to grow. They call it Namma Kadu or ‘Our Forest’ and the trees are now twice the height of Dinesh.”

The Role of Adult Allies

As with many of the efforts profiled in this publication, adults and an adult-led organization provide critical supports to the work of Bhima Sangha. The Concerned for Working Children (CWC) and its leader Damodaran Acharya have been at the heart of child labor and unionization of child workers since 1980. CWC facilitated the coming together of working children as a union, giving an organizational context for its efforts. Now, as the union develops greater power and autonomy, Bhima Sangha views CWC as an agency to provide services, skills and information — as and when requested by Bhima Sangha to do so. Bhima Sangha also uses CWC to build the capacity of its office bearers and members. Having an organizational support structure with leadership that understands and is committed to sharing power with young people has been critical to the union’s success.

Based on “Child Labour and the Value of Children’s Decisions: The Child’s Place in Policy and Practice” by Nandana Reddy (1998) and “Working Children as Protagonists.” Both documents are available at www.workingchild.org

YOUTH DEVELOPMENT AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT: FERTILE GROUND OR BARREN SOIL FOR YOUTH ACTION?

Over the past few years, there has been increasing discussion of the importance of deepening the connections between youth and their communities and strengthening the ties between youth development and community development. But there are some basic differences in the assumptions behind these terms that make bridge-building efforts harder than they might seem.

- **The populations do not overlap.** Even though young adults under 25 or even 30 are considered “youth” in many countries, “youth” in the United States is still defined as under 19 or perhaps under 22. “Residents,” on the other hand, are considered adults — people with homes, leases, children, jobs. By most people’s calculations, “residents” are not youth.
- **The goals do not overlap.** Youth development is seen as individual skill building and supports — goals supported by soft services. Community development, on the other hand, is most commonly understood as physical and economic development — goals achieved through power negotiations, politics and fund leveraging.
- **The activities do not overlap.** Youth participation most frequently conjures up images of involvement in things that have intrinsic merit — in sports, in leadership training, in service projects. Community or resident participation, on the other hand, is frequently viewed as involvement for external results — organizing, advocacy, governance.

With these differences, it is not hard to imagine why young people are not usually portrayed as serious players in community development efforts. Neither the youth development nor the community development worlds consistently see them as such.

As detailed in the companion to this report, *Youth Action: Youth Contributing to Communities, Communities Supporting Youth* (Irby, Ferber & Pittman, 2001), youth participation is frequently discussed as a critical part of youth development. Community improvement and change are increasingly discussed as a critical ingredient in youth development. But youth participation is seldom discussed as critical to community change. Many of the organizations we have interviewed are very clear that their desire to create good experiences for young people far outstrips their desire for measurable external change. There is, they would argue, a clear distinction between youth development and youth leadership development.

“Youth development” means that you do things to help youth grow — being responsive to youth and moving kids along. There’s a center, you support kids, you build relationships. “Youth leadership development” moves us in the direction of creating citizens of the future. It involves helping youth do more than develop competencies. It means helping them understand that there is a something bigger than themselves. . .

— Leslie Medine,
The HOME Project, Alameda, California

But most would also argue that their clear focus on individual growth distinguishes youth leadership development from the bottom-line mentality that is reflected in the purest forms of community organizing or community development. The challenge is that only a minority of the organizations that come at youth action from a youth development or even a youth leadership development perspective measure success in terms of community impact. Many do not even track it.⁴ Youth-serving organizations have rushed to push beyond the clubhouse doors to help youth participants get involved in their communities and to articulate and document the impact that community involvement has on the development of skills, knowledge, interests and civic commitment. But this rush has not been accompanied by clear statements of the public payoffs of youth engagement.⁵

⁴ Forum staff and consultants learned this firsthand in doing preliminary calls and interviews to identify the programs profiled in this report. The young people involved in many youth development organizations are, in fact, creating community change — but this impact often isn’t noticed or measured by organizations whose bottom line is individual change.

⁵ Organizations like the National Crime Prevention Council (see Teens, Crime and Community Web site www.nationaltcc.org) document “public payoffs” in the form of reduced youth problems and, consequently, reduced public expenditures or public safety risks. But the community benefits conferred are measured in terms of bad things young people didn’t do and commitments to social responsibility in the future, not concrete positive results of youth acts.

On the other hand, while most community development corporations (CDCs) now have youth on their radar screens, the majority target young people as recipients of services, not catalysts for change. A survey of community development organizations conducted by Ben Butler and Donna Wharton-Fields of Community Development Associates (1999) found that, while three quarters of the organizations responding had residents on their boards of directors and two thirds had residents involved in decision making and planning, the proportion stating that they had youth in these roles was considerably lower (12 and 20 percent, respectively). Similarly, when asked to name the benefits of providing

youth programming or opportunities, few if any stated that youth were central in achieving organizational goals.

The exceptions, like El Centro in Seattle and Teen Inspirators at Oak Hill CDC in Worcester, Massachusetts, are powerful. But for the most part, the impetus behind increased youth programming in CDCs is skill building and leadership development in the name of increased human capital. And even this rationale is being questioned.

CDCs have the desire and the basic tools with which to expand work into nonphysical development areas including the child care, job training, economic

OAK HILL CDC AND TEEN INSPIRATORS, ON THE MOVE: YOUTH ACTION IN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATIONS

In the Spring of 1996, Worcester's Oak Hill Community Development Corporation embarked on a three-month Community Planning Initiative (CPI) using a methodology called Urban Community Action Planning (UCAP). UCAP is a participatory, systematic community development approach, using a grassroots development framework created in rural areas in Africa, Latin America and Asia. One of the most unanticipated yet exciting outcomes of the planning initiative was the formulation of a teen group — Teen Inspirators, On the Move.

Twenty teens, both male and female, ages 11–16 from diverse racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds met weekly to plan activities for themselves and the neighborhood. They used mapping exercises, journals, neighborhood treasure hunts, community interviews, ranking exercises and felt board decision making exercises to collect and analyze information about their neighborhood.

While on the Neighborhood Treasure Hunt, the teens searched for the actual treasures of their neighborhood. Interesting architecture, beautifully maintained yards, teen-friendly stores, and safe places to hang out topped their list. They also explored potential treasures — for example, neighborhood problems such as abandoned lots that could be opportunities for change.

One such potential treasure proved to be Banis Park, a small park located at the corner of two busy streets in their neighborhood. They found the park in a state of decline. The swings were broken, the fence was damaged, and the park was littered with broken glass and trash. There were no benches and no shade except along the fence that surrounded the park. Additionally, the park had become a location for drug deals. Community members largely viewed the park as a liability to their neighborhood. The teens saw it as a potential neighborhood treasure.

The Teen Inspirators, On the Move used UCAP to engage nearby residents, park users, and city workers about the possibilities for Banis Park. Mapping exercises generated hundreds of ideas for the park. Focus groups and interviews narrowed down the list. A Park Planning Party held at Banis Park was a community-building, park planning event that combined a barbecue with discussions about the future of the park. Although it took almost two years to gain approval for the plan, acquire endorsement from key city agencies, and raise the necessary funds for rehabilitation, the Teen Inspirators persevered. In June 1999 the renovated Banis Park was reopened.

As a result of the teens' hard work, the support of Oak Hill CDC, and the systematic, participatory community development approach of UCAP, a group of teens who had previously seen themselves without a community voice were able to transform a neighborhood problem into a true community treasure.

Reprinted with permission from *Students Schools Neighborhoods: A SPARCS Action Curriculum for Community Change* (Ross, Coleman & Hall, 1999).

development, school reform, and anticrime efforts that are often referred to as community-building activities. But pushing CDCs to expand activities too fast can cause harm. CDCs as a group are still small

EL CENTRO DE LA RAZA: CULTURE AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Established in 1972, El Centro de la Raza (The Center of the People) is a Chicano/Latino civil rights organization primarily serving the Chicano/Latino residents of the Seattle and King County area of Washington State. The organization's philosophy centers on "empowering community members to empower themselves and advocate for positive social change." Central to this effort is a commitment to struggle for the civil rights of all people.

And, for El Centro, "all people" includes young people. El Centro's leaders, both youth and adults, view the organization's approach to youth as a fundamental component of its comprehensive philosophy toward community development. The organization's youth leadership development work is grounded in the belief that in order to make significant contributions to their families, community and society, young people must understand their history, recognize the inherent strengths of their culture, be grounded in the values and skills of non-violent activism, and have opportunities to learn and demonstrate leadership. The focus on culture is critical — through structured classes and daily interaction, El Centro teaches young people about their history and the injustices that Chicano and other communities of color have faced and overcome.

The commitment to youth roles goes well beyond "learning," however. While El Centro does not have youth on its board of directors, three young people are members of an Executive Advisory Committee — the body that functions as the organization's primary source for external feedback and guidance. El Centro also believes in providing young people with opportunities to learn and demonstrate leadership through holding staff positions and as volunteers — and several young people serve in high-profile paid positions inside the organization.

and fragile organizations. Engaging in community building is a complex undertaking for most. . . . Cities have not yet secured long-term, systematic funding for community development programs beyond bricks and mortar development. We therefore urge caution in making big leaps into community building.

— "Community Development in the 1990s,"

Christopher Walker and Mark Weinheimer

Young people have the capacity to be change agents. And they frequently have the motivation. But they often do not have the space — physical, political, social — or the resources — financial, technical, networking — needed to act.

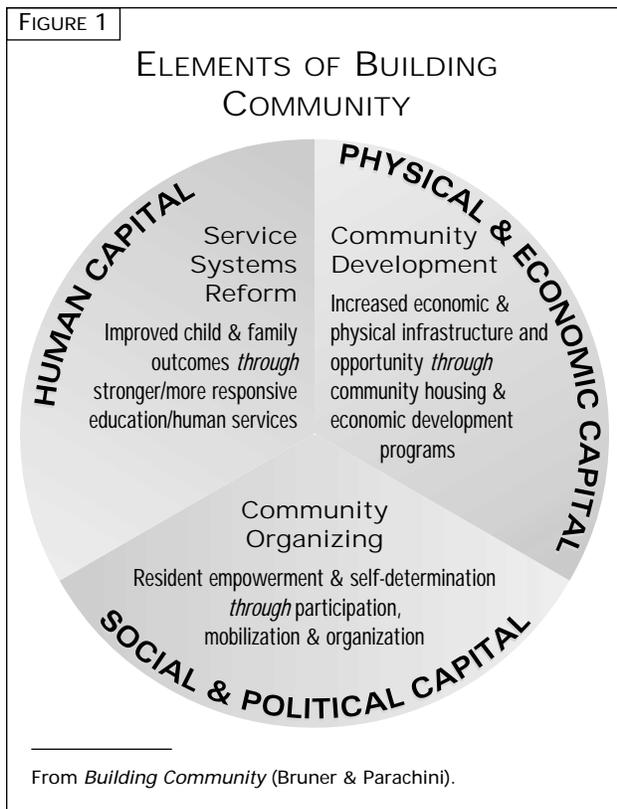
There is no doubt that there is a convergence occurring between the traditional youth development and community development fields — as those on the youth side of the equation recognize the importance of involving youth in the community, and those on the community side recognize the importance of building human capital. But there is not a huge body of evidence to suggest that the result of this convergence will be increased space for young people to really make a difference in their communities and in the institutions that most affect them and their families.

THE COMMUNITY BUILDING MOVEMENT: CAN YOUTH ACTION BE A PART OF THIS EQUATION?

Matthew Wexler and Jeff Armistead of the Local Investment Support Corporation (LISC) in their analysis, *Community Development and Youth Development: The Potential for Convergence* (1997), suggest that there is reason to be optimistic. Wexler and Armistead explain that the fields have moved apart since their birth.

. . . the community development movement and youth development were linked at the beginning. . . [but] the growth of CDCs' housing development activities into an industry has been accompanied by developments and forces⁶ which have caused CDCs and youth development organizations to diverge significantly.

⁶ The forces: (1) professionalization to bring technical expertise into CDCs, (2) pressures supporting noncollaboration with other organizations, (3) property management responsibilities that made CDCs risk averse and (4) an increased focus on places (properties) rather than people.



But changes in the community development field, according to Armistead and Wexler, are opening up new windows of opportunity.

Community building, as opposed to traditional bricks and mortar community development, has re-emerged as a change strategy that assumes that social and human capital are as critical as physical and economic capital in the creation of lasting change. Kingsley, McNeely and Gibson (1997) explain this eloquently in their reflections on this new field.

[There is] a new approach that is emerging to help address the problems and opportunities of both impoverished inner-city neighborhoods and rural areas. Most of its practitioners are now calling it community building. It works by building community in individual neighborhoods: neighbors learning to rely on each other, working together on concrete tasks that take advantage of new self-awareness of their collective and individual assets and, in the process, creating human, family, and social capital that provides a new base for a more promising future and reconnection to America's mainstream.

... there is now evidence of many cases where the residents of poor communities have dramatically

changed their circumstances by organizing to assume responsibility for their own destinies.

The community building approach has, according to many observers, blended the principles and practices of service systems reform, community development and community organizing. And it leads with — and often leans on — resident organizing and empowerment as the primary strategy for creating and maintaining reforms in the other arenas.

The language and philosophy of resident engagement square well with that of youth participation and youth empowerment. Sviridoff and Ryan's (1996) distinctions between residents as clients, residents as political activists and policy makers, and residents as engaged citizens — with a clear preference for resident engagement — help to make the link. Their focus on engagement signals a shift to a more inclusive definition (both in terms of numbers and roles), redefines the roles of professionals and creates more “space” for youth. Moreover, Sviridoff and Ryan's distinctions parallel the rubrics Roger Hart (1992) and others have used to describe types of youth engagement.

But, as with the traditional CDCs, there is still a strong sense that young people, while seen as an important target for services and supports, are not necessarily seen as a part of the immediate solution.

- In their 1997 reflection piece, Kingsley, McNeely and Gibson offer several powerful examples of resident action that benefited youth (support for college, programs for teen parents, summer employment and recreation programs). But the authors do not speak directly to the need to involve youth as key residents in community building efforts.
- Public/Private Ventures, in its 1999 report on resident involvement in community change in two P/PV-directed initiatives aimed at improving youth outcomes, makes no reference to the fact that young people are residents and offers no examples of young people's involvement in the community change processes (Walker, Watson & Jucuvy). This is the case even though one of the initiatives, Community Change for Youth Development, includes youth participation as a core element for community improvement.

- Angela Ards and Geoffrey Canada, in their powerful story of the development of Community Pride, a tenant organizing effort in Central Harlem, write about the importance of both empowerment services offered to families needing help and youth development programs that offer “the young people of 119th Street a chance to explore their strengths, talents and options for their futures.” The Community Youth Employment Program (CYEP) is one of the programs offered that trains and employs teens in community assessment and community organizing projects. But the impact of CYEP is described in individual terms — working, learning about team work, group effort, maintaining a journal, reflecting on success — not in terms of community impact.

It would be wrong to assume that, because they are not specifically mentioned, young people — especially young adults 18 to 24 — were not involved in these change efforts in large and formal ways. It is quite likely teens and young adults were involved to some degree. But it would also be wrong to assume that youth involvement, when present, was intentional or that, when absent, was noticed.

Again, there are two primary reasons:

- **“Resident” remains a code word for adult.** Resident is a ubiquitous term in the community building literature. But it is one whose definition must be inferred from the context or focus of action. Residents are tenants coming together to organize activities and pressure landlords. They are parents

POLISH YOUTH AS PARTNERS: LEADING THE WAY IN COMMUNITY CHANGE

Emerging from the fall of Communism, the youth of Poland faced daunting obstacles to engagement in community change. The infrastructure of civil society barely existed. Adults had little expectation that youth could play meaningful roles — exemplified by an old proverb, “fish and children have no voice.” And young people’s only experience of community participation was their homogenized, compulsory membership in youth organizations controlled by a repressive government. As Teresa Ogrodzinska (1999) of the Polish Children and Youth Foundation (PCYF) put it:

They did not understand volunteerism as it is practiced in democratic societies. Under the old regime they were forced to “volunteer” and had no opportunity to make decisions democratically. And, within the rigid confines of a planned economy, they had never been exposed to the entrepreneurial spirit — to individuals making a difference.

PCYF staff heard these challenges again and again as they spoke with young people in the early 1990s. Building on conversations with Maria Nagorski, then Executive Director of the U.S.-based Youth as Resources, and on financial support from the International Youth Foundation, PCYF spearheaded a far-reaching strategy to engage young people. Youth as Partners — named to emphasize the importance of youth-adult partnerships — was established to encourage, fund and support youth-initiated projects in communities around the country. Working with small grants of about \$800 US, and supported by both local adult mentors and regional trainings, the young people involved have changed the face of many Polish communities.

Since 1990, Youth as Partners has grown in its scale and complexity. Two examples help to illustrate the range of impact their efforts are yielding:

- Responding to floods in Southern Poland, youth organizations involved in Youth as Partners took on vital and innovative roles in helping communities rebuild — physically and emotionally. After reading about trauma suffered during the floods, young people involved in The Sports Club organized programs to help residents overcome their fear of water and swimming. The youth of the Swidnica Knighthood for Child Rights Protection organized a daycare center for children left without homes after the flood and leveraged their own donations to convince local leaders to invest in the reconstruction of their community’s church.
- Young people in another community developed a comprehensive network of bicycle trails in and around their city, using their Youth as Partners grant to both improve the physical infrastructure and develop the environmental awareness opportunities that accompanied them.

coming together to push for reforms in their schools. They are welfare recipients coming together to demand better services or neighbors banding together to create safer streets. In report after report reviewed on community building, community organizing or community development, distinctions are made between involved and uninvolved residents, between long-term and short-term residents, but not between youth and adult residents. This silence reinforces the assumption that residents, or more specifically the residents worth engaging, are adults.

- **Broad resident engagement in community building is a newly revived theme.** The renewed attention to resident engagement harkens back to the early days of CDCs (Armistead & Wexler, 1997). But it represents a clear shift from current practices that leave limited room for broad resident involvement. Community building efforts, like CDCs, are often still nascent and fragile — meaning they often have few resources and little expertise in the specific challenge of engaging young residents. Perhaps, as these efforts shore up their foundations, young people will find more inroads — or perhaps they will discover new structural hurdles that emerge as the field develops.

Again, there is reason to be optimistic. The National Community Building Network has made a concerted effort to involve youth during the past few years, increasing youth participation in its membership and at its conferences — in part due to the direct pressure of young people eager for more meaningful roles. But it remains to be seen how far these efforts will push the emerging field of community building.

COMMUNITY ORGANIZING + YOUTH DEVELOPMENT = YOUTH ORGANIZING⁷

While efforts to create space for young people in the community development and community building fields are important, it may be that the most promising windows of opportunity are opening elsewhere — in

the strong and growing efforts of young adults to engage disenfranchised youth.

Beneath the radar screen of traditional youth service organizations, a new generation of youth workers are caring for, listening to and beginning to mobilize alienated American youth. Drawing upon the successes and lessons learned from veteran organizers and youth development professionals, this new cadre of youth workers are developing a new method for engaging this generation of teenagers and young adults. . . weaving theories of community organizing with youth development to create a new kind of community-based youth work that is explicitly committed to social and civic engagement as well as political action. This emerging genre of community youth work is known as Youth Organizing (YO).

— Lisa Sullivan, Founder of LISTEN, Inc.,
An Emerging Model for Working with Youth, 2000

These new hybrid groups find the intersection between youth development and community change easier to maintain. Consider the ease with which Eric Braxton, the founder of the Philadelphia Student Union, explains the balance.

There are mainly two components of our work: youth organizing around education reform and youth leadership development. These two things have to go together: it is pointless to give young people skills without giving them a chance to use those skills. Yet, we can't expect young people to be effective organizers without teaching them strategies and skills that help them organize.

Youth organizing and community building are just gaining momentum in the United States, but these approaches are more common in other countries, especially in Latin America where the ideologies of community empowerment and social responsibility are strong. It is not called youth organizing in these countries. There is no need to emphasize the youth role. It is assumed that young people, as members of families and communities, will play a part in shaping their destinies (Mokwena, 2000).

What was clear from the young people we talked with was they were expected (and expect themselves) to become active in improving the quality of life for their families and their communities from a very early age.

⁷ This section and its title reflect the pioneering work of Lisa Sullivan (2000) to build the youth organizing field.

It goes without saying that balancing the dual goals of youth development and community improvement is a challenge for many programs in Latin America, just as it is for programs in the United States. But the challenges are different. If anything, many international programs have recently come to strengthen the individual development components of their work. The challenge in these programs is often to ensure that families and communities are not reaping the short-term benefits of young people's economic, community and political participation at the expense of their long-term capacity to contribute as well-educated citizens.

At the risk of over generalizing to make a point, there are three striking differences between the United States and many less industrialized countries that make it difficult for young people here to be a recognized, visible force in community change efforts:

1. the under-valuation of natural community strengths;
2. the professionalization of youth and community development services; and
3. the extent and quality of government infrastructure aimed at providing basic community services (e.g., transportation, sanitation, housing, safety).

Having discussed the first two at some length, we turn briefly to the third.

STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY INFRASTRUCTURES: ANY SPACE FOR YOUTH ACTION?

The professionalization of community services, including community change efforts, gets to the core of a key challenge to youth engagement in community issues. Compared to many other countries, the United States has invested significantly more in the apparatus and infrastructure of its communities. Professional, bureaucratic systems take responsibility for community functions from picking up trash and financing low-income housing to educating children, supporting the arts and trying legal cases.

The complexity and power of this community infrastructure means that few roles are left for young people to play as *infrastructure builders*. It is hard to come up

with stories of young people becoming a community's sanitation services because the United States already has garbage collectors. Few young people are founding schools to educate their peers because a public school system is already in place. Child laborers aren't organizing themselves because child labor has been reduced to pockets of activity out of the public eye. Young people may find it hard to provide vital community development functions simply because many are already provided. And the roles inside of existing community infrastructure require expertise, professional credentials and bureaucratic savvy or, indirectly, voting power — all out of reach of young people.

All this does not mean that young people are unable to engage in concrete community development in the United States. They can. But, to become active, they must either find the gaps or find ways to be involved in the formal processes — roles that look far different than those taken on by young people in less infrastructure-rich countries. There are three reasons to be optimistic:

1. **Our nation's infrastructure-building skills are increasingly being employed to create opportunities for youth engagement.** Conservation corps and YouthBuild programs — like the Southeast Alaska Guidance Association profiled in this publication — exemplify what can happen if public resources are directed toward engaging young people in community development. The roles young people take on are anything but marginal — they are construction workers, decision makers, full community members — in part because of significant state and federal investments in engaging large numbers of young people as paid community development professionals.
2. **There are many, many communities where necessary infrastructure is in place, but functioning poorly, opening up space for young people as infrastructure changers.** Organizations like Youth Force in New York and the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights in California — along with outstanding youth organizing efforts around the country — demonstrate the importance of young people grappling with community infrastructures that are not meeting their needs. While Ella Baker and Youth Force have both directed needed attention toward the juvenile justice system, this is only one of many structures facing youth-led change efforts.

3. **In many U.S. communities, vital infrastructure does not exist.** Young people growing up in these communities can play the concrete “from the ground up” roles witnessed in other countries. As Jonathan Kozol (1991) so compellingly points out in *Savage Inequalities*, communities around the United States still lack basic sanitation services, opportunities for employment and functional public schools. In these settings, young people can — and often do — step forward to both meet these basic needs and fight to address the inequalities. The story of Lubec, Maine — documented in this volume — indicates that even communities rich in some community development resources (natural beauty, innovative public schools) usually can provide spaces for young people to provide basic community development functions.

Opportunities do exist, and young people are acting to fill all these gaps in community functioning. However, their contributions will be more substantial and widely recognized if young people are recognized as full residents of their communities.

YOUTH RESIDENT ENGAGEMENT: STRENGTHENING THE IDEAS, PUSHING THE AGE BARRIER

Richard Taub's (1990) distinction between efficacy and political empowerment (presented in the Sviridoff and Ryan paper) is reminiscent of the definitions of youth and resident participation that are in common use in the youth organizing literature, the community-building literature and the empowerment philosophies of many Latin American countries.

Instead of looking at the question of empowerment — in the sense of having a political impact on large, impersonal forces — it might make more sense to think about efficacy, the capacity of individuals to believe that they can change the course of their own lives by their own efforts. . . . [It's a mistake to] think of empowerment as only or primarily a political phenomenon. Helping to create the conditions that make it possible for people to get control over their own lives is also empowerment.

— Richard Taub, *Nuance and Meaning in Community Development: Finding Community and Development*, 1990

Equally important, this language describes the types of engagement that American young people value and espouse, as reported in the Peter Hart survey presented earlier — bottom up, egalitarian, resident driven problem solving that stems from a strong sense of efficacy.

As one young Oakland resident states:

Sometimes we learn about or see things that we just feel are wrong — like the way some classes are taught or the way police treat us. But most kids don't think they can make a difference. When we talk among ourselves, we get mad. But you have to encourage people to believe. When we talk to adults who know how to make change, we can learn other ways to channel our anger. . . .

— Danielle, Oakland youth focus group member

Within the community development and building fields, definitions of community capital (beyond bricks and mortar) and resident participation (beyond governance and lobbying) have broadened considerably, creating more space for young residents' contributions to community building and community change to be recognized, encouraged and even solicited.

This space will be filled faster if those working in community development and community building and those working in youth development and youth leadership:

- **Broaden the definition of youth, both up and down.** High school- and middle school-aged young people are involved in making a difference in their communities. But they are often guided and assisted by young adults, ages 19–30. These young people need resources and recognition for their work. And communities need to recognize that, because of the limited definitions of youth and participation that are in place in most communities, opportunities for meaningful engagement actually decrease as young people “age out” of programs. At the same time, organizations and high school-aged change makers are recognizing that there are age-appropriate community roles for children to play. While the roles and responsibilities are different, elementary-age young people are increasingly trying on roles as planners, doers and evaluators in community efforts.
- **Deepen understanding of the assets youth bring as community residents.** Don't assume that their

skills and experiences are the same as adults, or that they have none. Kretzman and McKnight (1993), for instance, identify eight positive assets through which young people can make a unique contribution to the development of their communities — including discretionary time, connection to place, dreams and desires, and credibility as teachers.

- **Increase the pathways for youth action with adult support.** Recognize that young people are four times more likely to get involved when asked (Hodgkinson & Weitzman, 1996). They can be asked by adults, by young adults, or by peers — but they often need to be asked to get started. And the initial ask represents only the first step; young people need access to ongoing supports, high expectations and additional opportunities for involvement to maintain engagement.⁸
- **Increase recognition of youth acts *and* community impacts.** Acknowledge the extent to which young people’s actions go unnamed and unrecognized and the extent to which the impact of their actions goes unmeasured — whether they are involved in building systems, changing systems or working within systems to create change. Work with community-building organizations and organizers to increase recruitment of youth as engaged citizens. Work with youth organizations and organizers to support the definition and documentation of community impact.
- **Broaden the definition of impact.** Look for and expect short-term and long-term impacts within the community — changes in the physical, human, economic, social or political capital. Also look for and expect short-term and long-term impacts on the individual youth and adults involved — changes in attitudes, skills and sense of efficacy.
- **Deepen understanding of what it takes to engage young people with adults in transforming their communities.** Sometimes it is difficult to identify or create projects that actually respond to real community needs and also generate real youth involve-

ment. Doing so requires a closer look at what such efforts involve.

This list is only a partial one, offering advice to community development and community-building organizations. It is complemented by the list of Fundamentals of Youth Organizing proposed by Lisa Sullivan (2000) — focusing on the importance of reinvesting in alienated youth, youth-led efforts and youth decision making, and on the relationship between youth organizers and the young people engaged through their organizing efforts. That list lays out the tools for organizations that start with youth as the focal point. It is worth noting that many of the struggles that play themselves out in local programs can be traced back to a lack of vital national activities related to policy, research, public will, capacity building and philanthropy.⁹

Up to this point, we have focused on challenges — institutional, social, political, practical — that stand in the way of recognizing youth acts with community impacts. The list of challenges could certainly be longer, as it barely touched on the institutional and field capacity necessary to engage young people at a significant scale.

But two facts give cause for hope.

1. Despite persistent inertia within the youth development, community development and a number of other fields, all seem to be slowly converging on youth action as a powerful, logical next step in their work. Investments from foundations and the capacity of key national organizations are lining up with potential policy changes and a growing evidence base. These trends and forces are the subject of *Youth Action*, the companion to this publication.
2. As these “big picture” trends come into alignment, there is a second cause for hope. Now perhaps more than ever, we are equipped with promising stories and powerful lessons about youth acts that yield community impacts. In Section II, we share some of these stories and lessons.

⁸ *Youth Action: Youth Contributing to Communities, Communities Supporting Youth* (Irby, Ferber & Pittman, 2001) addresses the idea of action pathways at greater length.

⁹ Many of the “big picture” challenges facing national organizations committed to youth development are explored in *Unfinished Business: Further Reflections on a Decade of Promoting Youth Development* (Pittman, Irby & Ferber, 2000). Most of these challenges are as relevant to youth action as they are to youth development.

THE FUNDAMENTALS OF YOUTH ORGANIZING

BY LISA SULLIVAN

During out-of-school time, young organizers and youth workers have begun introducing teenagers and young adults from all walks of life to the value of community service, civic participation and political activism. At the core of this developing approach are the competencies of the youth development field. Young organizers are learning how to place the needs and interests of young people at the forefront of their training and capacity-building efforts, and they are providing young people with opportunities to develop and lead their own initiatives in the community.

From the community organizing field, young organizers are developing comprehensive strategies to facilitate real improvements in the entire community. Well-organized groups of young people are working in partnership with civic associations, churches and community-based organizations to reduce the demolition of public housing, to reduce the presence of guns in school, and to raise the awareness of government officials about the needs of young people beyond punishment, curfews and prisons.

The work of youth organizing is grounded in an evolving set of guiding principles that draw upon the best practices of youth development and community organizing. These emerging guiding principles include:

1. History as a powerful tool for mobilizing, educating and inspiring young people. Youth organizers incorporate the history of youth-led social movements in their training and educational programs. Youth learn about the social and economic conditions that exist during periods of activism and social resistance that shape their community and cultural history. More importantly, they are exposed to the stories of past generations of youth activists. As a result, they can make connections between previous social movements and themselves.
2. Youth organizers work with young people, not for them. Youth organizers focus their efforts on relationship building and community problem solving. Effective organizers seek out youth, young adults and community leaders who are well respected in the community. These individuals are enlisted to become staff, board members and volunteers. This approach helps to establish the credibility and legitimacy of youth organizing.
3. Reinvesting in the capacity of alienated youth is vital to community progress. Youth organizers target young people from all walks of life — helping them to understand the important role they must play in community change and progress. From gang members to straight “A” students, all youth can find a place in youth organizing work.
4. Youth organizing is youth driven and youth led. Youth organizing provides young people with many opportunities to develop as leaders. In a youth-driven, youth-led environment, young people have control of and responsibility for the good and bad decisions of a campaign, program, project and organization.
5. Youth organizers meet young people where they are. The efforts of youth organizers to sustain youth-led, youth-driven community organizing are not easy. Youth organizers must constantly meet young people where they are (literally and figuratively) in their personal development process and ensure that they achieve meaningful improvements in their own lives as well as within the community.
6. Youth participate in daily decision making. Responsibility for the work of an organization cannot rest with an individual or a small, elite group. At all levels, leadership opportunities exist for youth.

These guiding principles are the foundation from which youth organizers manage day-to-day operations, design training efforts and develop strategies for community outreach and advocacy. Unlike a traditional youth development approach, youth organizing fosters in young people a commitment to personal development in service to community empowerment.

Excerpted from *An Emerging Model for Working with Youth* (Sullivan, 2000).

SECTION II

POWERFUL IMPACT, POTENT LESSONS

Case Studies of Youth Acts with Community Impacts

The eight examples offered in the pages that follow¹⁰ — and the short profiles scattered throughout this book — describe work undertaken by young people in urban, suburban and rural communities in the United States and a half dozen other countries. In honing in on this handful of examples, Forum staff and consultants examined dozens of efforts identified by the International Learning Group (ILG) members, experts, funders and our own scans of the youth action landscape. Our process was neither systematic nor exhaustive — many powerful organizations likely never crossed our radar screens, and many that did were excluded because of the difficulty of getting good information in a fragmented and nascent field. And, as noted earlier, we hope they provide new examples for discussions. But the efforts included share a powerful common formula: they have all leveraged youth action to create meaningful, impressive and positive impacts on communities.

YOUTH ACTS . . .

There is a rich and growing international literature on youth participation.¹¹ This literature emphasizes three themes:

- **Participation as access** to basic services such as education, health, recreation, employment — the

social, political and economic enfranchisement of youth. In this sense participation is the opposite of exclusion from developmental, political and social opportunities.

- **Participation as voice and choice** within the organizations that loom large in young people's daily lives. Participation in programmatic and organizational decision making is a tenet of the youth development approach. The measure of participation is personal growth.
- **Participation as public action** through planning or involvement in challenging activities that have an impact beyond the narrow interests of the participants themselves. The measure of participation is contribution to the public good.

All three types of participation are important to young people's development, and all affect — directly or indirectly — the development of communities. But the stories featured in this publication focus squarely on the third type of participation — *youth action*. In all of the profiled efforts, young people take on critical roles in which they exercise real influence aimed at doing good and making change. Conversations with on-the-ground practitioners, national organizations and international experts have zeroed in on youth action as a way to connect disparate (and sometimes conflicting) strate-

¹⁰ Research and writing by Steve Mokwena and Thaddeus Ferber form the foundation for this Section.

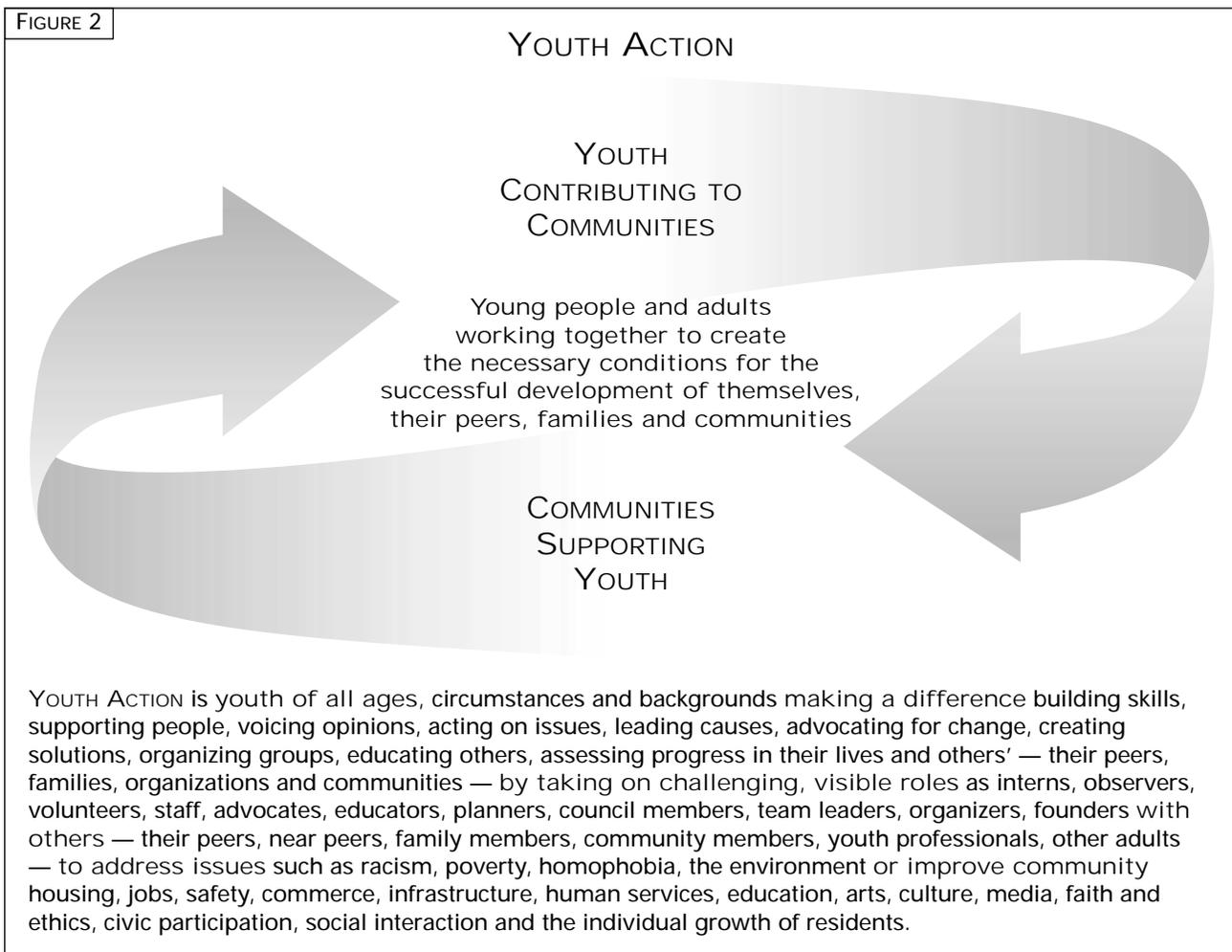
¹¹ For instance, Roger Hart's *Children's Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship* (1992) and *A Strategy for Adolescent Participation: A Discussion Paper for UNICEF* by Rakesh Rajani (2000). We are increasingly using the terms "youth action," "youth participation" and "youth engagement" interchangeably to refer to activities that enable young people to act collectively or engage in activities that lead to the betterment of their communities. See also *Youth Action: Youth Contributing to Communities, Communities Supporting Youth* (Irby, Ferber & Pittman, 2001), the companion to this publication.

gies to engage young people. These conversations have identified youth action as a powerful way to do work at the intersection of youth and community development. And out of these conversations has emerged a definition of youth action that embraces the diversity of strategies contained in the case studies that follow (Figure 2).

Articulating a definition that honors the genuine differences among youth acts is challenging. But speaking in generalizations about the young actors involved is nearly impossible. Asking “which young people?” is critical when attempting to understand youth action — for reasons of access and equity, as well as practice and strategy. Are disenfranchised young people taking action in their communities, or does action become “the domain of privileged, college-educated youth in

token seats at unimportant tables”? (The Forum for Youth Investment, 2001, Summer.) Are young people in their twenties, their teens or younger the primary actors? If multiple age groups and populations are involved, who is taking on what roles?

The implications of these questions are neither trivial nor straightforward. Lisa Sullivan’s observations in Section I indicate that a growing number of young adults are organizing high school-aged young people — with powerful benefits for their communities. There is evidence that different actions and strategies for engagement suit particular populations of young people¹² and different age groups. Several of the organizations profiled in this publication simultaneously engage children (2–12), young people (13–18) and



¹² For instance, in *Youth Action: Youth Contributing to Communities, Communities Supporting Youth* (Irby, Ferber & Pittman, 2001), we point to growing evidence that the language of “service” — currently moving with force through many suburban communities and high schools — may be less relevant and appealing for young people growing up in disenfranchised communities of color. In low-income urban communities, organizing, change and activism seem to be the watchwords for engaging young people who have not previously thought of themselves as “leaders.”

young adults (19–30) in community development work — but in substantially different roles. For instance, at Make the Road by Walking in Brooklyn (described on page 29), the founders of the organization are young adults, the youth organizers are high-school-aged young people, and elementary-aged young people are soon to be engaged as the artists and creators of the organization's work. Oona Chatterjee, the organization's cofounder, explains:

We have all these kids who are always running around here. It doesn't seem good to always have things that are for young people 13–19, so we're going to build things that are age appropriate and project focused. It's definitely going to have a community focus throughout . . . They'll be learning songs with a social justice focus, making banners for protests, learning more about the organization, and feeling more part of the community.

If you think about when you're 9–10 years old, everything seems unfair. So the concept of justice isn't totally defined yet. But something like, "We don't have a park in our neighborhood. Why don't we have a park? This lot could be a park . . ." That can definitely be grasped. And there's something powerful about being here a few days a week with the same group of young people, feeling part of this organization and part of the community.

Efforts to make actions developmentally and culturally appropriate — while critical — run the risk of fitting young people into narrowly defined roles, leaving them under-challenged or over-burdened and potentially shut out of more meaningful responsibilities. The balancing act is a complex one that effective organizations achieve with a mix of flexibility, multiple and diverse roles, high expectations, clear pathways to greater responsibility and clear supports for young people in over their heads.

Adults play an essential part in achieving this balance. The language of "youth acts" cannot distract attention from the critical roles that adults play in all of the efforts profiled here. In the organizations founded by young adults — Cefocine, Philadelphia Student Union and Cambodian Volunteers for Community Development, for instance — adults may be engaged in relatively light roles as advisors, capacity builders, role models and fun-

ders. But in each case, these adults have been critical — in particular as they broker relationships and lend credibility to the work. In other organizations, adults take on much larger but still very legitimate roles. Adults founded many of the efforts. They provide instruction, guidance, leadership and direction in several. Young people exercise a considerable amount of autonomy and collective power even in adult-led organizations — they are equal partners and crucial players in every case — but none diminish the importance of the adults involved.

. . . COMMUNITY IMPACTS

Just as all of the documented efforts engage young people in significant and meaningful action, each supports young people as they make a significant impact on their communities — building, preserving, developing, changing and contributing to the places in which they live. Community impact was the baseline for inclusion in this publication. We sought out examples where the impact was clear, tangible and impressive.

A focus on community impact is in no way meant to diminish the importance of youth participation for its own sake, or of young people taking action that primarily impacts the organizations in which they are involved. Young people do have a fundamental need and right to participate and there is still much work to be done just to ensure that young people have a say in the decisions that affect them. Attention to youth action inside of organizations is similarly critical — and there is clear evidence to demonstrate that this sort of involvement yields benefits for adults and organizations, as well as for young people themselves. But the challenge we put before ourselves in writing this publication was to demonstrate that young people can impact their communities in fundamental ways, and to learn from efforts that had done just that.

While all of the case studies contain irrefutable evidence of community impact, the quantity and quality of this impact vary in important ways. In some cases, the changes wrought are tangible and far reaching — entire neighborhoods rebuilt, new jobs created, new infrastructure put in place. In other instances, the progress is more tentative, with young people and their adult allies committed to the promise of long-term

change. Most of these differences in quantity are tightly coupled with the differing strategies that the efforts employ — that is, with the quality and character of the impact for which they are aiming. The differences indicate the range of ways in which young people (and adults, for that matter) can impact their communities — reflecting the very different sorts of change necessary in different communities¹³ (See “What Impacts Are Young People Having?”)

TRACING COMMUNITY ACTION, FROM INSTIGATION TO IMPACT

Communities are more than physical places. And they are more than the businesses, organizations and individuals who inhabit them. Communities are also about

associations, about people coming together and working together toward common goals. Increasingly over the past few decades, community development researchers and advocates have underscored the importance of recognizing and strengthening the human, social, cultural and civic aspects of communities as well as the physical and economic aspects. Researchers and advocates have also emphasized the importance of recognizing that every community has assets. No community, no matter how physically deteriorated or economically destitute, is without strengths.

What are the assets embedded in communities?

An informal survey of publications produced by foundations, intermediaries, research institutions and others (The Forum for Youth Investment, 1999, updated 2001) revealed ten types of community assets

WHAT IMPACTS ARE YOUNG PEOPLE HAVING?

What is the character of the impacts that young people are making in their communities? They are fixing problems, creating things that never existed, making sure that good aspects are not lost, fulfilling vital functions, helping communities continue to grow and progress, and changing the very nature of the places in which they live.

- Reclamation. Young people in Cambodian squatter communities see broken infrastructure, poor sanitation and garbage-lined streets. They decide to take back those neighborhoods for their residents.
- Creation. Sometimes young people have to create new infrastructure and community resources where few existed — as in Nairobi, where the young people of Mathare Youth Sports Association (MYSA) created a sanitation infrastructure for their neighborhood.
- Preservation and Conservation. Recognizing that they have something worth holding on to, the corps members of the Southeast Alaska Guidance Association help ensure that Alaska’s natural beauty is not destroyed by those who travel to appreciate it.
- Development. The high school students of Lubec, Maine, demonstrate that young people can play a vital role in the complex, professionalized work of community development — in this case, by incubating and testing potential new directions for a challenged local economy.
- Building. Young people can help build their communities — constructing greater connectedness, leveraging human resources and community assets, forging common agendas — as the young leaders of Cefocine in Ecuador have done with its blend of education, arts and action.
- Change. If the systems in place do not work, young people often take responsibility for reforming or reinventing them. In Philadelphia, for instance, the members of the Philadelphia Student Union are organizing for genuine educational change.

This list of impacts is not meant to be hierarchical — all are important, and all appropriate and vital depending on the situation in which young people find their communities.

¹³ The idea of qualitative differences in community impacts is also explored in *Lessons Learned, Lessons Shared: Reflections from the International Learning Group on Youth and Community Development* (Irby, 2001).

that various types of “community development” efforts attempt to enhance:

- economic;
- physical;
- basic services;
- health and human services;
- education and information;
- civic/political;
- cultural/artistic;
- spiritual/religious;
- social/associational; and
- individual development.

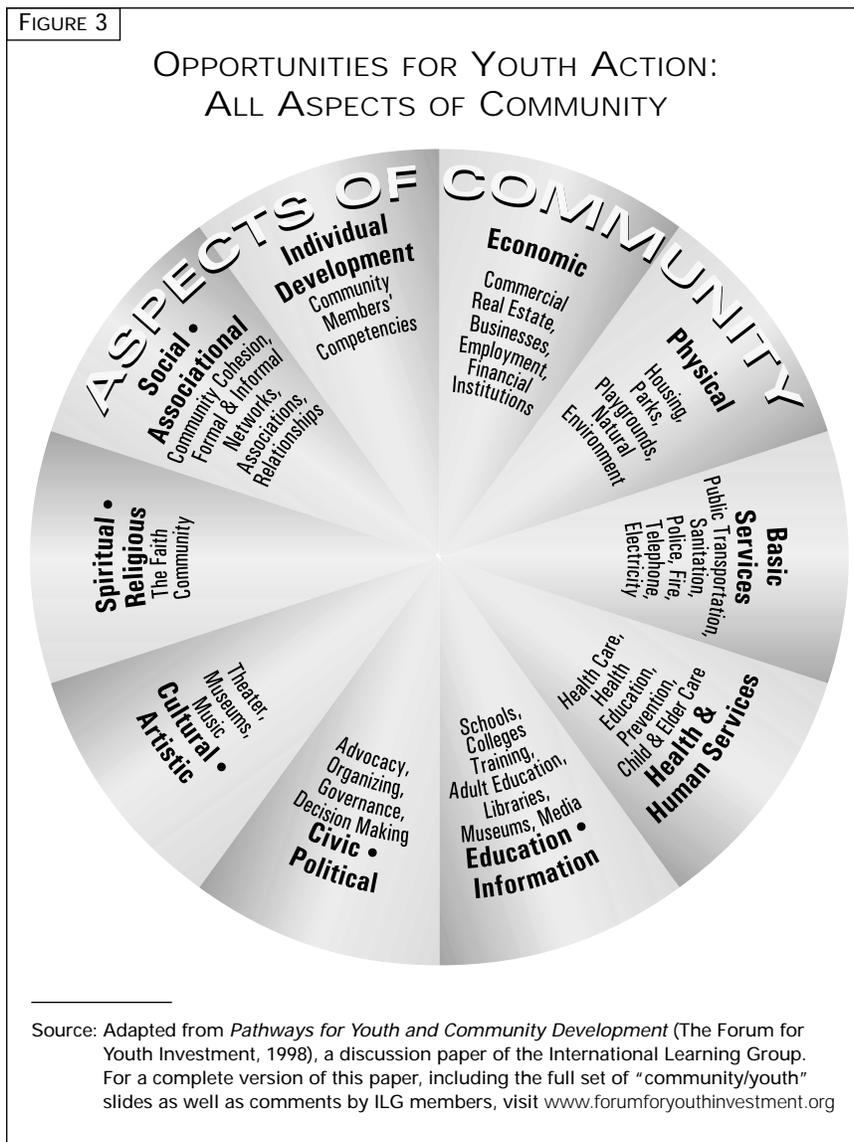
Each of these community assets represents an arena in which communities function more or less effectively. A well-functioning community includes organizations, resources, infrastructure and individuals committed to each of these areas. From a youth development perspective, all of these assets — areas of community functioning — can be brought to bear in making sure that young people grow up to be problem free, fully prepared and fully engaged.

From a youth acts/community impacts perspective, each of these community assets — really, aspects of community functioning — represents two things. Each represents a starting point — a *base of action* from which young people can become engaged. And each represents a *target of action* — an area of community life which young people’s work can impact. In between

is the *type of action* — the ways that young people go from instigation to impact.

Base of Action

Young people become engaged in community changing work from a variety of starting points. Some efforts have their origins in youth development and education organizations. Others emerge out of community development organizations committed to housing and economic issues. A significant number take the arts as their starting point. In fact, all of the areas of community functioning represent viable bases of action for youth engagement. That is, organizations and efforts in each area (human services organizations, legal institutions, political organizing efforts, educational institutions) can act as the home for a youth action effort. And each kind of community asset (artistic expression, spiritual experience, basic physical infrastructure) is a tool for young people to draw on as they work to impact their communities.



Type of Action

Young people make change through governance of organizations, organizing efforts, policy advocacy, leadership positions and community service. They take

action through active learning experiences, paid positions, entrepreneurial ventures, nonviolent resistance and youth philanthropy. Through all of these types of action, young people can move from base to target, from instigation to impact.

YOUTH ACTS, COMMUNITY HEALTH IMPACTS: TWO EXAMPLES

Expertise, training and professional standing have come to be the price of admission into community development work. As community development has become synonymous with housing and financing in particular, and the field has evolved in general, young people often find it hard to make it in the door of community development organizations. But even if community development work is defined more broadly — including the range of areas of community work — professionalization is still an often insurmountable obstacle to youth involvement. When it comes to community health issues, this is certainly the case. Young people find themselves in an unfamiliar world of medical malpractice, physician's codes of conduct, hospital bureaucracy and genuine field expertise.

Yet young people continue to find ways to make meaningful impact on community health issues. Witness the experiences of two very different efforts — Project HEALTH and a national network of peer health educators in Argentina — both providing vital community development functions in challenging situations.

Project HEALTH

It is hard to argue with either the individual stories or the sweep of statistics that emerge from Project Health's work in Boston, Providence and Harlem. Boston Family Help Desk — a centerpiece of Project Health — links about 1,000 families a year with the supports that physicians simply can't offer during 15-minute hospital appointments: food, safe shelter, health insurance, job training and child care. A swimming program takes on the pervasive problem of urban childhood asthma, resulting in improvements in lung capacity that are four times what is possible via medication. And Project Health volunteers provide personal supports and advice to young people dealing with a number of chronic illnesses, helping them to better manage and cope with their diseases. Connected to each of these programs — there are about two dozen in all — are quotes like this one from a Boston parent:

I have asthma, so [growing up] I used to go the emergency room a lot too. I missed a lot of school. I barely graduated because of my attendance. I didn't want that for my kids. I really wanted them to be in school, to learn, to get a good education.

How is it possible for young people to make contributions like these? The model that makes these impacts possible goes to the heart of the "expertise" issue. College students — many with little or no health-related experience — design and implement programs that bring together existing community resources and medical infrastructure to better meet the needs of families. Critical to the success of these programs are professional mentors — doctors, lawyers, family advocates, nurses — who both identify the issues that the programs address and guide every step of the development process. The mentors bring vital knowledge of both the medical field and the community.

But the organization's commitment to community engagement goes much further. "One thing I'm proud of is the deep partnership and collaborations we've developed with the community," says Project Health Executive Director Tara Purohit. "In a lot of volunteer experiences, students are in and out. That's a frustrating experience for the volunteers — but mostly for the community members. We're trying to overcome that. For instance, community members are involved every time we hire new staff. We have a neighborhood orientation day for all new volunteers, led by members of the community."

The young people, for their part, provide substantial people power and a commitment to do what medical professionals often can't — bring nonmedical supports into medical settings and bring medical *continues...*

Target of Action

The stories in the pages that follow indicate the range of aspects of community life that young people can touch through their efforts. Some focus on improved

economic opportunities and job creation. Others have improved the physical health of children and adults in their communities. Others aim to change the educational system. Again, all areas of community functioning represent viable targets for youth action.

YOUTH ACTS, COMMUNITY HEALTH IMPACTS, *continued*

resources out into communities where they're often absent. Young people end up as vital brokers between families and medical professionals, as well as linkers to the supports that make good health possible — housing, food, income. Their contributions are anything but sporadic — volunteers average 10–15 hours per week of involvement, and nearly all stay engaged through all four years of college. And the majority go on to work with low-income communities after graduation.

The lesson for other organizations: rather than attempting to take over for community development professionals, young people may have the most impact when they work side-by-side or in close consultation with these professionals.

A National Network of Sexuality and Reproductive Health Educators

The work of FINE — the Foundation for Study and Research on Women in Argentina — points to an other route for young people committed to improving community health. Since 1995, FINE has been training young people as sexual and reproductive health educators, an effort itself initiated and led by youth in their early 20s. The training program has community action at its center. All of the young people who participate design a project — from vision and fundraising to implementation — which they put into action upon returning to their community. The young people's projects have taken on a variety of forms: workshops, radio programs, the creation of new newspapers, community mobilizing and organizing around HIV awareness. The impact of these individual projects touches many lives, according to Cecilia Correa, the project's coordinator. "These kids start to engage in their communities, and you see how it starts to spread out and reach others, so other kids receive their help. It just keeps having ripples."

Correa's effort is one among hundreds of effective peer health education programs around the world — all building on the powerful premise that young people are particularly effective in educating other young people about the dangers of STDs and teen pregnancy. As Correa puts it, "The impact that youth have on other youth is so much better, because they understand each other and speak the same language and lingo. When it comes to sexuality it's always better to get information from someone your age."

The work of FINE is exemplary simply because of its broad reach — it has engaged young people throughout the country in the important work of peer education. But two additional features make this program stand out from a community impact perspective.

First, since 1998, individual peer educators — all doing important work in isolation — have come together into a national network of young people who have participated in the FINE training. This networking effort — again, initiated by young people themselves — has resulted both in opportunities to share practices and the slow development of a new national movement. By coordinating the work in their individual communities — planning activities on common dates, for instance — they have brought heightened attention to their individual efforts.

Second, young people have recognized that education must go hand-in-hand with policy change that helps stop the spread of AIDS. Most significantly, their letters, demonstrations, lobbying and legislative tracking were critical to the passage of the Law of Health and Responsible Profession passed in Buenos Aires. According to Correa, "The law gives access to quality public health — especially to sexual health, so when a youth goes to a hospital he has the right to get information and get birth control, get tested for HIV, without the authorization of the parents starting from age 14." Young people have now turned their attention to national politics, working to gain the same access for young people across Argentina.

While youth acts do start out from all areas of community and end up touching every aspect of community life, not all of them necessarily represent equally powerful bases and targets of action. Young people may find more and more significant roles inside of arts and cultural organizations than inside of community development financial institutions. Some of these areas of community life may not welcome young people's presence, much less their contributions. Similarly, young people may have an easier time bringing about change in their schools than in legal and political structures. Young people may be more likely to succeed in changing some aspects of their communities than of formal institutions.

Perhaps most importantly, some bases and targets of action may represent particularly powerful combinations when linked through particular types of action. Political organizing may be a critical lever changing schools. Or educational institutions may be a good home for projects focused on economic development when vocational programs are used to link learning and change. The examples that follow identify some of these potent combinations and potential mismatches. But they leave many vital questions unanswered as well — topics for additional research and documentation.

DEFINING THE POLITICAL EFFICACY OF YOUNG PEOPLE

- A sense of responsibility to contribute to society
- Democratic participation (informed citizen, exercises voting rights & privileges)
- Organizational skills
- Social action skills (persuasion, policy research, petitioning)
- Empowerment (belief in ability to make a difference)

From *Why Community Service and Service-Learning?: Providing Rationale and Research*, by Perkins & Miller.

STRATEGIES

How is it that young people become engaged and stay engaged in community-changing work? The efforts profiled in this publication draw on a range of strategies as they help young people become involved, support their efforts and link them with opportunities for action that yield real impact. A close look at the stories of the young people involved — as well as of the organizations and communities themselves — unearths the common features on which these many strategies are founded.

The Attributes of Young Change Makers

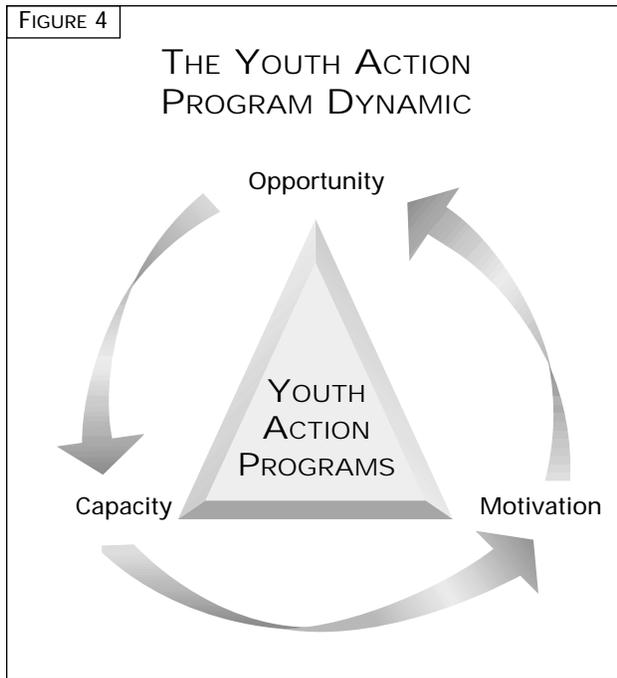
To understand what goes into the making of a young person who is socially engaged, it is important to take a closer look at the actors.

One useful definition suggests that social change agents know that their actions can bring about change. They have a sense that their actions promote dignity and self-sufficiency within the individual. By participating they avail their energies and resources for the benefit of the community. They know that their participation is a source of special insight, information, knowledge and experience, which contributes to the soundness of community solutions.¹⁴

Drawing on this definition, socially engaged young people have the knowledge that their actions can effect positive change. They possess an *awareness and motivation* about the need for positive change in their world (community and society) that is based on knowledge. They have the *skills and capacity* to make a contribution. They are *resourceful, connected and experienced*; they know how to access and navigate their ways through different settings and institutions to find and create opportunities to be engaged in purposeful collective action that can lead to positive social change or improvements¹⁵ in conditions for themselves and others. In short, whatever the target of their efforts, these young people could be described as having a sense of political efficacy. They go beyond the baseline of reg-

¹⁴ See Cahn & Camper (1968). See also Christensen & Robinson (1980).

¹⁵ See *Youth Action: Youth Contributing to Communities, Communities Supporting Youth* for additional discussion (Irby, Ferber & Pittman, 2001).



istering to vote, paying taxes and obeying laws to demonstrate a commitment to the greater public good. They have the “penchant to get involved” — to bear the burdens and benefits of citizenship at a fairly young age.

The Role of Organizations and Communities

The experiences of organizations and communities corroborate this definition of engaged young people. The efforts that engage young people in community-impacting work are as diverse as they are numerous. In *Youth Action*, we identify a variety of ways that young people are engaged — governance, organizing, advocacy, leadership, service, philanthropy, entrepreneurship (Irby, Ferber & Pittman, 2001). Each approach brings its own premises and principles, as well as programs and practices, to its youth action work. Divides

MAKE THE ROAD BY WALKING: SUPPORTING YOUNG CHANGE MAKERS

My name is Ismael Eddie Escobar. I am a Latino resident of the Bushwick section of Brooklyn, where one third of the population graduates from High School on time and where 5.5 percent of those High School graduates pursue college education.

Thus begins the first issue of *The Word on the Street*, a newspaper written and produced by the Youth Power project at Make the Road by Walking — a membership-led organization in one of New York’s most consistently downtrodden neighborhoods. Though it describes a troubling situation, *The Word on the Street* marks the latest hopeful chapter in Make the Road’s story. Founded in 1997 by two mid-20s law school graduates, Make the Road has built a membership of 300, forced the Department of Labor to investigate injustices, reduced the risk of lead poisoning in Bushwick, and successfully fought language discrimination and mismanagement inside New York’s welfare system, among a range of victories on the slow road to building the community’s power.

The Youth Power project — now three years old and working with a team of high-school-aged youth organizers — emerged naturally out of Make the Road’s commitment to build resident capacity and influence. The same neighborhood capacity building and popular education philosophy that undergirds the organization’s work with older residents is at the heart of its youth organizing efforts. According to Oona Chatterjee, cofounder of Make the Road and director of the Youth Power project, “Popular education is pretty central to what we do. If you look at the work of the youth organizers, you’ll see that they identified an issue, then they did community surveys, then they talked about their own experiences, and the work emerges from there — that’s all popular education.” This approach is reflected in the powerful ways in which Make the Road builds motivation, increases capacity and opens opportunities.

Motivation

Ask youth organizers how they got involved in Make the Road, and every one talks about a series of small experiences — a party, a poetry class, an invitation from a friend, access to a computer lab — that helped them make their way into the organization through their own doors, at their own paces. Once they made their way in, they found a place that blended support with opportunities for real action. Zynthia, *continues...*

MAKE THE ROAD BY WALKING, continued

an articulate and savvy young woman who has been in and out of the New York public schools, found something stable at Make the Road. “We’re like a family; people come here when they need help. There are all these kids around. We cook for each other...It feels good to be part of something.”

Ask the organizers what keeps them motivated, and they tell stories that blend their own experiences with those of their community and society at large. David, a soft-spoken young man who says he’s bound for the military, makes it clear that his fate is wrapped up with that of the community. “Being able to help our community means a lot, because it used to be nothing. For me, there was nothing — just being a father, staying off the streets.” It’s no coincidence that personal stories and probing analysis of social issues go hand-in-hand at Make the Road; the organization’s popular education approach means that the analysis of problems always starts with — and regularly comes back to — the personal experiences of those involved. This fusion of personal and the political naturally builds the relevance of the work.

Capacity

Capacity building takes on a new meaning in an effort aimed at building youth and community power. Capacity is not just about skills and knowledge gained at Make the Road; it is a matter of how much influence youth and adult residents are able to exercise. In this context, capacity is not an individual characteristic — it’s something built between young people and their community.

But even inside this new definition of capacity, helping young people build new skills and competencies is critical. Training on the mechanics of organizing and membership building complement reflective discussions on the prison-industrial complex and the practical learning that comes of street outreach. And Make the Road’s youth organizers talk of nothing more than the communications skills they gain through their work. An end-of-summer presentation reveals just how central these communication skills are. Each of the youth organizers keeps the audience of 1- to 70-year-olds engaged with accounts of their street outreach, meetings with police and high-ranking city officials, open mic nights and poetry classes, demonstrations and newspaper articles. The power of their words is what makes their work possible.

continues . . .

and tensions often keep these differing approaches in separate camps. But a close examination reveals the common core of these disparate approaches. The examples and theories offered from practitioners in programs and communities in this country and abroad have three common themes:

- **Fostering awareness and motivation** — building awareness of issues and root causes; deepening young people’s commitment and sense of responsibility.
- **Increasing capacity** — using and building youth’s leadership and action skills; deepening their knowledge related to systems and strategies; ensuring that they have the basic services and robust supports necessary to maintain engagement.
- **Creating opportunities** — helping young people identify and create a range of opportunities to act

on passions and use skills in ways that generate demonstrable outcomes, and/or to build passion and identify the need for skills by becoming involved in real change efforts.¹⁶

It is against these three themes — fostering motivation, increasing capacity and creating opportunities — that we map the engagement strategies of the efforts profiled in this volume.

ROOTED IN PLACE: COMMUNITY CONTEXT AND HISTORY

The stories that follow grow out of their particular communities; this is likely their most powerful common feature. Each responds to a specific set of

¹⁶ See *Youth Action: Youth Contributing to Communities, Communities Supporting Youth* for additional discussion (Irby, Ferber & Pittman, 2001).

MAKE THE ROAD BY WALKING, *continued*

It is clear that the organizers' new capacities translate into other aspects of their lives — and this is the intention of Make the Road's adult staff, who realize that schools aren't helping young people build the skills they need. Luis, a well-dressed and talented young poet, speaks proudly of how his abilities translate into other parts of his life. "It also helps me with school. When I do a project, I think about community organizing — developing strategies and tactics. When people look at me, they think I look thug or ghetto, and then I talk on their level."

Opportunities

In the summer of 2001, Make the Road hired eight youth organizers — all high school-aged young people from Bushwick — to plan and lead their summer Youth Power work. It was the young people who chose the theme for the campaign — truancy — after they experienced harassment and unreasonable detention at the hands of New York City police officers. Young people, with the supports of Make the Road staff and volunteers, planned and implemented the campaign from its start — taking on roles in strategy, street outreach, media and writing, education and the rest. The formula implied in this approach — involving paid work, dedicated time, youth-led action within the context of adult and community support, and a variety of meaningful roles — is a recipe for powerful and meaningful youth engagement.

The Youth Power project has won incremental victories — convincing the District Attorney to convene police officers for a sensitivity training led by Make the Road's youth organizers, gaining significant media coverage for their issues, putting out an impressive newspaper developed entirely by young people, and the like. But Chatterjee recognizes that community impact — whether youth driven or adult driven — takes time.

I hope to be here helping for as long as I'm useful. It takes a long time to build something that really matters. If you look at social change efforts that have worked, it's been because people have been really ambitious. So I want us to be ambitious, and I want us to matter. I want us to have power to make justice in this community — so that the powers that be listen to the residents. There should be a youth center and translation in welfare centers. There should be opportunities for people to have fair wages, work that pays a living wage. There should be open space, and rent that people can afford. I think building that much power is possible, but it will take a while.

conditions, keeping a finger on the pulse of the social, economic, political, cultural and physical realities facing their communities. Those that do not do so at first learn quickly or fail. For instance, Cambodian Volunteers for Community Development committed themselves to community-based work after seeing their neighborhood cleanup work reversed by residents who had no investment in the volunteers' work. Now, as one observer comments, "CVCD works at the most grassroots level an organization can. Community members are an integral part of the decision making process and an essential component to the sustainability of the projects." The result? One of the most effective and far-reaching organizations in Cambodia's emerging civil society.

That they are so essentially a product of their communities makes generalization across the case studies difficult. But despite the difficulties, the efforts have a remarkable number of common features — some identified in the previous pages, others that will bubble up as other readers digest them. Their "rootedness" also makes replicating their successes in other places more complicated — a process of extracting principles and practices while critically examining the fundamental premises that respond to unique situations. Again, despite the difficulties of extracting generalizations from truly unique situations, the effort is worth it — the strategies and lessons embedded in these examples are too powerful not to share with other communities.

LUBEC AQUACULTURE PROJECT

LUBEC, MAINE

High School Students Revive a Declining Way of Life

In this era of high-stakes testing and plateauing minority achievement, many schools are the target of reform (see the Philadelphia Student Union profile). Students organize outside the school to change building and district priorities and practices. In Lubec, the school has become the center for entrepreneurship and economic development, acted out within the context of the core curriculum. This is a powerful example of an institution finding a way to achieve its goals (academic success) by helping students reclaim the traditional industry of their community.

In rural communities across the United States, a familiar (almost cliché) story plays out: shifting economic and demographic winds spell an end to the sources of prosperity that once supported these small towns. Young people without much cause for hope either drop out into low-paying service sector jobs or get out to find their place in the new suburban and urban economy.

High school students in Lubec, Maine, however, have put a twist on this plot: they are claiming the vanishing way of life, and their town's destiny, as their own. They have made it their responsibility — and that of their school — to try to revive the declining economy and move the community's primary industry to a more sustainable path. And, against tough odds, they are succeeding.

EVIDENCE OF IMPACT

The direct outputs of students' work are tangible and impressive. Students, teachers and community volunteers have turned an abandoned water treatment facil-

ity 50 feet from the school into a state-of-the art aquaculture center. Here students raise trout and salmon for marketing in the newly purified water, beefed up with their own brew of nutrients. Recently they added a hydroponics greenhouse that uses captured water from the aquaculture center.

Reclaimed
Capacity

After applying for and receiving a lease from the state of Maine, students also have started their own mussel farm. They've gone on to launch a small bait-fish business to fill a local need, started breeding tropical fish for retail sale and are creating plans for the reestablishment of a small commercial fish smokehouse.

New
Business
Ventures

Student work has resulted in new opportunities for local fishermen as well. For instance, when students successfully obtained a lease to raise mussels, locals asked if they could "piggyback" on the school's permit and mussel raft. Similarly, water tests conducted by students have allowed the community to reestablish

Economic development starts by planting seeds — you never know what's going to come from it. Every student involved in the project is a seed that we've planted. All of these students may move away and never look back. But it seems more likely that they'll stay committed and stick around. You just don't know, but I think we need to take the chance.

— Dianne Tilton,
Sunrise Community Development Council

its clamming industry. When neither the state nor local fisherman had the resources to conduct regular water testing, the clam flats were closed. But equipped with time and scientific knowledge, students established that the flats were sufficiently clean to resume activity. “You can’t help but applaud what these kids are doing,” notes Bob Peacock, who used to run the sardine factory his great grandfather started in 1928 and now processes farm-raised salmon.

Value-added Services

The research conducted by students is similarly impressive, resulting in real impact on economics inside and outside the community. In the classroom, students have devised an experiment yielding important data about the optimum diet for enhancing the roe of sea urchins, a delicacy in Japan and a potentially lucrative item for struggling fishermen. Some students are monitoring phytoplankton, a toxic alga that can harm fish and, in turn, humans; they send their data to the Maine Department of Marine Resources and to marine biologists internationally. Another group is studying the feasibility of cultivating two species not common to Maine waters, tilapia and yellow perch.

Technical Research

On their own, these impacts are heartening. But they are not enough to turn around an entire community; the number of new jobs and amount of income generated are relatively small, and the impact of research is still several years away.

In some ways, the most significant impact to date has come in the form of adult responses to youth actions. Young people serve as the inspiration and conscience of the community, demonstrating what is possible. For instance, students wrote, filmed and produced a documentary video about Lubec’s deteriorating marina that aims to revive the town’s heretofore unsuccessful drive to win state or federal assistance for repairs.

Restored Community Activism

Students have spurred adults not only to advocacy and action but to much-needed financial investment. The high schoolers’ enterprises in aquaculture will benefit from a recent \$6 million anonymous gift to

LUBEC: HISTORY AND CONTEXT

In downeast Lubec, just a stone’s throw from Canada, only two of the 40 sardine factories this coastal town once shared with its neighbor, Eastport, remain. A declining fishing industry — once the source of support for generations of families — has crippled the economy in this community of 2000.

“Unlike some rural areas that have always struggled financially, [the Cobscook Bay] area has been well-off in the past” explained Dianne Tilton, Executive Director of the Sunrise Community Development Council in Machias, Maine. “In some ways, this makes the downturn harder.” Lubec and Eastport (the peninsula on the other side of the bay) both had short upturns in the late 80s when local businesses got into salmon aquaculture. “We took advantage of the high tides, low water temperatures and existing skills. But the small players were bought up by larger folks,” explained Tilton.

The challenges in Lubec, according to Tilton, have been lack of confidence and vision. “When I first started working with Lubec, the biggest problem was that they couldn’t imagine anything better...the town had a collective inferiority complex.”

The aquaculture center, the water-quality project, and other efforts that are boosting community morale grew out of the work of one teacher and a handful of students who, five years ago, held a town meeting to discuss whether aquaculture might help turn things around. Few people showed up. Not surprisingly, “the word scared everyone off” recalls Debra, 13 at the time and now high school senior. “Not knowing much about it, people figured aquaculture was just another threat to the town’s livelihood.”

The students’ ages probably didn’t help much either. “In this community, like so many others, people judge you by your mistakes, especially if you are young,” says Debra. “They expect you to fail.”

Undeterred and still curious, the students set out to discover everything they could about the subject — and to learn by doing. Their teacher Debbie Jamieson, who had taught everything from physics to oceanography but knew nothing about aquaculture, applied for a grant and learned along with them. Other adults in the community gradually pitched in, and today Lubec is a veritable spawning ground for learn-as-you-go aquaculture.

Increased Public and Private Investments

support revitalization efforts in their and two other Maine counties. Community businesses are donating time and materials to the efforts, making themselves and their businesses available to the students. The principle teacher for the program is paid directly with state funds.

In a way, the aquaculture project is an investment in the long-term viability of the community. More students are returning to the town to make a living, seeing new ways to survive economically. But Debbie Jamieson, the science teacher who got this started, recognizes that the investment is an uncertain one — one that will see much of its impact further down the road.

Reversals in Out-Migration

“I think that’s a really ambitious thing to try to revive the local economy,” says Jamieson. “Teaching kids skills like writing leases for fishing grounds — I think that’s going to be a really useful thing. The thing we struggle with,” she continues, “is right now the industry will take anyone with a strong back. We haven’t been able to convince them that they need people who know things, who have these skills.”

It almost goes without saying that these efforts have had an impact on the students. Touching more than one third of its student population, the program’s relevance seems to be catching many students who may have “slipped through the cracks,” reports Jamieson. Students also have room to excel. Lubec Consolidated High ranked near the top in an evaluation of state

Improved Student Learning

vocational education programs. And Jamieson reports that more students are getting into and succeeding in quality colleges.

Perhaps most important, though, is an intangible change. Young people have helped renew the spirit of the community, changing expectations and hopes for the future. As Tilton puts it, “Lubec has a tough reputation in the state — they’ve been the poster child for everything that can go wrong. But the success that they’ve had has really given a self-esteem boost to the community. It’s a source of pride.”

There are challenges in having the school as the base of action, having research, applied learning and entrepreneurship be the primary type of action, and having both student achievement and community revitalization as the target. These are explored in the “Close-up” section that follows. Clearly, however, there have also been benefits to the young people and the community.

CLOSE-UP

In many rural communities in the United States, public schools are the only settings in which young people gather in large numbers. More than that, they are often one of the most important focal points of the community, the most significant public infrastructure and the largest employer. As such, public schools are poised to become engines of economic development in many communities, simply because they are among the only institutions with the resources to play that role.

This was certainly the case in Lubec. Debbie Jamieson and a group of students found a way to link the basic goals of high school reform — improved attendance, improved engagement, improved test scores — to the larger goals of the community — economic viability and the preservation of a way of life.

Tracing the Action, from Instigation to Impact

The School as a Base of Action

Lubec’s community development efforts took root not only inside the school building, but inside the academic curriculum and the school day. This home base has shaped the program in fundamental ways. Jamieson emphasizes that the goals of the project

Our success with aquaculture has come from trial and error. We’ve shown ourselves and everyone else that it’s not getting it right the first time that matters. It’s working through mistakes, taking chances, correcting what’s wrong. That’s how we learn — and how we make the impossible, possible.

Debra, high school senior

remain academic — meeting the state’s standards of learning, providing hands-on educational opportunities and raising math and science test scores. Economic development is not her primary goal, though she sees herself as building the skills that will let her students open up businesses and bring new expertise to existing ones.

In some ways, schools are well-positioned to take on this economic development role. Schools have the advantage in terms of numbers. Since nearly all a community’s youth pass through schools’ doors, they have the capacity to mobilize a huge community development “work force.” In Lubec, where 35 to 40 of the high school’s roughly 100 students take aquaculture classes at any one time, ideas for new projects proliferate as rapidly as the mussels students are growing in Cobscook Bay.

Moreover, schools have access to financial resources simply not available in other settings. Despite ever-tightening budgets, for instance, the town of Lubec has added \$100,000 during the past two years to support the aquaculture program.

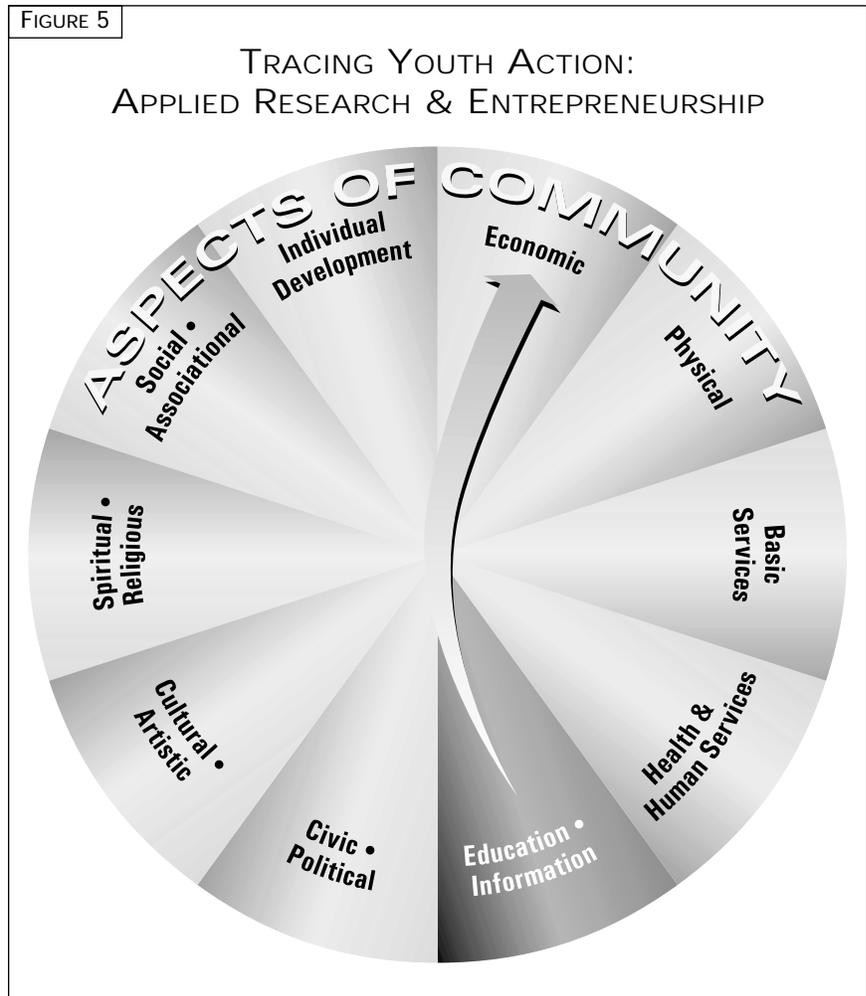
But in both rural and metropolitan locations, using schools as the home base for community development work has clear disadvantages as well. The school’s accountability system limits the criteria by which projects’ successes can be judged. Here and elsewhere, community development work is not rewarded by a system focused on individual academic achievement. Efforts housed in schools are usually held accountable primarily for student learning, not community outcomes.

In addition, traditional roles and priorities are thrown for a loop when schools take on this new function. As Jamieson points out,

“there’s a risk for teachers in not knowing what the answer is. To begin with, that was kind of tricky. And we were so busy doing the actual day-to-day,” she added, “that we had a hard time getting the content in. It’s hard to know when to push them and when to let it drop.” Further, while community partnerships are strong in Lubec (and in many rural schools), distrust and territory issues between community organizations and schools will certainly be a barrier elsewhere.

Applied Learning as the Type of Action

Education has always been seen as a long-term community development strategy. But it is not usually seen as having short-term community impact. Lubec’s focus on learning in a school setting helps students overcome one of the most consistent barriers to full engagement in community development: lack of expertise. Schools have the



time, resources and staffing to focus on building the specific skills that young people need to play meaningful roles — in Lubec’s case, scientific research skills, small business training, public speaking skills and the like. But the aquaculture program is more than a long-term community development investment. The strong commitment to bring that learning to bear immediately in the community through tangible, valuable projects is what makes this effort stand out.

Individual and Community Economic Viability as the Joint Targets of Action

As already emphasized, Lubec’s work began with a primary focus on student learning. But it has always maintained a strong commitment to the economic development of the community in both the short-term, by creating small business opportunities for students, and in the long-term, by offering a viable new direction for the local economy. While the short-term, direct impact is limited — young people selling bait fish and mussels will not alone revive an ailing economy — those involved are betting on the long-range returns. With aquaculture as one route toward economic development, the school can act as an incubator and spawning ground (no pun intended) to leverage additional investments and try out potential strategies. In a troubled economic context, testing new entrepreneurial ideas can be remarkably difficult. Schools may provide the shelter to refine these ideas before they go “prime time.”

Strategies

Building Motivation: Bringing It Home, Making It Fun

Clearly, the close-to-home nature of the project keeps students committed and engaged. The initial focus of student action — what research and projects they take on — is based on work from previous year’s students and tends to be fairly structured. But as students move farther into the aquaculture course, they take on more control over their work — designing research studies, choosing small business development efforts and taking full responsibility for organizing events. Students also realize that their

and their families’ futures, in some way, depend on the success of their efforts. In the beginning, this knowledge kept students persevering when adults initially greeted their efforts with skepticism. But as community members warmed up to the project, their supportive reactions became a source of motivation for students.

The fact that they are learning and getting credit while having fun is also a plus. According to Jamieson, the key to students’ commitment is the change of pace from the ordinary school day. “I don’t think that they think of what they’re doing as learning. They think that it’s a fun place to be,” she observes. “They just like getting outside of the classroom. Even if they’re taking on a major research project with a huge amount of work involved, they’re relieved just to be doing something different.”

Increasing Capacity: Students as Experts and Entrepreneurs

As teachers of a year-long course, Jamieson and her colleagues are in a unique position to build the skills necessary for students to engage in community development. The demands of the project have pushed the curriculum far beyond its roots in biology. “Students realize that what they’re doing is more than pure science,” Jamieson explains. “There are a lot of politics involved.” As a result, students have attended hearings on legislative bills that would affect their projects and have learned to communicate with local leaders. Public speaking and writing skills — vital in community meetings, obtaining permits and presenting their work throughout the state — are taught through practice and real-life application. Small enterprise and financial know-how come as students market their “crop” to local supermarkets. A strong grounding in scientific methods and research skills allows them to generate data with concrete implications.

Generating Opportunities: Turning Learning into Action

The aquaculture program sits squarely at the nexus between youth and community development, and there is nothing artificial about the connection the pro-

gram creates. Young people are building needed skills and being challenged to use them to help their community. The community values their efforts and is becoming increasingly supportive of their work. Young people are being offered challenges (like presenting at the New England Aquarium or to public officials) for which they have to prepare. They are identifying entrepreneurial opportunities and being given the leeway

and support needed to try them. They are being encouraged to think big and allowed to fail.

Lubec is not a story about controversy and confrontation. But it is a powerful demonstration of the idea that youth can support their communities and communities can support their youth in ways that create lasting improvements for everyone.

CAMBODIAN VOLUNTEERS FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

PHNOM PENH, CAMBODIA

Young People Create a Grassroots Education and Service Movement

The United States is a country of dichotomies — youth and adults, human development and community development — that have tended to limit our definitions and supports for youth action. Cambodian Volunteers for Community Development (CVCD) is a powerful example of what happens when the lines are blurred intentionally. CVCD was started by young people. Its mission statement is a perfect articulation of the balance between human development (“empowering [poor residents] to shape their own lives by teaching them literacy, job skills and health education”) and community building (“encouraging and offering disadvantaged citizens opportunities to volunteer and cooperate in community development and environment activities”). Its implementation strategy stands out because of its explicit reliance on young people — as key community residents — to get training and to accept responsibilities as teachers and volunteers in their communities.

Having survived the genocide and brutal reign of the Khmer Rouge, members of Phnom Penh’s squatter communities have moved out of the international spotlight — and into the quieter suffering of poverty. In these communities, families are too poor to afford the cost of a basic education for their children and thus youth have few opportunities to earn a living wage. The neighborhoods are unhealthy because trash litters the streets, sanitation and hygiene practices are unknown and community members do not understand how the environment impacts their health.

Enter the Cambodian Volunteers for Community Development (CVCD). A truly grassroots organiza-

CVCD aims to improve the lives and realize the potential of Cambodia’s poor, empowering them to shape their own lives by teaching them literacy, job skills and health education. CVCD aims to improve community life in Cambodia by encouraging and offering disadvantaged citizens opportunities to volunteer and cooperate in community development and environment activities.

— CVCD Mission statement

tion, started almost a decade ago by the efforts of 40 young people, CVCD has built a deep and lasting connection with the residents of the squatter communities it serves. It listens to their needs and provides opportunities for community members, especially young people, to make improvements in their lives and to change their communities — goals that CVCD’s current director, Sothea Arun, feels are inseparable.

EVIDENCE OF IMPACT

CVCD’s impact has been broad and profound. Between 1998 and 2000:

- **3,000 people studied English or computer skills for a minimal charge.** CVCD primarily uses education to make change. The courses they offer are high quality and teach marketable skills. Cambodians who know English or have computer skills can generally earn a living wage. In response to requests from squatter communities, CVCD is expanding

Without educated and skilled individuals to rebuild the country, Cambodia continues to suffer.

— Sothea Arun,
CVCD Director

the kinds of services it offers and is growing to serve more and more communities. Cycle drivers are requesting English classes, other organizations are asking CVCD to partner with them to help more squatter communities, and students keep studying and volunteering and breathing life into CVCD. As it grows, CVCD retains its commitment to equity and access.

CVCD's courses are intentionally provided at a price that makes them affordable to squatter residents, while most other English and computer classes offered are prohibitively expensive.

- **7,000 residents of squatter communities studied sewing skills, Khmer literacy, English and environmental sanitation and hygiene for free.** Sewing

training classes help young women learn a paying trade. A child who attends Khmer literacy classes learns basic math, Khmer language and hygiene that positively impacts her entire family. Like any good teacher, CVCD goes beyond basic subject matter and teaches these skills in context. Their students learn about health, the environment and sanitation in addition to English, Khmer, or computer skills. CVCD classes go beyond teaching basic skills; they involve students in using these skills in their communities. And CVCD uses educational opportunities to engage students in volunteerism, changing their perception of their role in their communities.

- **1,200 families in Basac squatter areas benefited from community cleanups, environmental education and regular garbage pickup.** Students' knowledge is put to work in the neighborhood cleanups

CAMBODIAN VOLUNTEERS FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT: HISTORY AND CONTEXT

As a French colony, Cambodia was often neglected. Cambodians were not provided with education, as the French colonists didn't think it was worth the effort or investment. Rather than providing opportunities for residents, they brought in Vietnamese to fill civil servant positions.

Cambodia became an independent nation in the 1950's. In 1975 the Khmer Rouge took over Cambodia, emptying its cities and killing one out of every eight citizens. "Cambodian scholars were either systematically killed or fled the country during the Khmer Rouge regime," according to CVCD's current director, Sothea Arun. Arun adds, "Without educated and skilled individuals to rebuild the country, Cambodia continues to suffer. On top of this, most Cambodians presently suffer from trauma caused by 30 years of war and destruction."

The Vietnamese drove off the Khmer Rouge, but the nation was still afraid that the past could happen again. Cambodia remained extremely isolated from the world through the 1980s. The country is left without a "civil society," according to Alan Morgan, director of the Cambodian Master's Performers Program. Without a civil society, volunteerism and cooperation do not exist. Cambodians are afraid that they will be punished for standing out — not irrational given the country's recent history.

As a consequence, Cambodia today is a country steeped in corruption. Most Cambodians do not question the government's failure to provide basic services or the disproportionate distribution of wealth.

Cambodian Volunteers for Community Development was founded nine years ago by college students sympathetic to the poor and deeply distrustful of government and the wealthy. A group of young people was protesting against the United Nations elections, concerned that the UN wasn't addressing the country's problems at the grassroots level. The students were also frustrated with the Cambodian government and its inability to provide basic services for the poor, such as trash collection. With the assistance of Arn Chorn Pond, a young survivor of the killing fields and an emerging human rights leader, the students began to see that they could individually make a difference in the issues that concerned them. As the story goes, Chorn Pond inspired the group by picking up trash himself, and the Cambodian Volunteers for Community Development was born. Its mission: to empower community members by teaching them valuable skills and engaging them in volunteering. A democratically run organization, CVCD was started by the efforts of forty young people. Many of the founders are still involved with CVCD, and young people continue to be central to the work of the organization.

they organize. Simple acts like cleaning up streets, planting trees and teaching locals about sanitation can greatly reduce health problems. In a country where many do not understand the link between environment and health, this is no small accomplishment.

But CVCD's accomplishments impact the community in deeper, subtler ways that reflect its fundamental commitment to human resource development as a long-term community building strategy:

- **Thousands of youth have a rekindled sense of cooperation, volunteerism and civic commitment.** CVCD is the natural home for engaged young people on many levels. As a grassroots organization, it is particularly open to the ideas and energy that young people bring to it. And its focus on education is a perfect fit for young people as they seek out educational opportunities to change their futures, and in the process learn that they can change Cambodia's future. Many students continue to work with CVCD long after their coursework has finished. Arun believes this experience helps them become leaders and hone their skills for bet-

Most of our teachers are young volunteers who have studied with us and participated in our projects for at least five years.
— CVCD Annual Report

ter job opportunities. There is no doubt that it is creating a cohort of young people who have witnessed and been a part of the power of organizing to change lives.

- **Squatter communities are building the capacity for sustained, resident-driven change.** CVCD has come to understand the necessary ingredients of community development that sticks. By organizing with community members CVCD strives to change the attitudes and practice of community members regarding their environment. CVCD begins by teaching about public health. Then they organize a series of neighborhood cleanups that involve CVCD students and community members in mass community tree plantings and garbage collection. CVCD continues to play a role in the health of the community, leading cleanups as necessary and continuing to provide learning opportunities for young people.

There are clear challenges involved in attempting to execute widespread educational and environmental improvements through a grassroots volunteer organization. Funding, teaching space and materials are always in short supply. But the opportunities for engagement and impact seem to far exceed the challenges. CVCD's capacity to engage young people in a process in which they can simultaneously educate themselves, educate their neighbors and improve basic living conditions continues to evolve.

CLOSE-UP

Cambodia today, like many countries in transition, is racked with corruption. Most Cambodians do not question the disproportionate distribution of wealth that leaves thousands of families living in unsafe, unsanitary conditions, or else rail against the government that allows these conditions to persist.

When Arn Chorn Pond and a group of student protesters found that their concerns about the government's inattention to basic services were not enough to sway the United Nations from admitting Cambodia, they took matters in their own hands and began picking up trash from the streets. Since then, they have inspired thousands to believe that they can create a better way of life — building skills and rebuilding civil society — through building education, improving environmental health conditions and working together.

Tracing the Action, from Instigation to Impact

A Youth-founded Grassroots Organization as the Base of Action

Unlike most Cambodian nonprofits, CVCD is a grassroots organization. According to Laura Smith-Lousiell, Director of Global Children, "CVCD works at the most grassroots level an organization can." Consequently, "community members are an integral part of the decision making process and an essential component to the sustainability of the projects." This grassroots home has allowed CVCD to respond to community needs fluidly. CVCD holds itself accountable to the people it serves, not to a government or

foundation. And community members, especially young people, are engaged in every step of the project: planning, implementation and evaluation.

Being a small grassroots organization has afforded CVCD the flexibility to make changes within and thus amplify the changes it helps create in communities. But its status poses many challenges as well. CVCD has a rather small budget and has faced many financial crises over the years. Most recently, the government closed its bank, causing CVCD to lose a full year's budget. With emergency funding and many staff members going without pay, CVCD managed to get back on its feet and continue to serve Cambodia's poorest residents. Its classroom facilities are small and crowded, particularly the Khmer classrooms, which are located in residents' homes. But it is amazing how much can be accomplished on so little and how many young people are willing to take part in this effort.

trash cleanup in a neighborhood and install trashcans. A month later, the neighborhood would look the same as it always did — full of debris. The core group had to reconsider their approach. What has emerged is a system that involves the neighborhood in changing itself: learning about environmental health, planning and seeing through the cleanup, and continuing to improve the health of the community.

CVCD strives to build the community's capacity by developing its human resources. The route that we take in accomplishing this requires that we get involvement from the residents of every community we work in. By doing this, we empower young people to be more responsible, and to take action.

— Sothea Arun, CVCD Director

Volunteerism and Community Organizing as the Core Type of Action

Young people make up 50 percent of volunteers in most projects. According to Arun, "Youth involvement is very important for CVCD because they are the future leaders of the community. By getting them involved, CVCD is also encouraging the emergence of youth leaders." By engaging young people in volunteerism, CVCD opens paths for the entire society. Young people and community members are creating a spirit of cooperation in Cambodia. CVCD is training a force of volunteers who will serve as role models for the next generation.

CVCD has always focused on poor communities, but it has not always had community organizing as one of its core action strategies. At its start, CVCD members would organize a massive volunteer



Environmental Health and Human Resource Development as the Targets of Action

CVCD supports community development in a number of ways. First of all, learning English or computers greatly increases the odds of a young person getting a good paying job. According to CVCD's annual report, "the skills learned at CVCD help [young people] get jobs at nongovernmental organizations, businesses, private schools, restaurants, hotels and garment factories." Since many of the students come from extremely poor families, this cannot be underestimated as an important community impact. In squatter communities where there are few opportunities for finding good work, CVCD opens paths to young people that would not otherwise exist. Second, by using students as environmental educators and organizers, CVCD has been able to create a volunteer workforce that directly benefits the health of residents in squatter communities.

Strategies for Supporting Youth

As noted, CVCD stands out as an example of an organization that has (1) blended the goals of human resource development and community building, and (2) adopted a definition of "residents" that not only

includes youth but sees them as central. Making young people central actors in achieving this mission involves a complex set of strategies.

Young people are the heartbeat of CVCD.

— Laura Smith-Lousiell,
Director of Global Children

Motivation

It is hard to pinpoint exactly what makes young people want to become involved in CVCD. When asked, those familiar with CVCD have a hard time putting it into words. What it comes down to is the CVCD vibe. CVCD is an inviting place, an exciting place, a life-changing place. The physical space is full of young people from morning to night. Former students and CVCD members spread the word, or young people learn about CVCD by volunteering in their own community cleanups.

Once they're in the door, it is the combination of concrete individual outcomes and community contri-

butions that make many young people stick around. Those engaged in the organization make no clear distinction between individual learning and community development. When asked why young people get engaged, Arun responds, "Young people are motivated to get involved with CVCD after they see the difficult conditions in slum communities, and at the same time they have the chance to develop job skills and gain knowledge that will help them in life. They will get education, training, skills and experiences via participation in community development work."

Capacity

The same tight connection between learning and doing helps ensure that young people are ready to take on meaningful roles in community development. Coursework and volunteer work are bound together as the skills used in volunteering are taught with subject matter, and those skills are practiced when students volunteer. Thirty percent of CVCD's English and Computer Skills students also volunteer.

Young people in the communities CVCD serves are crucial to the success of street cleanups, and CVCD invests time in preparing them to transform their neighborhoods. CVCD has developed a curriculum that highlights environmental issues, including "hygiene and sanitation, waste, pollution, recycling, compost making and reforestation," according to Arun. The curriculum relies on sound educational practices, drawing on students own experiences, incorporating the use of multimedia and engaging students in finding real solutions. CVCD's Environmental Training Project Director coordinates the training of 60 community members, 60 percent of whom are between the ages of 13 and 18. These trainees in turn train the community at large, passing on the information about environmental health and sanitation that is at the core of the street cleanups. This process is a two-way street; CVCD learns from community members what will work best for the community and community members learn about practices that make their communities healthier.

Opportunities

CVCD's close relationships with other organizations and with the communities they serve mean that oppor-

tunities for meaningful action arise naturally out of conversations and shared knowledge. This guarantees that volunteer efforts never feel like “make-work,” and ensures that young people won’t see their work undone by communities that are not invested in their contributions.

Just as the opportunities that CVCD creates are responsive to communities, they are also responsive to the individual young people looking to become involved. There is no role that young people do not play in the organization’s work. They are engaged at every level of CVCD, as founders, students, organizers, planners, representatives of their communities, teachers and agents of change. In an organization where all roles have been played by young people, all roads are open — and it is easy for young people to see a progression from light commitment to a lifetime of involvement. The variety of available roles mean that young people can also bring their own skills

and interests to the table — from physical strength, to communication skills, to teaching ability, to organizational leadership and fundraising. This approach — anything but a “one-size-fits all” mentality — has made it possible for thousands of young people to find a home at CVCD.

CVCD volunteers help poor residents see immediate improvements in their communities — changes that not only improve the appearance of their communities but may actually improve their health. But CVCD has taken a long-term approach to community change strategies (education, investment and empowerment), investing heavily in young people as current and future workers and civic leaders. The strategy seems to be paying off. Because of the role CVCD has played in their lives, thousands of young people have engaged in volunteerism. Thousands of young people have been empowered by the opportunity to change their lives and the health of their communities for the better.

THE FOOD PROJECT

BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS

Common Ground: Harvesting Food and Community at a Growing Nonprofit

Like the seeds these young people planted at summer's start, The Food Project (TFP) has blossomed from a small pilot ten years ago to a nationally recognized program. Year round, young people and adult partners join The Food Project's quest to create a sustainable metropolitan food system, to bridge communities traditionally divided by race, class and physical distance, and to address critical environmental and social issues.

Fifteen miles west of Boston, surrounded by lush fields of fresh vegetables and herbs, the roughly 60 urban and suburban teens who make up The Food Project's summer corps gather with their families each August to celebrate their season's work. They have set a record with this summer harvest, which goes to Boston area food banks and homeless shelters: 73,000 pounds from 21 acres of conservation land in Lincoln, Massachusetts, plus 6,000 pounds from two previously hard-scrabble acres in inner-city Dorchester.

And they have, as usual, helped a new crop of young farmers, aged 14 to 19, grow. "It is very special to see huge zucchini plants produce food for people in shelters — and remember the hot day two months ago when you planted one," says Jess, a young crew leader.

EVIDENCE OF IMPACT

Working on so many levels at once, The Food Project's impact is broad and deep.

Most tangible are the thousands of pounds of organic produce grown annually (50 kinds of vegetables alone) distributed to the city's poor; the 2,500 hours volunteered at local soup kitchens and homeless shelters; the compost and soil tests freely given. The city acreage reclaimed for growing offers local residents an oasis where they can raise their own crops in uncontaminated soil, stop by for a free lunch, or gather agricultural tips from Food Project teens and staff who work there spring through fall.

Fresh Food from Reclaimed Land

The weekly farmer's market provides tangible benefits as well — indeed, Greg Watson, director of the Massachusetts Renewable Energy Trust, describes it as "a much anticipated community ritual." All the produce, otherwise unavailable locally, is sold at bargain prices. Outreach between The Food Project and various public agencies enables qualifying residents to use food vouchers. The market also provides a venue for local gardeners to sell their surplus.

Creative Use of Food Vouchers

A further contribution is the large map of this Boston neighborhood, "Dudley Street" to locals, which will soon hang in TFP's new offices there. The outcome of a door-to-door survey by interns this summer, the map pinpoints each of the 156 front- and backyard gardens

Increased Resident Involvement

tucked away in this densely populated community. The blueprint helps TFP crews know, for example, who in their “family” of urban growers is elderly and may need assistance with heavy chores, who may have produce to haul to the farmers’ market and who needs help remediating lead-poisoned soil. TFP youth routinely provide extra pairs of hands to tasks like these.

The map also affirms the rich agricultural traditions of this largely African American and Cape Verdean community. Interestingly enough, most of these neighborhood gardeners used organic techniques where they farmed before, when chemicals were unavailable. Now,

it is the organic aids they lack. Pressed by a group of Project interns, a nearby Home Depot recently agreed to add more organic products to its shelves.

Indeed, increased community knowledge about gardening, soil contamination and pollution are lasting program benefits. Amanda Cather, TFP’s “urban grower,” likens her work and that of the TFP youth to urban agricultural extension agents (a role that currently does not exist). Their regular workshops on growing food organically draw increasing neighborhood interest and local gardeners often stop by TFP’s two city lots to ask questions and exchange tips. “Folks

THE FOOD PROJECT: HISTORY AND CONTEXT

“Impossible to resist” is how one person describes a first encounter with Ward Cheney and his yet-to-be-born Food Project in 1991. An experienced farmer in Lincoln, Cheney wanted to bring together people of diverse backgrounds — particularly youth — to grow and distribute food to Boston’s hungry and, in the process, “practice care for land and community.” The new organization, in Cheney’s words, would balance: *values and beliefs* (care, reverence, usefulness) with *important resources* (land, people of diverse backgrounds) and needed products (innovative education; food for others and ourselves; an active, responsible, informed citizenry).

Charismatic and persistent, Cheney attracted \$140,000 in funding the first year from foundations and individuals, along with office space and land from the Massachusetts Audubon Society. He hired two interns — Pat Gray, a veteran of local politics, and Greg Gale, then a Harvard Divinity School student who had worked with teens — to put his ideas into action.

At the same time Gray and Gale were rounding up young people, community partners and the means to sow and reap, the notion of local food production in metropolitan areas began appearing in tiny pockets across the country. The images were compelling. City dwellers grew their own food on once abandoned lots. People of all ages together worked the land, gaining new skills, possibly a livelihood. Food production, however small, succeeded without the pesticides upon which big agribusiness depended.

These images, combined with The Food Project’s nascent ideas about bridging age and community, formed a heady mix. Fortunately, they were grounded in an ever more concrete sense of how the Project would manage its work, the role young people would play in every aspect of its life and the daily norms needed to tap the best in everyone involved. Seizing ideas and opportunities at every turn — generated by its young staff as much as Gale and Gray — The Food Project grew steadily for six years.

From 1992 to 1996, the program raised fresh produce for 15 Boston shelters and a local farmer’s market from its one acre in Lincoln. A summer program that paid two dozen inner city and suburban teens \$125 a week to plant, grow and harvest became a Project cornerstone. In 1996, a skeptical but determined crew of teens reclaimed a half-acre former auto dumpsite in Dorchester, launching The Food Project’s first urban garden. A new crew redeemed another acre and a half two years later. Along with the Project’s increasing urban presence and its expanding cadre of young participants and volunteers, a year-round academic program emerged.

Spurred by a five-year, \$615,000 grant from the Kellogg Foundation in 1998, The Food Project has since exploded with new programs and possibilities — along with more than doubling its conservation acreage. Today the organization has a staff of 16 and a budget of \$1.7 million. It grows more than 150,000 pounds of organic produce each year (50 kinds of vegetables alone), with more than half going to food pantries and shelters.

here long to share their food and their knowledge,” Amanda adds. “On some days, it seems like we’re growing a rich community laboratory of give and take among the collard greens.”

Changed perceptions and relationships accompany these sturdy contributions. The Food Project “is building a sense of what is possible on the land, tapping the agricultural pride in this immigrant neighborhood” explains Jon Barros, director of the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative and a key TFP partner. What began as an informal security force of neighbors determined to protect TFP’s 2.5 acres from vandalism (of which there has been little) has yielded a new sense of community. Barros describes a “contagious spread” with community standards emerging around “how you keep your land.”

And, as hoped, The Food Project’s young crews *do* reach across their urban-suburban divide, finding common ground as they dig and weed and discovering places they otherwise would never know, from country lanes to AIDS shelters. At this year’s end-of-summer celebration, several suburban kids spoke about how their work in the city gardens and shelters had altered their views of poverty and race — now “changed indelibly” in the words of one. Some urban kids talked of teamwork. As 14-year-old Brian said to his suburban crew-mate Trevor, “You’re white, I’m black, but working the fields together we’ve become good friends. Man, I’m going to miss you.”

While small-scale sustainable farming is a difficult career path to enter, a few TFP alumni have pursued their interest in productive agriculture. Others have chosen studies and careers that enlarge upon their experience — majoring in environmental science in college, linking an interest in health with community development to start a community health clinic, looking to start a comparable organization in another city.

Sixteen-year-old Sparklle Thames, who hated her first day on a Food Project field crew and vowed never to return, is one of those young people for whom TFP

has been transforming. Growing to like both her work and its mixed company — all the while ignoring comments from peers who denigrated her farming as picking cotton — Sparklle now leads neighborhood workshops on diversity to create a safe and more tolerant community. Of her experiences she says, “I feel amazed, mature and responsible.”

Teens like Sparklle, notes renewable energy advocate Greg Watson, “bring a level of energy and vitality that is like a breath of fresh air (or controlled hurricane) to the community. They think and dream without the constraints that older folks bring to the table.”

And there are many more like her. In 2001, several hundred high school students applied for 60 positions as summer crew workers (60 percent inner-city, 40 percent suburban), with a third remaining involved throughout the school year. More than 1,000 volunteers donated time in the fields and food lots.

The program ledger now includes two low-cost, inner-city farmers’ markets, several small food businesses, a series of free community lunches (prepared by local chefs), a community supported agriculture program and an EPA-sponsored environmental awareness program. Soon The Food Project will open a commercial kitchen in its Dorchester headquarters. All of these efforts involve young people in substantive ways.

CLOSE-UP

Nothing about The Food Project is contrived, especially in the opportunities it provides its young growers and the impact it seeks. “The stakes for us and our young people are high,” explains Program Director Greg Gale. “If we do not farm well and productively, people go hungry, land lies wasted and families do not have access to the life-giving produce we grow.”

Only a true partnership with its young crew members makes possible the backbreaking work that mission requires of them. “We could not get the work done without them,” Gale declares. “We rely heavily on their commitment, talents and capacity to work and serve. They know this, and it is from this understanding that our journey with each new crew begins.”

Tracing the Action, from Instigation to Impact

What Base?

Like the agriculture upon which it is based, The Food Project is a complex and integrated system, simultaneously an agent of both youth and community development.

TFP stands center stage in the small but growing movement for sustainable urban agriculture.

For some, it is about giving young people a structured work experience or involving them in service learning. But TFP also stands center stage in the small but growing movement for sustainable urban agriculture. It

speaks out on issues of environmental safety, pesticides and waste management, lead contamination and, not least, hunger. Its salience in the agriculture and “food security” community is underscored by the support it has attracted from the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Environmental Protection Agency and an award from the Food and Drug Administration. As Gray notes, “There are some people who fund us because of the significant work we accomplish. They are surprised to find out that youth are at the center of our achievements.” The many faces TFP wears seems more of an asset than a liability in regard to funding.

Also special about The Food Project is that all its work occurs outdoors — in Dorchester, smack dab in the community — heightening its visibility. “People walk or drive by our lots and see the kids with their Food Project T-shirts, sweating in 100 degree heat,” says Kristin Brennan, who manages TFP’s farmer’s market, “and they know these kids are real allies in developing the community.”

What Types of Actions?

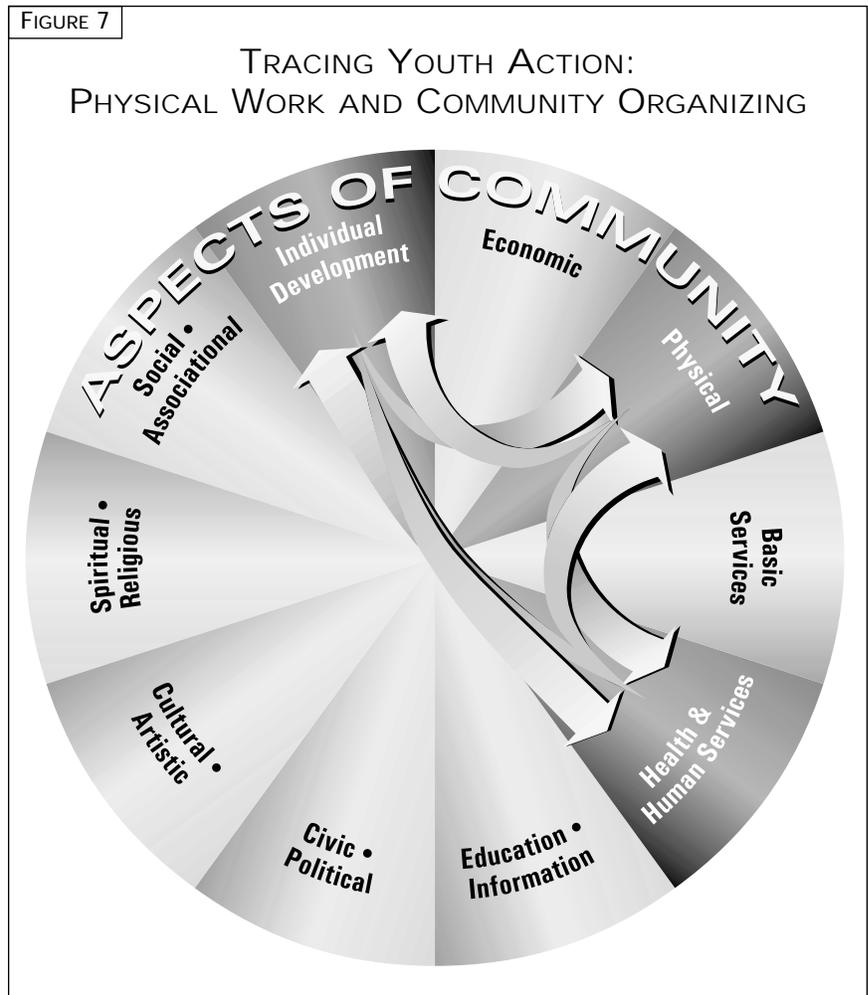
Another gift of TFP’s vision, its leaders observe, is the requirement that the organization, in all its actions, be “very, very operationalized.”

This sets it apart, they and others note, from most other youth development organizations, regardless of their base of action. “Because agriculture is a business, with real, tangible and complex organizational requirements plus unknowns like rainfall and sun,” says Gale, “we must be both highly structured and flexible.” That TFP works in two places at once, separated by a half-hour drive, only magnifies the operational requirements.

Hard work and bridge building are the core types of action.

The Food Project, of course, is also about bridging community and race. This was its starting place: youths and adults of diverse backgrounds working side by

FIGURE 7



side, moving from suburb to city and back — a commitment that placed TFP among a hundred “promising practices” recognized by former President Clinton’s Initiative on Race. The choice to begin in the suburbs, though, haunts the organization in some ways, according to Gale. It shows up most, he says, in the composition of the “senior” staff, which began and continues to be largely white.

What Targets?

The targets of The Food Project’s work are as varied as its organizational identity. Growing healthy youth along with healthy food, harnessing both to meet the food needs of inner city and suburban residents, continues central to its mission — thus creating a model for a more sustainable local food system. Developing community through caring for the land has prominence, too. And enveloping both is a fierce determina-

TFP’s targets are as varied as its organizational identity: Healthy youth, healthy food, healthy communities and a sustainable local food system.

tion to transform people’s perceptions of themselves and others so that they can create a different society.

Down deep, though, The Food Project finds itself increasingly wrestling with two concerns integral to these aims. One is gaining public attention around

issues of food and agriculture, especially in urban areas. With only 2 percent of Americans involved in agricultural production, it is not surprising that few care about it. The Food Project hopes some of its young crew members and staff will continue to speak up and work for sustainable agriculture. Indeed, as part of the summer and academic year program, TFP helps young people develop the tools (from presentation skills to handouts) to raise awareness and change perceptions. But the struggle remains uphill, say Gray and Gale.

The second issue concerns the extent to which The Food Project extends beyond service to truly empower the city dwellers with which it connects to promote the agricultural sustainability of the neighborhood. Adam Seidel, a college junior, began with TFP five years ago as a crew member and later joined the summer staff. He asks the tough question that always dogs well-

meaning “outsiders” or those with “special knowledge” who approach a community wishing to be partners in change. “How can individuals with seemingly more resources actively give their power or knowledge to others who seemingly have less, without reinforcing the systems that allow for inequality to exist?” he wonders. In the case of The Food Project, “How do you approach neighbors in their gardens in ways that suggest equality? How do you shift the balance from preaching to bringing out and validating the wisdom in each gardener’s experience?”

Adam suspects the answer lies in building partnerships that are truly reciprocal, perhaps the final target of TFP’s diligence. This summer, Adam and others say they heard more residents than ever before talk about “us” rather than “you.” They spoke of the work of The Food Project — of harvesting crops and community — as “ours.”

Strategies

Motivation

Youth begin their experience with TFP in the seven-week summer program, the equivalent of a Food Project boot camp. Each of the 60 14- to 16-year-olds selected for the program, after extensive interviewing, sign a standards sheet signifying “they are joining a community that operates under common assumptions,” in the words of Program Director Gale. For many, this is their first job and paycheck (now \$150 a week), and the standards sheet spells out violations and consequences. A first offense, possibly tardiness, draws a warning and a talk with the staff crew leader. A second, perhaps not wearing The Food Project T-shirt (a daily requirement), means loss of a day’s pay, though

“Patience,” said 15-year-old Shatara, when asked what she gained from the experience. She added, “Take your anger out on the weeds.”

“The power of connections — connecting black and white, rich and poor, young and adult, ideas with needs,” another young farmer answered.

A third said he has learned “the important role agriculture can play in the city.”

two weeks of no further violations wins it back. A third offense, maybe lying or vandalism, brings automatic dismissal. Participants quickly catch the spirit of the program and major violations are rare.

Also new to these young people is working with land and farming — and the dirt, sweat and fatigue they create. For some this is the program's biggest lure, for others a trial whose tribulations unfold slowly.

Working in teams — ten-person crews with two older teens serving as crew leaders — provides the spark and the glue. “My crew kept me going,” is a common refrain. The crew provides the base through which TFP's young people learn about work, service, farming, diversity, community, identity and values. The regular documentation each summer's crew does of its work also helps each new crew see how it stands on the shoulders of those who came before.

Clearly, TFP also draws upon the desire of its adolescent participants to do meaningful work and make a difference. Speaking for her crew, 15-year-old Vera said at this year's Family Feast, “It simply feels so good to be helping people. So good.”

And TFP brings with it the inherent blessings and curses of work that bestows concrete gratification when done well (the perfect ear of corn) and blunt reminders when neglected (peas choked by weeds). As crews deliver crates of fresh produce they have planted, harvested, washed and weighed to city food pantries, they hold in their hands the best of all motivators.

Capacity

TFP's young people commit themselves not only to daily physical work, but also to intensive workshops and discussions — always guided by older teen interns and staff (generally in their 20s). At the start of each summer program, participants create personal and community goals, draft a plan for achieving them and set targets for measuring progress. From these emerge two guiding documents, what TFP calls a “Standards Sheet” and a “Violations Chart.”

In turn, participants are introduced to “Straight Talk,” a communications tool deeply embedded in

TFP's methodology and culture and designed to encourage honesty, learning and personal growth. Using protocols for speaking and listening candidly yet respectfully, youth meet with their peers to exchange critical information about what they are doing well, where they can improve and any lapses in conduct.

The Food Project's constant attention to detail — especially in relation to the capacities and supports it provides its young people — shows up in other ways, too. With Kellogg Foundation funds, Greg Gale recently consolidated into a 238-page book, *Growing Together*, the cornucopia of methods TFP has gathered and developed over the past ten years to stimulate interactive learning. Included are strategies for helping young people and their adult guides check in daily with their feelings and concerns, set ground rules, get a group's attention, encourage participation, brainstorm, ask questions, make decisions, inspire motivation, process activities and establish themes.

In 1996, TFP extended its summer program to go year round, meeting a desire — indeed a passion — among some of its summer crew to remain involved during the school year. Crew members work weekends and weekday afternoons, in this case leading volunteers of all ages in work on the land. In the winter, they prepare meals in shelters. They also get a chance to take issues stirred up by their summer's work and study them in more detail: sustainable agriculture, small business planning, the complex dynamics surrounding hunger and homelessness.

Opportunities

Plentiful opportunities for young people are a Food Project staple. Certainly, with so many tasks to perform, everyone can contribute. Each job is important, from cleaning tools to making change at the farmer's market to surveying community garden plots. Says the summer program coordinator, Rachel Fouche, “Every youth here has learned something and has had time to practice it. They take that with them wherever they go.”

Early on, Gray and Gale devised opportunities for TFP's young people to grow within the program, able to return each year to tackle new challenges and roles. Some of last year's crew workers become this year's

crew leaders. Experienced crew leaders, in turn, may serve as TFP interns, assigned to special projects like helping develop a pilot pesticide education program for urban gardeners. Interns later can hire on as staff, designing and leading their own special projects with help from a new group of interns.

In addition, Gray and Gale made a commitment from the start to an inclusive, open management style. The

decisions and direction of The Food Project come from regular discussions among staff, interns and crew. Indeed, teens serve on TFP's board of directors. "If we are a model of anything," said Pat Gray in an interview with the *Christian Science Monitor* (Holmstrom, 1998, August 12), "we are a model of inclusion with rigorous standards . . . We hire staff to be committed as we are, and we expect input. This is not a passenger ship. We are all rowing so we all determine where the boat is going."

THE PHILADELPHIA STUDENT UNION

PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA

Through a Youth-led Union, Students Raise Voices for Educational Change

School reform efforts are finally making their way to urban high schools. School superintendents, perhaps for the first time in decades, are committing to districtwide high school reform. So are students. Sometimes invited by the school district, sometimes organized by their peers, they are becoming informed consumers — doing their homework on bond issues, budgets and bus schedules. And they are finding increasingly powerful ways to make sure that those ideas get heard and get considered. The Philadelphia Student Union (PSU) is one of these efforts.

Every day all across America, young people in large urban areas make their way past security details into enormous high schools with overcrowded classes, uninspired courses and under-trained teachers. In such settings, few students experience their daily encounters with adults as collaborative or mutually respectful. Relatively few even find the physical environment respectful. Isolated and unnoticed, many choose to drop out of school rather than stick it out in a system that treats them more as threats than as partners in their own learning.

But a remarkable initiative begun six years ago by a high school student in Philadelphia is blossoming into an antidote to that anonymity and alienation — as well as to the physical and financial challenges that plague schools. A blend of both community organizing and leadership development, the PSU now organizes and trains 15 to 20 students a year at five public high schools across the city.

“I’ve never met an apathetic young person,” says Eric Braxton, 25, who in 1995 founded the nonprofit corporation Urban Retrievers, which then got the Philadelphia Student Union off and running. “[But] I’ve met a lot of hopeless and discouraged young people who think that they are not big enough to change things. How do you start to counteract that belief?”

Braxton’s search for answers has helped create a growing sense of possibility and hope in Philadelphia’s public schools.

WHAT ARE STUDENTS FIGHTING FOR?

- Student involvement in decision making
- Public school funding
- Mistreatment of students in schools
- Public transportation
- Metal detectors
- Multicultural education
- Interactive and engaging curriculum
- School uniforms
- School security and safety

— Issues addressed in
Philadelphia Student Union Platform on School Reform,
October 2000

PHILADELPHIA STUDENT UNION: HISTORY AND CONTEXT

At the time Eric Braxton graduated from high school in 1994, Philadelphia's public school system was mired in crisis. Academic performance among the city's 215,000 students was low, the poverty and dropout rates high. The school system's physical plant needed repair and renovation. With limited state support, the gap in per-pupil spending between Philadelphia schools and their suburban counterparts grew to about \$2,000. A long-standing desegregation case against the school district resulted in recommendations for a reform agenda, just as a controversial new superintendent, David Hornbeck, announced his own. The city's teachers union, feeling excluded and imposed on, fiercely opposed reform. Capable teachers and principals fled the system in droves. The turmoil focused unprecedented public attention on the city's schools.

The atmosphere of controversy swirling through the city was a natural fit for Braxton, who deferred his enrollment at Hampshire College first by one year, then another to launch Urban Retrievers. The son of a kindergarten teacher and a labor activist, Eric had long been steeped in the principles of peer counseling and young people's rights. Eric attended high school years at an independent Quaker school, but was connected to public school issues and students through his work with the Philadelphia chapter of Teen Voices, a group sponsored by Planned Parenthood to involve youth in school decision making on matters such as condom availability.

When he founded Urban Retrievers, the new nonprofit's principles were simple, he says: to help students "look at what's wrong in the community, understand how the problem came about, and then create and sustain changes themselves." Building on his Teen Voices connections, he aimed to develop young people's leadership skills through a year-long course for high school students.

In his group's early efforts, "we knew the issues we wanted to address," Braxton says. "But we had no idea how to organize, how to motivate, how to facilitate. And we didn't know how to take into account the dynamics of the oppression and racism young people face every day, both directly and institutionally."

PSU was born out of this realization — that it takes not only issue awareness, but capacity building and structured opportunities to give young people the tools they need to believe they can make a difference.

EVIDENCE OF IMPACT

After five years in the business, PSU is deep into the school reform mix. In all, Braxton's commitment to youth power has mobilized more than 500 students to work for justice and democratic governance in schools and scored some important victories at the state, district and building levels.

In 1998, PSU organized lobbying efforts, including busing several hundred students to the state capitol, to oppose the Governor's voucher plan. The legislature voted it down. Students are vigilant in their lobbying for better funding for the city's public schools. A new school funding formula is now under study by the legislators, and the group intends to maintain its pressure against the inequities in the current system.

State-level
Lobbying

PSU has also put its muscle behind school funding in Philadelphia. In May 1996, as the district was cutting teachers and programs because of a \$150 million deficit, PSU organized nearly 2,000 high school students in a one-day walkout, the largest since 1968. Gathering at City Hall to support a bill allocating \$35 million for schools, they kept the issue alive

District-level
Advocacy

in the media; the pressure on the mayor and city council eventually led to the transfer of \$15 million in additional funds to the school district. In October 2000, PSU brought together 400 students in a one-day Student Convention on School Reform. The students ratified a nine-point student platform calling for improvement on issues from multicultural curriculum to public transportation and student uniforms — the basis of their ongoing organizing efforts.

Acting on this shared platform, PSU has had wins in each of the three neighborhood high schools in which it established chapters. Each has predominantly African American, low income student bodies.

Building-level
Organizing

STUDENTS SUPPORTING STAFF DEVELOPMENT

For over two years the Simon Gratz Chapter of the Philadelphia Student Union has been working on encouraging more meaningful and engaging instruction. We interviewed many teachers to ask what could be done about this. Many teachers said that the current professional development could use a lot of improvement. They also said that they did not have a say in what professional development was done. Sometimes the workshops did not meet their needs or wants.

Several teachers suggested that a teacher committee on professional development would help. The new teachers' contract allows for this to be created. The job of the committee would be to empower the teachers to redesign the way professional development is done at Gratz so that it could really help them. Our vision is not just to come up with a list of topics, but rather to really figure out how to create a space that allows staff to work together and get the support they need to make this a really great school.

— from a PSU proposal for establishing a professional development committee at Simon Gratz High School

- In 1997–1998, PSU members at Simon Gratz High School got the principal to allocate \$8,000 for new textbooks. When the district changed to block schedules and teachers were struggling to engage students in the new, longer class periods, PSU members opened a dialogue with the faculty, and students ran a professional development workshop for their teachers to identify which approaches best held their interest in challenging work. Students also gained two seats on a new faculty committee to bring about professional development that better addressed the actual learning needs of teachers and students. PSU members are also working to make the curriculum relevant, taking the lead in organizing service learning projects that involved analysis of the root causes of problems in their community.
- The West Philadelphia High School PSU started in 1997–1998. The group made improving building conditions a top priority. Testifying before the

City Council, the group scored a first year win, ultimately forcing a building inspection that resulted in needed repairs.

- At John Bartram High, where students long complained of physical and verbal abuse by security guards and other staff, PSU drafted a job description for a school ombudsman to handle complaints; the district hired a part-time teacher to fill the position in 2001–2002.

PSU's impact is being noticed at the top. It has begun to attract both attention to its cause and credibility for its efforts from policy makers and administration officials. "I have great respect for the PSU," said former Philadelphia School Superintendent David Hornbeck in 2001.¹⁷ "They pick substantive issues, they do their homework, they are creative in their tactics." Reflecting on his tenure in Philadelphia and his epiphany after working with PSU, Hornbeck added that he should have started "treating students as vehicles of school reform much earlier, in contrast to seeing them in the first several years primarily as the objects of school reform."

I've never met an apathetic young person, [but] I've met a lot of hopeless and discouraged young people, who think that they are not big enough to change things. How do you start to counteract that belief?

— Eric Braxton, PSU Founder

Word of PSU's success and that of other youth organizing groups is spreading to other cities and gaining the attention of national funders. The PSU gets frequent invitations to visit groups that are just getting started. "We'd like to create an alliance, because people are starting to look at youth organizing as a field," says Braxton. "And there are definitely other groups: the Boston Youth Organizing Project; Youth Force, which organizes in NYC around the criminal justice system; a group in L.A. called YUCA; a bunch of groups in the Bay Area such as Pueblo and YMAC." Braxton also serves on the board of a new group, the Funders Collaborative on Youth Organizing, which includes several large funders.

¹⁷ Hornbeck stepped down as Philadelphia's Superintendent after ten years in 2000. He serves as the Chair of the Board of the Public Education Network.

But Braxton also gauges the PSU's success on a more personal level — the difference it makes in young people's lives while they are in high school and after they leave. Even as they fight to improve their schools, the young people involved in PSU build a new appreciation

Rekindling
Interest in
Learning

for education — and a new ability to succeed in schools. “Half of the group write college essays on their experience in the student union,”

according to Braxton. “Honestly, a lot of students stay in school just to be a part of the organization.”

“Our students have gone on to continue their leadership and activism beyond high school,” Braxton says. “They look at themselves as leaders now.” Braxton cites a litany of examples. Former PSU members are active on college campuses, organizing black student unions, supporting the unionizing efforts of the maintenance staff, or joining the antiglobalization movement. A founding member of PSU's Saturday chapter organizes

Lifelong
Activism

political and environmental campaigns in Arizona. A former PSU student, now a minister in Philadelphia, has started a mentoring program for young African American boys. Another serves on PSU's own professional staff.

PSU continues to grow in strength and numbers. They are now working in two special admittance schools (Central and Masterman high schools). They are organizing a chapter at the Philadelphia High School for Girls. And they have created a Saturday chapter that draws students from schools around the city to address common problems.

Creating an independent youth-led voice for school reform that has not only ideas but influence is not simple. PSU has learned, over the years, how to work with school officials while working for change. It has also learned how to nurture student leadership while mobilizing student protesters.

CLOSE-UP

The PSU is a powerful example of what happens when youth development and community organizing are combined to create youth organizing. Youth organizing

ing, as defined by Lisa Sullivan (2000) of LISTEN, Inc., is “the new kind of community-based youth work that is explicitly committed to social and civic engagement as well as political action.”

Eric Braxton understands the balance required:

There are mainly two components of our work: youth organizing around education reform and youth leadership development. These two things have to go together. It is pointless to give young people skills without giving them a chance to use those skills. Yet we can't expect young people to be effective organizers without teaching them strategies and skills that help them organize.

Tracing the Action, from Instigation to Impact

Independent Youth-led Union as the Base of Action

Braxton believes PSU's position as an outside group strengthens its capacity to challenge the status quo. “A lot of education reform experts will tell you about the importance of having autonomous groups that hold the district accountable. If your group is run by the district, its funding can get cut; you're not in such a good position to challenge things.”

PSU also tries to collaborate with other parent and community groups. On the school funding issue, for instance, it has joined the Pennsylvania Campaign for Public Education, a coalition of community groups including parent organizations, clergy and communities of faith.

But operating outside the school system presents its challenges, too. Chief among them is access. An interim principal at Simon Gratz, for example, initially bridled when he found PSU students circulating surveys that asked what qualities students wanted in the school's next principal. “He saw us as a threat to him, and he kicked us

The Philadelphia Student Union gives students a greater voice in school issues.

— Hilderbrand Pelzer, principal,
Simon Gratz High School

out of the building,” Braxton recalls. But once he learned more about PSU and its motivations, Braxton continues, “he realized that we weren’t working against him, and we were able to come back into the school.”

Although school people are “wary sometimes,” Braxton notes, PSU counters that resistance with persistence, professionalism and a positive stance. “We take the approach that we’re there to work with people, not against them. We all want the same thing, for young people to have a good experience in school.” Making personal connections is also important. “We try to maintain strong relationships with [a school’s] staff, so we can come in and help question what needs to be questioned.” Summing up, he adds, “we’ve had mostly good experiences.”

Leadership Development and Activism as the Types of Action

Young people are in a unique position to create social change, the PSU founder asserts. “Historically, they have brought a lot of energy to the task, partly because they don’t yet have life commitments like family and jobs.” At the same time, young people bring a particularly important perspective to school reform issues. “Students who are not doing well,” Braxton says, “often have more insight into the school’s problems than anyone.”

Braxton wins agreement from perhaps an unlikely source. The initially resistant interim principal at Gratz, who was later appointed principal, recently wrote about the PSU:

I will admit that this organization provides an excellent opportunity for my students to develop organizational and leadership skills.

Additionally, the Philadelphia Student Union gives students a greater voice in school issues. In a school the size of Simon Gratz High School (2,200 students), it is helpful to have a student organization that can facilitate student involvement on school issues. . . . The students have a way of breaking down issues, so that the faculty can feel the pulse of the students.

One of PSU’s biggest challenges, Braxton acknowledges, is “having young people believe that they can accomplish major changes.” Schools are designed, he asserts, to make young people feel small and powerless, and the larger society only reinforces those attitudes. “It’s hard for young people of color in inner-city schools to feel that you can affect things,” according to Braxton.



School Improvement as the Target of Action

“Schools can’t work better,” Braxton continues, “until students want to learn and feel a sense of ownership of their schools. We won’t be able to succeed until students are playing a major role being leaders for change.”

Is the PSU, then, mostly about leadership development, or does it also address larger issues of social change in the community? “You can’t separate the two or put one before the other in a hierarchy,” Braxton says. “You have to help young people become lifelong community leaders, and you have to create changes right here and right now in their lives. You must do the two things together.”

As it joins the larger activist community, PSU cannot help but make concrete the principle that students’ voices and actions are the powerful missing ingredient when it comes to school change. “When we are successful,” David Hornbeck comments about the role of the PSU in school change, “it will be, I am increasingly convinced, because ‘the children shall lead us.’ It will be their energy, their purity of purpose, their sense of justice and injustice that will sustain the effort in its most difficult moments. They engage far less in the

practice of ‘on the one hand and on the other.’ They are far more likely to say, ‘This is right; this is wrong — what’s the question?’”

Strategies

Motivation

A host of programs in high schools offer opportunities for students to contribute to their communities through various kinds of service projects. But “young people can and must do more than service,” Braxton declares. “Too many youth programs don’t get to the root causes of the problems they address — racism, poverty and youth oppression.” To succeed, he decided, PSU’s strategies would need first to unearth students’ motivation to make change, then to build their skills and connect them to the necessary supports.

Involving students in change efforts early in their school careers is crucial if they are to have time to develop and implement their leadership skills before graduating. As a result, current PSU student members look for ninth and tenth graders to recruit and train; each school’s chapter then works as a group throughout their high school years and even beyond. The group also seeks members with varied perspectives, including both successful and unsuccessful students. “We take

AGENDA FOR CHANGE: EXAMINING AN ISSUE

*Issue: Interactive and Engaging Curriculum**

Problem

Learning is an active, engaging, and fascinating process. People learn best when they have an opportunity to use the information in a constructive way and connect it to things they already know. High expectations and encouragement from teachers also help people learn. Many times this is not what happens in schools. Much of the focus is still on memorizing, repeating, and copying from chalkboards as the main teaching methods. This results in students being bored, not being able to remember what they learn, and in some cases, dropping out.

Desired Results

1. Teachers should receive regular training in interactive and engaging teaching.
2. A procedure should be created for students to evaluate their teachers. Students have many good ideas on how to improve schools.

* One of nine Issues addressed in *Philadelphia Student Union Platform on School Reform*, October 2000 (see page 51 for a full list).

anyone who is interested, who is willing to come to meetings regularly and treat other students with respect. Everyone is capable of being a leader.”

Capacity

Social change in schools and in society cannot occur, Braxton believes, unless young people develop certain key skills around which PSU’s program is organized. Braxton names four types of skills.

- **Critical analysis skills.** What is the problem? What are its root causes, and what are the relationships between them? Focus on developing an analysis of social problems — racism, metal detectors in schools. They are not here by accident. Why do they exist? What and who created them? How do the problems in my school relate to problems in the city and greater social problems? How does the problem of metal detectors in schools relate to privatization of prisons and the prison-industrial complex?
- **Leadership skills.** Public speaking, facilitating meetings, working with the media, community organizing.
- **Building relationships and community** among group members, across groups, and between adult mentors and student organizers.
- **Peer counseling.** Identifying and helping each other overcome personal obstacles to being effective leaders.

The process of developing these skills is modeled on classic community organizing techniques,¹⁸ coached by a core staff of three young adults in their 20s and ten high school students. At the same time, the group pays close attention to the necessary personal skills to develop as leaders and organizers, and to supporting members in what is often a difficult choice to attempt to make change. “Strong organizations are built on relationships,” says Braxton. “When it’s ‘not cool’ to stand up and care, you need those relationships to stay involved.” If an attitude or behavior is getting in the way of a student organizer’s relationships, he adds, the group turns to peer counseling strategies to work it out.

¹⁸ As key resources Braxton cites *Organizing for Social Change: The Midwest Academy Manual for Activists*, third edition, by Kim Bobo and colleagues (2001), and *The Human Side of Human Beings: The Theory of Re-evaluation Counseling*, by Harvey Jackins (1978).

WE, THE STUDENTS . . .

We, the students at Simon Gratz High, want to create a student government to help teachers and students alike understand how we feel about our school...Students should have a strong and active voice in the school. Having a voice in choices that are made about our education would make students feel ownership of the school. If students feel some ownership in the school where they learn, we might have better attendance, fewer suspensions and more respect for keeping our building clean. Also, having a choice in how we are taught might make most students more enthusiastic about learning. Our future is at stake here, and we feel that we should have say in most decisions. In addition, we feel that students have really good ideas about things that need improvement around the school.

— from a PSU proposal for student government at Simon Gratz High

Opportunities

Student members develop their change agendas and leadership skills in after-school meetings led by one of PSU’s staff members. Students from any Philadelphia school also may participate in the Center City group, which meets on Saturdays to plan citywide campaigns on matters like school funding. And about 60 of the core student leadership cohort attend a yearly spring retreat, building relationships and alliances across schools and addressing issues of racism.

Each student group begins by analyzing its own school environment and how it does — or does not — achieve its stated goal of student learning. “How do students learn best?” they ask, exploring current theories of learning through discussions, reading and writing. “How are decisions made?” “Who has power?” In one early challenge, they call on their own experiences to design a school that might work better for students with different learning styles.

Next, the group chooses an issue that could bring its own school closer to the ideal, if students organized to address it. They research the issue extensively,

conduct surveys, interview local experts and sometimes travel to schools outside the state to investigate a problem or its possible solution. Since reading and writing well are important to the research process, students get continual feedback and coaching on these skills from adult PSU staff members. Their critical thinking skills are honed by the group's focus on trying out multifaceted solutions to complex systemic problems like school design or student rights issues. (For examples, see "What are Students Fighting For?" on page 51, and "Agenda for Change: Examining an Issue" on page 56.)

Finally, and most importantly, the students act. Having found voice and evidence for their concerns and their recommendations, they meet with teachers, with principals, and with local officials, using and

testing a range of strategies aimed at one thing — getting results.

The PSU was born out of a deep sense that students cannot learn when they are not trusted to help shape the environments in which learning supposedly happens. According to Braxton:

High schools treat students with disrespect, as if they're not worth anything. You're not going to learn anything when you are treated like prisoners. How do you start to counteract that? How do you get people to feel like they can create change?

The PSU is a good start toward enacting the answers — an outside organization working inside schools to make them better.

CEFOCINE

GUAYAQUIL, ECUADOR

In the Midst of Poverty, Play and Creativity Transform Neighborhoods

Young people in many Latin American communities — and in less economically developed regions around the world — end up playing vital community roles by necessity. In these communities, young people are breadwinners, caretakers and sometimes full community members by the time they reach their teens. Cefocine offers a powerful example of young people taking on these vital roles, while also getting the support they need to learn and grow — a true mix of community development and youth development.

Trying to name the challenges facing the impoverished communities in and around Guayaquil, Ecuador, it is hard to know where to begin. A woman living in one of the cooperatives says that when it rains, streets turn into rivers and garbage floats on the surface. “It’s impossible to walk, because the currents could take you,” she explains, “and that is just one of the problems of the community.”

In all, 82 percent of residents live in poverty — and the consequences of this poverty run far and deep. Those who take public transportation run the risk of assault by the rampant gangs. Parks and wells alike are rendered unsafe by the garbage and sewage that pollute them. The neighborhoods lack basic infrastructure — few health services, little sanitation, a massive shortage of jobs, inadequate schools.

Facing this laundry list of woes, the young people of Cefocine respond in perhaps the only way possible — they laugh. They play. They turn weaknesses into strengths. And in the process, they change the face of their communities.

Ludy, now in her early 20s but a member of Cefocine since high school, begins each of her meetings with the spaghetti song — “I’m a spaghetti, that moves by here, that moves by there, dancing and dancing, a little bit of sauce, a little bit of oil, move and move, now it’s your turn”

“We started our work with children,” Maribel, another of Cefocine’s young leaders explains. “But as we were working we were finding other necessities and we started to expand the work, to make new projects that were not just with kids.” One result: with 50 women, Cefocine developed Creative Hands and Minds — a project through which women come together to create handcrafts and, in the process, a major new source of family income.

“The youth have all the energy and the enthusiasm. They can transform their community’s reality through their work. All the energy that a gang uses in a negative way, destroying and scaring a whole neighborhood could — potentially, using it in a positive way — make the community better,” says Nayla Bersosa, a 21-year-old facilitator. This is the brave logic behind *Gangs: A Bet for Hope*, an effort that has helped hundreds of gang members become entrepreneurs and providers of vital community services.

These three women, and the other leaders of Cefocine, range in age from their teens to their early 30s. Together, they tell a powerful story.

EVIDENCE OF IMPACT

Perhaps the only thing that rivals the list of challenges facing the poor neighborhoods of Guayaquil is the list of contributions made by Cefocine's young leaders.

Children, from Games to Social Criticism — Before Age 11

Cefocine's work starts early, when most community development organizations are thinking about child care, not social change. Through its work with children ages 2–11, Cefocine touches about 1,000 lives at any given time — filling a critical gap in basic education

and engagement. The start of these programs, as with everything at Cefocine, is creativity and fun.

But it would be a mistake to dismiss Cefocine's work as all fun and games, and it would be inadequate to say that these children are “served” by the programs. From an early age, participants are doing work that addresses complex social issues. For instance, through the Geminis project, children draw and color their own cartoons about their family, violence, ecology, hygiene, their rights, relationships at school. The children then become the directors of their own movies as the cartoons are filmed and kept on video — all focusing on community issues chosen by the children themselves. As they produce their own media, these children come to under-

CEFOCINE: HISTORY AND CONTEXT

Cefocine was founded in 1995 by ten young people from in and outside of Guayaquil's impoverished cooperatives. Their initial efforts, as Maribel indicated, focused on providing opportunities for children to express themselves and have fun. From the start, creative expression was understood as a lever for learning and community change. Workshops that begin with the spaghetti song end up teaching children about audiovisual production, childhood rights, environmental preservation, hygiene, violence in mass media and problems that the children identify around themselves. Play and creativity are the constant themes throughout, with young people as young as two participating in the development of videos, works of art and entrepreneurial ventures.

By 1997, Cefocine had recognized that its mix of creativity and community redevelopment was relevant to all community members, not just to children. Creative Hands and Minds and Gangs: A Bet for Hope were founded on a belief that both women and young people represent under-appreciated agents of change in their communities. Over time, Cefocine has also expanded to reach larger and larger areas of Guayaquil. In 1997, much of their efforts focused on two cooperatives — Juan Montalvo and Julio Cartagena, together home to about 20,000 people. But as its leadership has grown from 10 to 30, as more young people have taken on facilitating roles, and as community members have taken over responsibility for programs started by young people, they have grown into a network of neighborhood-based efforts. In this way, more and more young people, families and communities are benefiting from their outstanding work.

All of Cefocine's successes occur in a context anything but conducive to youth action. In Ecuador, as in other countries, youth are seldom taken seriously as community members. In spite of all the work young people are doing to be heard, the adults are slow to give them roles in the “real world.” Most adults argue that the proper role of young people is to study, but not to participate, propose, give ideas or set new rules. These general expectations are compounded by the combination of fear and distrust that greet young boys and gang-involved youth in particular. By focusing on gang-involved youth — and by arguing that gang members are a source of community hope — Cefocine turns prevailing roles and expectations on their heads.

Cefocine's members are certainly not doing this work alone. Though founded on and driven by the energy of its young members, the support of outside allies has been crucial to Cefocine's growth. Funding from the Esquel Foundation, the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) and the International Youth Foundation has supported the expansion of their efforts into other cooperatives and allowed Cefocine to hire staff. Their membership in networks like the International Catholic Organization of Audiovisual and Cinema (OCIC-AL) and the Audiovisual Universal Network of Latin American Boys, Girls and Teenagers (UNI-AL) has helped to leverage needed technical assistance and in-kind donations. Favorable news coverage by news outlets in and outside of Ecuador has brought deserved attention to their work.

stand, with the help of youth facilitators, to be critical of the media images and advertising they face every day.

Young People, from Gangs to Agents of Change

The impacts of Cefocine's gang-focused efforts can be measured by both their breadth and depth. Cefocine's young leaders work with about 250 young boys and girls; the majority of them had a direct relationship with gangs or were gang members themselves. Such youth-on-youth gang prevention work is rare — but the successes that Cefocine appreciates are even more rare. The former gang members have learned to respect others, respect the environment and channel their energy through the organization of educational, sport and ecological activities as alternatives to the violence. In this way, those 250 young boys and girls won a new opportunity in life and the community won a responsible and concerned group of youth. Everybody wins; the only loser was the structure of violence.

But the transformation goes beyond better outcomes for youth and reduced violence in the community. The young people in the program are meeting vital community needs as well. For instance, young boys involved in the Gangs program have started their own company — a mail service in a city where such infrastructure is in short supply. And the company is growing — starting with five young boys, it now has 25, traveling on bicycles from north to south in the city.

The transformation underway in the lives of individual young people is particularly heartening. Jesus, a 17-year-old boy, says that:

Since Cefocine arrived the youth have learned to dream. We really didn't have a clear idea about our lives, even about ourselves. In fact, now we are thinking about university, radio programs and our own companies. We used to be shy, we didn't believe in ourselves, we didn't care about anything. Now we are trying to make our neighborhood and our lives better.

Jesus spoke these words soon after a video he helped to produce was aired for young people and community members. When the second part of the project starts, Jesus became a facilitator, in charge of a group of teenagers and managing the project. A member of

Cefocine evaluates him, but he holds the primary responsibility for the project. In his new role — working twice a week, during afternoons after school, for almost a year — he helps other young people, from 12- to 20-year-olds, to realize their own value, to develop their self-esteem and communication skills and to be agents of change.

Women, from Isolation to Power

Through Creative Hands and Minds, women and Cefocine have built a vital combination of creativity, community and economic opportunity. Through the project, women come together for evening creative meetings in which they make handicrafts that later will be sold. The effort has been so successful that now these women are contributors to their families' incomes and have their own entrepreneurial group. The furniture and crafts they produce are sought out by residents throughout the city.

Before this we didn't know each other. We could have seen the other, but we never talked . . . now it's incredible because we are the best friends.

— Participant,
Creative Hands and Minds

Along with this change in economic status has come a change in perceptions and freedoms. The same city residents who had looked down at these women for decades — stereotyping them as the wives of violent husbands and mothers of gang members — were suddenly lining up to buy the women's work. Just as it has changed the perceptions of outsiders, the women's newfound economic power has also brought greater equality inside marriages. Women with little space for self-expression and time with other females now have a space of their own. "Before this we didn't know each other. We could have seen the other, but we never talked . . . now it's incredible because we are the best of friends," said one of the women involved.

Communities, from Poverty to Hope

Cefocine's impact on communities as a whole is perhaps best illustrated by the stories of two neighborhoods — Juan Montalvo and Julio Cartagena. Both neighborhoods exemplified the side effects of poverty visible throughout the city. In Juan Montalvo, the

going was particularly hard. From a simple survival perspective, only 3 percent of Juan Montalvo residents are over 46 years old, and in 1997, ten assaults occurred every day. The apathy among the residents was obvious. Even the community house reflected it; it was abandoned, dirty, destroyed. People were divided, discouraged and disorganized. They didn't even dream about becoming unified to solve their common problems. When the work began the mothers didn't let their children participate; they distrusted it because they were not used to programs like Cefocine. The informative and explanatory meeting, letters, visits and, most of all, the children's enthusiasm and interest for the workshops eventually ended the resistance.

Thanks in large part to the work of Cefocine, both communities are far more hopeful places than they were a few years ago. The combinations of new businesses created by women and young people, reduced violence from gangs, greater awareness of health and environment, and more opportunities for children add up to sea changes in the character of these two cooperatives. Acting on the suggestion of a young resident, the people of Julio Cartagena recently replaced a garbage-strewn gang battlefield with a park. In Juan Montalvo, a number of youth enterprises have started up. Not all the problems are solved. No community-based organization can provide all the functions for which public authorities normally claim responsibility. But many of the side effects of missing public infrastructure have been addressed.

In these communities — in particular Julio Cartagena, where Cefocine has been active longer — the people have recovered something that they lost a long time ago: their faith. Now, members of the community are committed to change: the women, the boys, the girls and even the men. For every necessity or problem they are trying to find a solution. The signs of the transformation are small as well as large — for instance, the sea of kisses and hugs that greet expected guests, even strangers. "I've never been so kissed in my life," said ILG member Bene Madunagu — pleased and surprised — when visiting the cooperative.¹⁹

CLOSE-UP

Once upon a time there was a group of young people who were searching to work in the poorest neighborhoods of their city, in order to know the people who lived there, to believe in them, to play, to awaken their creativity and, mostly, to learn from them . . .

These words, spoken by Rafael Carriel, Cefocine's Executive Director, only begin to tell Cefocine's story — one as unique and nuanced in its story line as it is impressive in its conclusion. Cefocine's story is about joy and about contribution — and, first and foremost, about the power of self-expression to transform communities.

Tracing the Action, from Instigation to Impact

Art is the Base and Type of Action

Jenny Nicholls, an Australian educator and artist visiting Cefocine through the ILG, described the driving power of artistic expression in the organization's work:

In one of our site visits we were warmly welcomed into the community of Julio Montalvo, where group after group of children and young people talked, sang, danced and presented their plays to us. This was a "village" where gang violence had been prevalent throughout all levels of the community. However, in a short time, the work of Cefocine has had a profound and in some instances overwhelming effect on these young people. A group of teenagers presented us with a performance — created on their own — that reflected on how deeply gang culture was embedded in their lives, and then on the transformation that had taken place when Cefocine entered and began to provide them with alternative activities. I can't remember ever seeing a group of 16-year-old boys so enthusiastic about performing a theatre piece, or looking so proud as they demonstrated their new martial arts skills.

¹⁹ In November 1999, several members of the International Learning Group on Youth and Community Development (ILG) spent two days in site visits and discussion with members of Cefocine. Sabrina Duque, a young leader of Cefocine, is the primary contributor to this case study. Her record of the ILG members' site visit is captured in *Lessons Learned, Lessons Shared: Reflections from the International Learning Group on Youth and Community Development* (Irby, 2001).

In the video we've reflected all the ugly and sad situations that we've lived or saw before we entered this program: drug addiction, alcoholism, rapes, fights, assaults, death. We wrote the stories, the script, we were the actors, and now, all that we want is for that old reality to remain only a video. Like a bad dream.

— Freddy, age 19, participant in Gangs: A Bet for Hope

Artistic creation is a constant presence in Cefocine's work, meeting different needs depending on the situation and the group involved. With younger children, art that expresses feeling and experiences is a start for education about ecology, health and other community issues. Youth involved in Gangs: A Bet for Hope use videos to describe their experiences, as well — and also to identify solutions to the violence plaguing their communities. Freddy, a 19-year-old boy from Julio Cartagena, described the process. "We have made a video that is called *Our Lives*, and we are very proud," explained Freddy. "In the video we've reflected all the ugly and sad situations that we've lived or saw before we entered this program: drug addiction, alcoholism, rapes, fights, assaults, death. We wrote the stories, the script, we were the actors, and now all that we want is for that old reality to remain only a video. Like a bad dream."

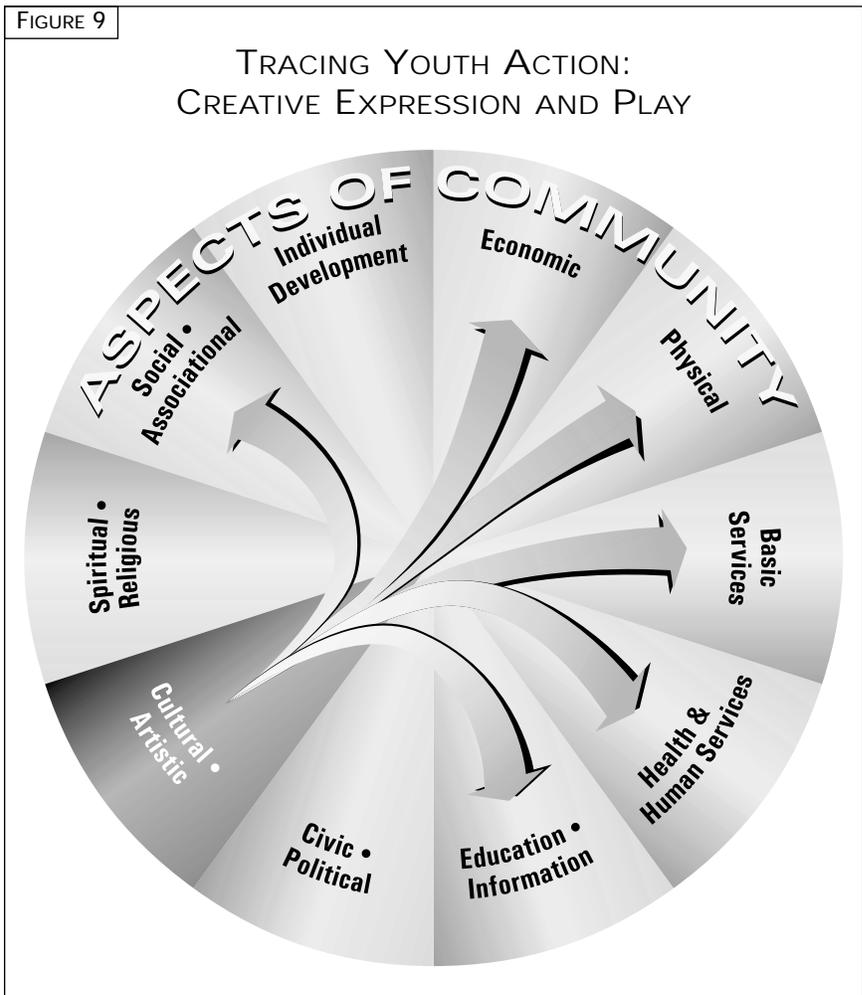
"The videos play a really important role at Cefocine. Making a movie, a video, is very important because the audiovisual work opens spaces for the creativity, the self-expression. They are free to expose their problems or develop productions that reflect their own ideas about human rights, gender, group and youth participation," explains Marvick, the audiovisual director at Cefocine. "They have also produced the pilot of a radio program in which they give advice to other young people about behavior, health and familial matters. Now the young people have a project that

supports them having a space on the radio with their programming." As in this case, most of the young people's ideas for community action stem from creating works of art and reflecting on what they have produced.

For the women involved in Cefocine, art goes beyond self-expression to play a vital economic function. Crafts become both their livelihood and a new source of community for women living in isolation and with little economic clout. In this way, the arts prove to be a remarkably flexible starting point for community action.

Numerous Targets of Action

The young people of Cefocine touch nearly every aspect of community life. Economic issues (small business and job creation), physical infrastructure (parks and the natural environment), social life, health, basic services (sanitation and safety), education and personal situations have all improved as a result of their work. This is in part possible because the communities in



which the organization works start out with so little community infrastructure. But it is also a statement about Cefocine's adaptability in the face of differing community needs, its willingness to let community members — including young people — set the direction for action, and the flexibility of the arts in addressing diverse community issues. In essence, Cefocine's approach offers neighborhoods a starting place — and lots of support along the way — for them to do with what they think best.

Strategies

Building Motivation

As the starting point for most of its work, artistic expression and play provide the initial hook that brings children and young people into Cefocine — and into community-changing efforts. By helping young people explore their own experiences of community issues and then turn those explorations into a work of art, Cefocine builds a strong base of awareness and commitment. That the products are often collective — putting together the experiences of individual students into a powerful group package — makes the energy that results even more powerful.

Increasing Capacity

The direct training and instruction offered by Cefocine is limited. Nearly all of their capacity-building work goes on through a combination of play, exploration and experience. Young people learn video production by creating videos, in the context of clear support and coaching from other young people and adults who are skilled

This reality of having team members that went through and had a previous experience with Cefocine shows the validity and sustainability of this program.

— Rafael,
Cefocine Executive Director

videographers. At the same time, they explore and learn about community issues — ecological, economic, social, political. Most things not learned by doing are learned by playing — through songs,

games, sports and activities — or through the normal course of conversation between community members.

Generating Opportunities

As with many of the efforts documented in this publication, Cefocine provides young people with a huge array of active roles — some of them already identified, many of them created by young people themselves and all drawing on different strengths. Young boys and girls who enter the organization through an artistic experience — often creating a video — over time build enough self-confidence to make the next step on their own. For instance, young boys arrive at the question, “Why don't we start a business?” out of discussions about a shortage of job opportunities. Cefocine gives the boys a loan, but does not direct the business's operations.

Young people who have made the leap from self-expression to entrepreneurship often then take on roles as teachers and leaders. For instance, in 1995 Ludy — the young woman famous for her spaghetti song — was part of a project that Cefocine implemented at the high school located in her hometown — a low-income area known as the Trinitarian Island. The project was called “Creation of Student Video Clubs and First Inter-High Schools Video Fiction Festival.” Since then, Ludy got involved with the whole process, stayed and is now working there. Like Ludy, almost everyone on the facilitating team is a young person who has been previously involved with Cefocine. “This reality of having team members who went through and had a previous experience with Cefocine shows the validity and sustainability of this program,” explains Rafael.

Over the years, Cefocine's leadership has grown from 10 to 30. Nearly all of this expansion is the result of young people who grew up in Cefocine's programs moving into leadership positions in the organization. Such an ability to build new leadership, to stay youth led even as founders age, is a rare characteristic in an organization. It is also a hopeful indication that Cefocine will be strengthening neighborhoods for many years to come.

EDUCATIONAL VIDEO CENTER

NEW YORK, NEW YORK

Behind the Camera, at the Forefront: Student Filmmakers Learn New Role as Agents of Social Change

As contemporary media become the chief means of communication and entertainment among young people everywhere, growing numbers of educators have begun to use media analysis and media creation to provoke learning and self-expression. For years, youth groups have used teen theater and youth writing as powerful forms of peer communication. Increasingly, however, media and the arts are being recognized for their value as advocacy tools. Educational Video Center (EVC) is an example of this genre of programs linking rigorous skill building with issue advocacy.

The story in New York City is not unlike that in many large urban cities. Students bored in crumbling classrooms. Residents living in decaying neighborhoods. Media reports portraying young people as the dangerous. Residents unsure of young people's intentions. Opportunities for youth and adults, school and community to interact in a positive way are rare.

But EVC is changing the odds. Thirty students from resource-poor schools throughout New York City

I'm a teen. I want to prove to the whole world that what the media is saying about me is really wrong.

— a young EVC Filmmaker

spend three hours, four afternoons per week at EVC for its High School Documentary Workshop. During the for-credit, semester-long program, students work together to produce short video documentaries on subjects like race relations, drug abuse, schooling or criminal justice.

A model of synergy between school and community, EVC also has its students interacting with neighborhood adults in various roles — police officers, judges, shopkeepers, social workers. “The kids get out and do interviews on the streets,” says Steve Goodman, EVC’s founder and director. “They are working on serious issues, asking good questions, being treated as adults and connecting to adults in the community in positive and authentic ways.”

The more they get out of the school building in such ways, he adds, the more they learn. One student’s beliefs and perspectives on capital punishment notably shifted, Goodman recalls, after interviewing a former prisoner who was falsely accused of a crime. On the flip side, Goodman notes, “community people get a better picture of what kids have to say, which they need in their own work.”

Equally important, students’ films prompt new questions about important community issues and help stir, as hoped, local civic action.

EVIDENCE OF IMPACT

In 17 years, young people at EVC have created more than 75 short video documentaries about difficult and contentious issues. They include *Young Gunz*, about why teenagers carry guns; *Unequal Education*, an expose of the uneven allocation of resources in two neighboring schools; and *Blacks and Jews: Are They Really Sworn Enemies?* about the Crown Heights riots. EVC student films have won some 100 national and international awards. They have been shown nationwide on ABC, NBC and PBS, and one appeared in Bill Moyers's public television series, *Listening to America*.

Such national exposure, as is so often the case, is what sparks local debate and change. The 1991 student film *Unequal Edu-*

cation, for instance, exposed deep class- and race-based inequities between two middle schools in widely disparate Bronx neighborhoods. Its screening on national television sent shock waves through the more privileged neighborhood, dividing its local school board and community and galvanizing African-American activists to challenge the status quo. Neighbors gathered in living rooms to watch and discuss the film

Award-winning Documentaries that Raise Awareness and Spark Advocacy

EDUCATION VIDEO CENTER: HISTORY AND CONTEXT

Steve Goodman's introduction to the transformative power of filmmaking came from personal experience in the early 1980s. While studying at Columbia University and its graduate school of journalism, he produced a documentary on a South Bronx youth gang. When he screened it for community audiences in the Bronx and teenagers in alternative high schools, the vital discussions that followed made him recognize the power of video — not only to capture the social conditions of inner-city life but to raise the possibility of changing them. Convinced that the next step should be for teenagers to explore and document their own communities, Goodman began teaching a video workshop at Satellite Academy, a small alternative high school.

Satellite proved fertile ground for exploring Goodman's interest in a more active, student-centered and community-based curriculum and pedagogy. Simultaneously, community media centers such as DCTV and Young Filmmakers — with a real emphasis on community — had become established institutions in the city, encouraging activists to use their newly available portable cameras and editing facilities to achieve political as well as artistic goals.

When EVC opened in 1984, it quickly staked its ground and stood out from other youth media programs for its powerful linking of videography with issues of social justice. Early on, Goodman also incorporated innovative techniques of assessing student performance using rubrics that rated both products and process against explicit, professional criteria for excellence.

Such active and experiential learning won high praise from the city's growing network of alternative schools — City as School, Vanguard High School, Central Park East Secondary School and others like them. "Teachers and advisers who have worked with us over time say what happens here is productive and positive," Goodman said. "They see the growth and change as kids mature in the process."

Other EVC programs grew from these early successes with the high school documentary workshops. Students who upon completion wanted to continue their work suggested creating YO-TV (Youth Organizers TV). Each semester, six of the workshop students will stay on for an additional paid year of preprofessional work as the crew of YO-TV, which produces short documentaries for outside clients like museums, human rights organizations or public broadcasters.

EVC also reaches into both school and community. Its Teacher Development program offers workshops, seminars, summer institutes and consultations in 25 schools around the city for teachers who may never have held a camera but see the possibilities for introducing filmmaking into other academic areas. And its Community Organizers TV (CO-TV) programs train parents and community organizers to use video as a tool for achieving social changes like equity in education, housing for the homeless, rights for immigrants and funding for youth services.

and, after seeing it at a conference on education law, the Bronx Legal Services decided to take up the issue of school equity and parent/student advocacy.

Another student documentary, *2371 Second Avenue: An East Harlem Story*, also prodded community action. Made by Central Park East High School student Millie Reyes, the video sought to document the miserable living

Irrefutable Evidence that Can Stand Up in Court and Aid Community Organizers

conditions in the building where she lived with no heat or hot water. The EVC crew researched the code violations on file against the landlord and filmed the substandard conditions — including one shot of Millie’s cousin washing her baby in an empty bathtub with water heated in pots on the stove.

Throughout the process, Millie became a leader of her building, organizing residents to sign a petition to withhold rent until all 90-some violations were repaired. When Millie and her neighbors tried to present the petition, they were thrown out of the landlord’s office. But the EVC crew on hand captured the scene on camera. Millie eventually showed her tape and was interviewed on NBC’s *Today Show*. Shortly after, the landlord sold the building and the conditions were improved.

Most EVC videos, though, are not broadcast nationally but used locally by grassroots organizing groups to

inform and galvanize citizens. Systemic changes that might result from such screenings are often slow to take shape and difficult to identify. But the connection made between the youth and adult organizers in a community is immediate. And so EVC students contribute their artistry, ideas and passion to the incremental work of social change.

Not surprisingly, the students’ sense of themselves and their place in society evolves with their work. The effects on the students can be as powerful and long lasting as the effects on the community.

Many EVC students come from communities where they face poverty, racism and trouble with the police on a daily basis. Because “video defamiliarizes the familiar,” Goodman said in an interview with the *New York Times*, the act of making films can transform students’ perceptions of their familiar urban setting. “Video documentary enables students to bear witness to their social conditions and look for solutions,” he said. “We tend to go through life almost being lulled into accepting our conditions, but there’s something about video that captures life, reframes it, positions it.” That new perspective leads both to powerful learning and to further community action, he has found.

Linking Powerful Learning and Community Action

DESIRED EFFECTS ON SOCIETY OF OUR VIDEO

- To show the basics of the criminal justice system, especially for juveniles, by showing how one gets into it and what happens when one enters the system
- To communicate the express PURPOSE, clearly stated, of the alternate incarceration centers and incarceration centers
- To make people aware of the individual control factors of the jail system (there isn’t a “standard” but many individual and biased decisions)
- To help people understand what is REALLY going on
- To get kids bothered, to see that jail isn’t a cool place to go, to think twice about their actions, to know that prison is BAD by inference from what we show
- To help people see that prison is not good but is necessary
- To help people see that many laws are too harsh

— Excerpts from a wall chart recording student inquiry on a film in progress

I like telling stories that matter. Not idiotic stories about asteroids hitting the earth [or] a woman running away from a serial killer. I like telling stories that you can watch and you can learn something from — like, “I can’t believe that’s going on, I should do something about it.” [They’re] really social change media, things that you watch that make you want to act.

— Samuel Delgado, a young EVC filmmaker speaking after making a short documentary about the International Criminal Court

EVC affects its young producers in other ways, too. Students learn to examine objectively the slew of media that permeates their lives, whether print, video, audio, film, television, the Internet or CD-ROMs. Media educator Mary Megee said recently in the *New York Times* that such skills are important because, “to be effective participants in the public dialogue, young people have to learn to be critical receivers and capable senders of messages themselves” (Pall, 1999).

By working together in groups, students also learn new habits of collaboration, problem solving, decision making and revision. Just as important, EVC’s young videographers practice a particularly personal brand of accountability. They may go out in the field with professional mentors, but the mistakes they make — and what they learn from them — are entirely their own.

CLOSE-UP

This past June in a New York City public library, a young videographer presented *Youth vs. Media*, a documentary she and several other teen filmmakers produced about media misrepresentations of youth. In the question and answer session that followed, she asserted, “I’m a teen. I want to prove to the whole world that what the media is saying about me is really wrong. They judge me by who I am and the way I look. If they say youth are useless and bad, we can be smarter by doing this kind of work. By showing this kind of video, it is like we are fighting back for our rights.”

Sparking such attitudes was exactly what journalist Steven Goodman had in mind when he founded the EVC in 1984. The nonprofit aims to help adolescents

develop media literacy and technical filmmaking skills while nurturing their idealism, intellectual development and commitment to social justice.

Tracing the Action, from Instigation to Impact

Education and the Arts as the Base of Action

EVC’s unique combination of student learning, community action and teacher professional development makes the organization a difficult one to categorize neatly.

“We’re not quite an after-school program,” explains Goodman, “because kids are served during the school day and they get school credit for their work. Are we a technical program, a jobs program, an arts program, a literacy program, a social change program? Should we become a school ourselves?”

Given the current restrictions and constraints on New York schools, Goodman considers operating outside the school system to have more advantages than not. Chief among them is a degree of flexibility not available to schools. On a practical level, EVC’s three-hour sessions represent a block of time necessary for filming, interviewing or screenings — but virtually impossible to secure within a school’s daily schedule.

Capitalizing on unexpected opportunities is another advantage. EVC recently has begun discussions with the Urban League about working with parents in the community to use media as an organizing strategy to affect school funding and other equity issues. This project grew out of its Community Organizers TV (CO-TV) branch, but only recently did it turn away from broader community issues to school reform and parent groups — a focus that might see better success if pursued from outside schools.

At the same time, EVC shares some of the same concerns as schools and other nonprofits. Funding remains

EVC is “an independent nonprofit organization with strong connections to the alternative school infrastructure.”

— Steve Goodman, EVC director

a constant struggle. Though the New York City Board of Education provides EVC with rent-free space in a midtown Manhattan alternative school and salaries for the two filmmaker-teachers on staff, “Some foundations don’t quite know what to make of us,” Goodman says. With a \$650,000 annual budget in 2001, EVC pays its part-time media educators less than what the city does its teachers for comparable work. Keeping committed staff at such low salaries is one of EVC’s chief worries.

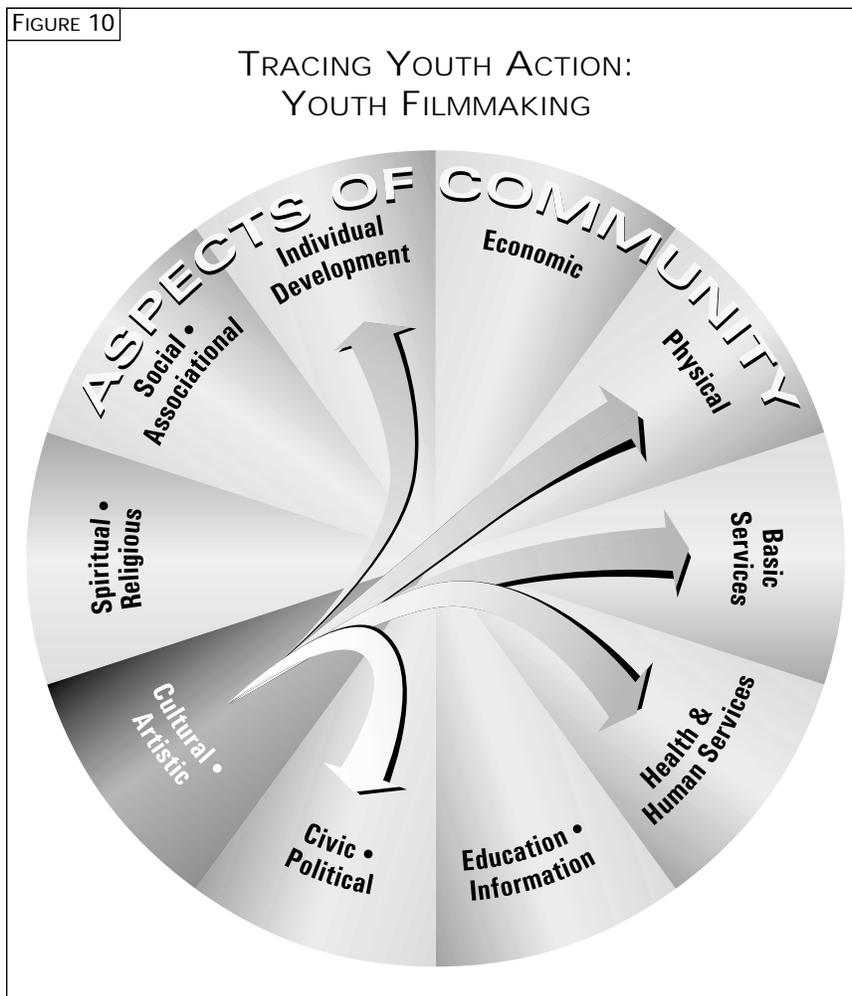
For now, Goodman concludes, EVC remains “an independent nonprofit organization with strong connections to the alternative school infrastructure.”¹⁹

Youth Filmmaking as the Type of Action

EVC students learn filmmaking. But it is the topics of that filmmaking, and the process for developing the topics that push EVC out of the arts/technical education category into the social change category. Perhaps the most important benefit of being a nonprofit, though, is the curricular freedom EVC enjoys. The social issues at the core of EVC’s mission — those of poverty, racism, violence, teen pregnancy or drug abuse — are generally off limits to a public school system funded primarily by taxpayers. Schools may address these as personal issues in advisory groups, Goodman observes, but they rarely make such matters part of the academic curriculum. At EVC, by contrast, students research and document them as social and cultural phenomena. The process of portraying that information on film, Goodman notes, “empowers kids to see themselves in context, to communicate to others how that feels.”

EVC’s special niche has been its dual focus on both education and social activism.

FIGURE 10



From the start, EVC’s special niche has been its dual focus on both education and social activism. “If you take away the community change part, the kids could be making music videos,” Goodman observes. “If you disregard the developmental learning part, they could be documentaries about social justice but essentially directed, shot and edited by the adults in charge.”

From the start, EVC’s special niche has been its dual focus on both education and social activism. “If you take away the community change part, the kids could be making music videos,” Goodman observes. “If you disregard the developmental learning part, they could be documentaries about social justice but essentially directed, shot and edited by the adults in charge.”

¹⁹ EVC works with youth and adult videographers. Finding the time and the tools to help its professional videographers become better teachers is another ongoing challenge. The entire staff now meets in study groups for three hours biweekly to develop their understanding of the teaching and learning process. Staff members keep journals, watch and critique tapes of each other’s workshops, and read and discuss relevant articles. “We’ve recently been looking for professional development ideas from the work of other outside groups that compare to ours, such as the National Writing Project or Foxfire,” Goodman notes. “It’s difficult to find the time, but well worth it.”

We believe that when you pick up a camera you are arming yourself. Video can give you the potential to bring people together, to make people understand one another, or to kill whatever silence hovers over any issue(s) you are interested in.

— YO-TV student manual

From the beginning, EVC planned on students learning something from their exposure to community members. But young people have something to teach their elders as well. When a student with a camera asks intelligent questions about important issues, adults in the community take notice. The passion and idealism of youth can help dissolve the cynicism and indifference — about the motivations of younger generations and the possibilities for meaningful change — that grip too many more experienced citizens.

Targets of Action Throughout Urban Life

The often stressful experiences of EVC's urban students yield film topics of undeniable relevance to these young lives and the communities around them. In 2001, for example, students chose to investigate policing and efforts to reform it; in previous years, themes have included drug abuse, unequal educational opportunities, racial violence, housing and homelessness, teen parents, poverty and death and bereavement.

The single most satisfying moment [of the EVC experience] was at the final screening at EVC . . . I had my mother there, and my girlfriend at the time, and her mother. Her mother didn't know I could speak that well. She had her perceptions about me based on maybe the way I looked, or my appearance. She never got a chance to speak with me or find out how I felt. But when she saw me speaking about the project and how proud I was of it, it touched her. Also, seeing my mother in the audience and looking at how proud she was — that stayed with me. It gave me self-confidence. Just having that understanding, "Yes, I can do this. I am capable," went a long way to helping me. No one can ever take that away from me.

— Former EVC student

Strategies

Motivation

EVC's students are a diverse group, usually coming from alternative high schools and often struggling with academic skills, family troubles or worse. "We aim to serve kids who do not normally have opportunities for these kinds of experiences," says Goodman. Their interest and willingness to participate fully are the Documentary Workshop's chief entry criteria.

Because students attend EVC voluntarily and choose film topics of their own interests — with direct bearing on their own lives — motivation is usually internally driven and not an issue. Meeting the looming deadline of a public screening keeps students focused, as does working together in teams. As former EVC student Ray Ballanger explains, "Once everyone could start to see [the video] actually materializing, everyone wanted to make it the best possible."

The idealism of young people makes them ideally suited to carrying out EVC's mission. Their passion for their chosen causes is palpable. "We believe that when you pick up a camera you are arming yourself," YO-TV students write in a manual for their peers. "Video can give you the potential to bring people together, to make people understand one another, or to kill whatever silence hovers over any issue(s) you are interested in."

At the same time, the inherent demands of filmmaking and EVC's rigorous revision processes inevitably produce moments requiring patience and persistence. "There are times I just wanted to walk away," acknowledges Sam Delgado, who intends to pursue a career in filmmaking. "But you can't do that if you want to see your message get out."

Capacity

Students come to EVC's high school workshops with little prior knowledge about what a documentary is or what it takes to produce one, though they often come with strong feelings about the social issues and conditions their films aim to capture. During the semester, EVC's two full-time filmmaker-teachers guide students

through the steep learning curve as they develop skills in research, writing, interviewing, critical viewing, technical arts, editing and collaborative work.

The intergenerational aspects of EVC's work — students' interactions with the community members they interview as well as their adult instructors — offer additional support. "Young people do not get opportunities at school or at home to really work alongside an adult on a challenging project," Goodman says. Although supportive adults are also "there for the kids" in alternative education and youth development settings, he notes, their effectiveness can be limited without a strong enough intellectual focus.

To help keep that focus, EVC maintains a steady emphasis on teaching students to craft well-supported arguments through the narrative of their films. Working together in teams, students gather regularly to decide the "line of inquiry" they will follow, keeping a firm sight on the impact they want their films to create. They brainstorm questions that will both guide their next interviews and determine the location and purpose of their shooting sessions.

To further track and enhance an individual's learning and development, EVC asks all participating students to keep work portfolios. These include resumes, demonstration reels of their documentaries and examples of both growth over time and their best work. Portfolios might contain interview protocols students have developed that show different styles of questioning or journal writings about what they are learning and experiencing. Students eventually present their portfolios at "roundtables" attended by outsiders as well as EVC staff. "It's a way to assess each person's individual learning, not just the success of the group project," Goodman notes.

Opportunities

In addition to the daily activities involved in video production, EVC's assessment process offers students valuable "real-world" experience. It begins with early screenings of rough cuts that allow young filmmakers to test the impact of their work on their intended audiences. After showing his International Criminal Court

video to other high school students, César Guerra notes, "It's very much a good way to do it, to have other people criticize it. Because once you get involved in a project you get used to what you get. But after you bring in someone new, it's like, 'Okay, you're wrong on that.' So it's kind of good."

After revisions based on their rough-cut showings, students present their work at a public screening followed by an intense question and answer session. Attended by film and other professionals in related fields, peers, teachers and family members, such screenings celebrate and recognize the young people's efforts and contributions to the community. They also apply real-world standards to students' work and help students build a network of professionals to support them in future career and education choices.

The Center's staff and alumni association also serve as a continuing resource for the former workshop participants who often solicit advice, contacts and references. Center staff connects former students with job opportunities and invites them back to present their work. In July 2001, EVC students from last semester's workshop, as well as alumni from ten years ago, came together to screen and discuss their work at an Open Society Institute meeting on youth media and community organizing.

An ironic measure of adults' growing respect for EVC's students is the resistance young filmmakers face in the field as they pursue their interviews. "They had a really hard time getting interviews with the police," Goodman says. "Even when it's for high school kids, police don't want to be on videotape." New York City's Board of Education and various school district personnel were also suspicious of "kids with cameras asking questions," when students made an earlier documentary about inequities in school funding and resources.

Whatever the context, Goodman remarks, "the kids get treated like any other journalists." As much as any other, that fact points to EVC's strikingly successful double mission: to capitalize on young people's idealism and in the process to educate several generations about things they could only learn from each other.

SOUTHEAST ALASKA GUIDANCE ASSOCIATION

JUNEAU, ALASKA

Connecting How Young People Learn to How They Live

Youth conservation corps — growing out of the powerful and poignant experience of the Civilian Conservation Corps during the great depression — have always seamlessly joined a focus on individuals and the environment. Increasingly, this powerful model is being turned to challenges of urban and rural communities — housing, economics, human services and the like. The result: Organizations like the Southeast Alaska Guidance Association, where young people with few job opportunities and few supports become a force for building physical infrastructure, preserving the environment and strengthening community pride.

Long known for the bounty of its natural resources and pristine wilderness areas, Southeast Alaska is picturesque, rugged and remote. It can also be a tough place to grow up — 60 percent of Alaska’s Native American high school students drop out of school, 16 percent of young people live in working poor families and rates of juvenile crime are on the rise.

Those young people growing up in rural areas have few recreational opportunities — and far fewer opportunities to contribute to their communities. Although they are surrounded by dense wilderness, most rural youth have limited knowledge of environmental issues and have spent little time pursuing outdoor recreational activities.

Founded in 1985, the Southeast Alaska Guidance Association (SAGA) capitalizes on the region’s rich outdoor opportunities, offering young people — many of them school dropouts — the opportunity to learn

wilderness skills, complete their educations and give back to local communities. “We lead the nation in so many negative statistics related to youth,” says SAGA founder and director Joe Parrish. “Yet there’s no environment like this in the world in terms of providing a rich outdoor experience for young people.”

And despite the troubling statistics, SAGA participants are communicating a subtle but powerful message: Young people are able contributors, capable of overcoming obstacles and serving as role models in the community.

EVIDENCE OF IMPACT

It’s hard to doubt that youth are contributors after looking at the sheer scale of what young people have accomplished through SAGA. Over the past 16 years, SAGA’s participants have been actively engaged throughout the region and the state — building trails in remote wilderness areas, cleaning up campgrounds, constructing homes for low-income Alaskan Native families and engaging in a range of service activities within local communities. In 2001 alone, SAGA participants completed projects in 18 Alaskan communities, including eight miles of new trail construction, 16 miles of trail maintenance, 75 miles of brush clearing on roads, 50 acres of wetland revegetation, three miles of stream restoration and the building of 15 bridges. They built houses, made year-long commitments to do

Conserving
Threatened
Environments

drug prevention work in public schools and tutored numerous young people through SAGA's programs.

- The Serve Alaska Youth Corps (SAYC) engages more than a hundred young people each year in performing a variety of service projects throughout Alaska. Projects range from improving trails and wildlife habitat to building playgrounds, tutoring children and working with senior citizens. During the program, corps members also work toward per-

sonal, career and educational goals, including completing, if necessary, their GEDs, interning with a local organization or taking part in vocational training. Each is paid the state minimum wage of \$5.65 per hour, whether working or attending school.

- SAGA's Eagle Valley Center in Juneau serves as a statewide training center for youth and adults, offering wilderness and sea kayaking courses, a ropes course and retreat facilities.

SOUTHEAST ALASKA GUIDANCE ASSOCIATION: HISTORY AND CONTEXT

SAGA evolved from Parrish's early experiences as a conservation corps member in California's Sierra Nevadas. A native of Pennsylvania, he moved to Alaska in 1979 to start a Young Adult Conservation Corps. After funding for the national program was cut, Parrish taught at an alternative school before combining his two passions — outdoor education and service — through founding SAGA in 1985. Over the last 16 years, SAGA has grown and evolved to meet the needs of local youth and surrounding communities. Today, it serves as an umbrella organization operating four core programs.

In building SAGA from the ground up, Parrish worked hard to build something unique to Southeast Alaska, targeting that region's rural communities. Parrish is quick to cite the assets of these rural communities. "Even though we're spread out, there exists a real sense of community in the region," says Parrish, adding that federal, state and local organizations have chosen to collaborate with SAGA because of its quality services and rural focus.

But the region also faces serious challenges — isolation, a flagging economy and a large population of at-risk youth chief among them. Comprising a chain of islands, Southeast Alaska has a population of 74,000, most of whom live in five primary towns and numerous smaller villages, many accessible only by boat or plane. Declines in the fishing and timber industries have severely impacted the region's economy, leaving many adults — and youth — with decreasing employment opportunities. Especially hard hit has been the Alaskan Native American population of 12,000.

SAGA tries to respond to the unique realities of rural work, adapting its structure, training and services. In addition to establishing two regional offices in Juneau and Anchorage, SAGA oversees elaborate transportation and communication efforts to service its corps members working in remote locations. It also devotes considerable time to training its Serve Alaska Youth Corps (SAYC) leaders in survival skills specific to the Alaskan wilderness. All SAYC leaders are trained in first aid, and many have Emergency Medical Training certification.

From the start, SAGA has been dedicated to engaging those young people with the fewest opportunities — those who have dropped out or struggle in school, those with a history of contact with the juvenile justice system, or — too often — those with a history of substance abuse.

The program's efforts to reach at-risk youth have drawn resources from juvenile justice authorities, who have witnessed its success in turning young lives around. Also important has been the visible impact of SAGA's efforts. "We've got a lot of concrete accomplishments behind us that benefit the communities we work with in ways they can see and recognize," says Parrish. "When funders give us money, they can be shown a picture of young people doing something that benefits both themselves and the community."

The focus on at-risk youth brings with it some serious challenges. The greatest problem SAGA has faced — and continues to face — is drug and alcohol abuse among participating youth. Roughly 70 percent of all disciplinary action taken through SAGA programs comes in direct reaction to drug and alcohol use, says Parrish, admitting that sometimes program supervisors are "out of their league" and may need to expel a youth or refer him or her to agencies with expertise in those issues.

- Its Rural Outreach Prevention and Education Program places corps members who agree to a one-year commitment in education and drug and alcohol prevention agencies. Over the last two years, SAGA has placed 20 AmeriCorps mem-

Providing
Vital Supports
in Rural
Communities

bers as tutors, mentors and volunteers in Boys and Girls Clubs and within the Sitka and Juneau school systems. In the schools,

corps members provide young people with productive after-school activities during the hours when youth are most at risk of succumbing to negative influences.

- Launched in 1996, SAGA's Young Alaskans Building Affordable Housing (YABAH) program engages 16 young adults, ages 16 to 25, each summer in building a home for a low-income family. YABAH's approach and philosophy is based on the national YouthBuild program, from which it has received financial support and technical assistance. YouthBuild provides job training, education, counseling and leadership opportunities to unemployed and out-of-school young adults through the construction and rehabilitation of affordable housing. True to the YouthBuild profile, most YABAH participants are high school dropouts, many of whom have had run-ins with juvenile authorities. Through the program, they develop valuable work-related skills, get paid to build a home and have the opportunity to continue work toward their high school diplomas. YABAH participants are also required to devote 75 hours to a community service project. Past projects have involved serving the elderly at retirement homes and working with children at local child care centers.

Just as SAGA's activities have expanded to meet identified needs, so have the number of young people who have benefited from its work. Over the past 16 years, more than 2,000 youth have participated in the Serve Alaska Youth Corps. Just in the past year, more than 100 young people carried out a total of 72,500 hours of service work. But numbers don't tell the whole story. SAGA's work is making deep and lasting change in the

communities where it works — change hard to measure in hours and participation figures.

This is illustrated most clearly through the work of young people in the YABAH program. To date, more than 60 youth have completed the program before returning to school, beginning another job or engaging in a service activity, either through a national service program or the military. These young people are building houses in communities where they are very much needed — and, at the same time, they are building community pride.

Building Houses,
Building Pride

In towns such as Sitka, where the demand for low-income housing far exceeds supply, YABAH participants — most of them Alaskan Natives — are highly visible in the community. "It's a victory every time a Native person gets hired on a construction project," says Parrish. "Subtly, in the Native community, there's great pride in the fact that these houses are not being built by Caucasian workers." With roughly a quarter of construction workers being contracted from outside the state, YABAH helps build the local economy while also strengthening a community.

All of this focus on community should not obscure a basic fact — SAGA is as much about youth as about community and conservation. According to Parrish, SAGA's programs focus on teaching young people three things: (1) to show up on time, (2) with everything they need and (3) with a good attitude. "These are foreign concepts to a lot of our kids," he says, adding that such values can be transferred to school life, jobs, relationships and nearly everything young people do.

As evidence of the lasting effect of SAGA's work, many of those who participate in the program continue on as staff

Teaching
Transferable
Skills

members. "We've demonstrated a lot of credibility over the past 16 years," says Parrish, adding that SAGA is highly regarded within local communities. Its positive reputation is reflected in the number of local, state and federal services agencies and nonprofits that collaborate with SAGA in addressing the needs of at-risk youth.

CLOSE-UP

Like many youth conservation corps around the country, SAGA is committed to breaking down the wall between youth development and community development — and doing so each and every day.

SAGA began as a “mom and pop” operation, says Parrish, which has evolved into an organization with a \$2 million annual budget that requires far greater sophistication in terms of funding, staffing, overall coordination and program delivery. Yet despite its growth over time, SAGA remains true to its original mission of “helping young people make the connection between what they learn and how they live.”

Tracing the Action, from Instigation to Impact

Environment as the Base of Action

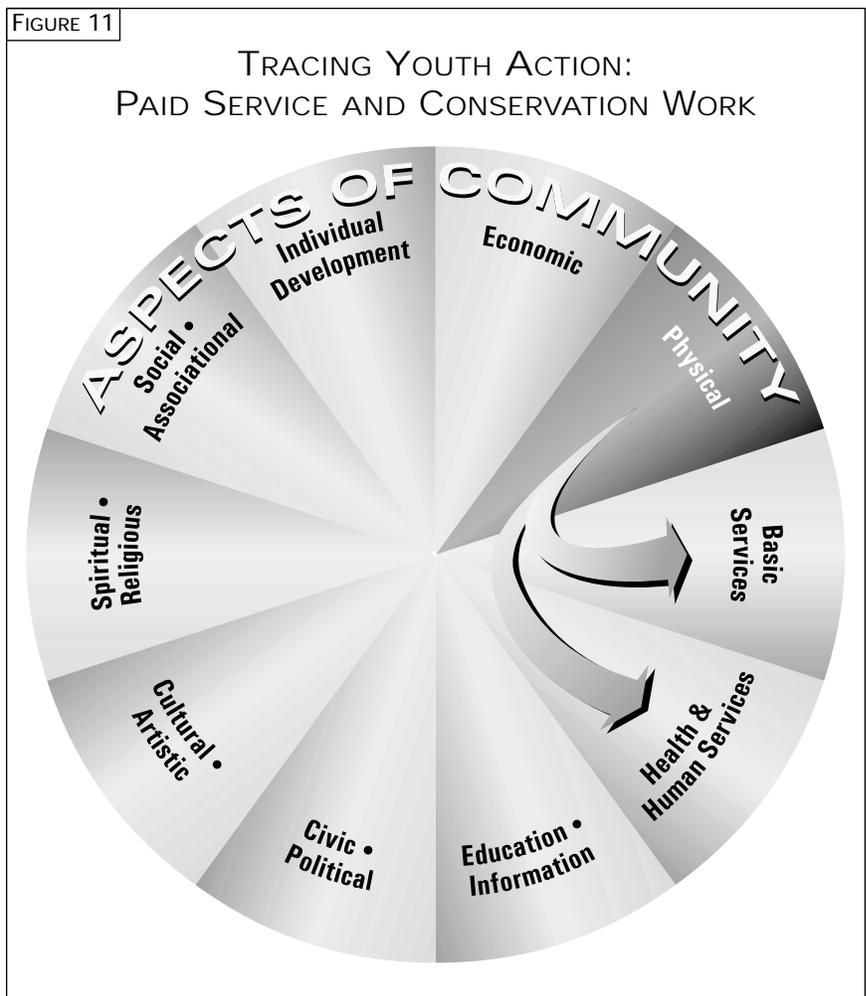
In Alaska, this mission means using the natural environment as the starting point for SAGA’s work. SAGA’s first priority is to get young people out into a healthy environment and surrounding them with healthy, supportive adults. Parrish’s own experiences in the outdoors, and years of watching so many young people thrive in Alaska’s wilds, have convinced him of the transformative nature of outdoor experiences.

But the outdoors is more than just the setting and inspiration for SAGA’s work. The conservation corps model gets young people into the outdoors to engage them in protecting natural places — through trail maintenance, stream bank conservation and the like. In this way, the same remarkable natural settings are both classroom and opportunity for contribution.

Professional Service and Conservation Work as the Type of Action

“It’s a model that’s worked through the decades,” says Parrish, referring to the success of the Civilian Conservation Corps started in the late 1930s and subsequent state and national programs modeled after it. Youth conservation corps around the country offer young people (sometimes high school graduates, sometimes not) summer or year-round employment (often hard physical work in an outdoor setting). Parrish attributes part of SAGA’s appeal to the fact that young people are financially rewarded for their hard work. Participants are paid both for their time working outdoors and in the classroom. “For young people living independently or rural youth, that’s the only way they could participate,” he says. For young people who don’t do well in traditional learning environments, “having a reward like a paycheck means a lot,” he adds.

FIGURE 11



Physical Infrastructure, Environment, and Human Services as the Targets of Action

No longer just bridge builders and trail maintainers, young people involved in conservation corps are increasingly involved in urban projects and those that involve little physical labor — in SAGA's case, tutoring, human service provision and the like. This shift, catapulted by the creation of the Corporation for National Service, has created a vast resource for communities with limited community infrastructure. In SAGA's case, extensive relationships with local services agencies and educational institutions make work on a range of issues possible and effective.

Strategies

Motivation

SAGA graduates provide some of the most valuable advertising for the program, serving an important role in subtly recruiting participants by relating their SAGA experiences to peers. The real draw, for most, is doing something they know will be physically challenging, enable them to see and experience new places, and provide them with modest income and the opportunity to complete their education. SAGA challenges young people physically, intellectually — and emotionally. While they may not always like it, by overcoming challenges they develop greater self-confidence, explore new interests and gain a deeper sense of what they're capable of. "When they're dragging brush in the rain, they're not always great about showing their enthusiasm," says Ariel Greene, an AmeriCorps volunteer working with the program. "But by the end of the summer, their affection [for others] and what they've gained become clear. They all become physically stronger, tougher, with a stronger work ethic."

Capacity

Young people require few skills to enter the program. What they really need to demonstrate "is a willingness to try," says Parrish. "We're looking to see where their heart is and why they're here." With any given SAGA program, there are those that succeed and others who won't make it or drop out and eventually return.

"I was a troubled youth at 15," says D.J. Mazon, now 22 and working with SAGA as an AmeriCorps volunteer. The son of alcoholic parents, in his early teen years Mazon ended up "hanging out with the wrong people and getting in trouble with the law." Referred to SAGA by his probation officer while in his mid-teens, Mazon lasted only a few weeks before quitting the program. The next year, however, he returned, and has been coming back every year since, first as a program participant and recently as a corps leader.

As they develop skills and competencies they didn't have before, young people like Mazon gain greater self-confidence and leadership skills. "I now have knowledge I can give to other young people," says Mazon, explaining the role that "talking circles" play in the program in creating safe places for young people to open up. "Watching them grow is really cool," he adds. Learning to get along with others is another key focus. "We learn how to trust each other," he says. Giving back to the community also has its rewards, says Mazon, recalling a recent incident in which his SAYC group distributed firewood they had acquired through thinning trees to community members in the town of Haines. Townspeople were so grateful they rewarded the group with fresh salmon.

SAGA is aware that for many participants in its programs, the return to their home environment and possible negative influences can counteract even its most successful efforts. To provide youth with ongoing support, SAGA checks in on program graduates a minimum of four times during the year following their participation, working with them to develop a community service project in their home town. Past service projects have included beach cleanup efforts or straightening headstones at a local cemetery. SAGA also helps identify local mentors who are willing to play a role in the lives of its young graduates.

Opportunities

Such program modifications are the direct result of annual strategic planning exercises held among SAGA staff and corps members who have a "tremendous say in what the program looks like," says Parrish, who

openly supports innovation and creative suggestions from those who know the program best: its field staff. Not long ago several corps members presented him with a business plan for a curbside recycling in Juneau. The program was made part of SAGA's strategic plan for the year to come.

The fact that roughly 20 percent of SAGA's participants eventually end up as staff is testimony to the program's appeal and lasting impact. For SAGA staff — as well as for many of those young participants who make it through the program — early experiences of giving back have evolved into a way of life.

MATHARE YOUTH SPORTS ASSOCIATION

NAIROBI, KENYA

Blending Sports and Service, Young People Become Role Models and Reformers

Adults often wonder why the passion and focus that youth bring to the athletic fields rarely makes its way to their school work, their family chores or their community volunteering. The thousands of young people who have joined Mathare Youth Sports Association (MYSA) are a testimony to the fact that the transfer can happen.

One of the largest and poorest slums in Africa, Mathare covers roughly 80 sq. km. around Nairobi, Kenya. Home to several hundred thousand people living mostly in shacks with little or no water or electricity, Mathare's reputation over the years has been that of a very tough place to live — with rampant crime and drug use, high rates of HIV/AIDS infection, few recreational opportunities for young people and a preponderance of easily-preventable diseases stemming from lack of proper sanitation and garbage disposal.

In recent years, however, Mathare has become increasingly well known as the home of some of the region's most accomplished young football (i.e., soccer) players. For more than a decade, MYSA has engaged local youth in sports activities and enlisted their support in carrying out a range of community development activities — from collecting garbage to promoting HIV/AIDS awareness. With upwards of 24,000 members, MYSA is now the biggest youth sport and community service organization in Africa and is largely managed by youth under the age of 16. But MYSA's impact goes well beyond numbers.

EVIDENCE OF IMPACT

The give and take between sports and service has been integral to MYSA's approach since the beginning. An early MYSA motto, "healthy athletes need a healthy environment" reflects its commitment to community service. Participants spend 60 hours per month engaged in service work, which earns them points that are applied to their league standing.

In one of its first forays into the "healthy environment" side of its motto — and one of its most impressive contributions to the community — MYSA has become the informal sanitation infrastructure for much of the surrounding area. At the time MYSA was launched in 1987 there were only a handful of garbage trucks serving Nairobi's population of 2.5 million and they almost never made it to the slums, says MYSA's founder and chair Bob Munro. When its first cleanup efforts took place, MYSA made sure at least one city garbage truck showed up. "When it went to the slums, women started dancing," he recalls. In those days, MYSA

Neighborhood Sanitation

Mathare's a neighborhood that's linked to drugs, alcohol, and everything that's bad...Mathare has a lot of pride in us. [MYSA's] given the community a much better image. Everyone wants to be a part of it. People look at the players as role models.

— Maurice Muteti, one of MYSA's legendary players, now 23 and studying engineering in Ohio

youth carried out weekly cleanups using wheelbarrows, rakes and shovels. In 1988, MYSA acquired two garbage trucks and tractors. Over a dozen youth now serve as truck and tractor drivers, responsible for clearing thousands of tons of garbage each month.

Along with garbage collection and cleanup activities, MYSA has initiated a number of other high-impact service programs. Accomplished MYSA youth leaders receive professional training in HIV/AIDS prevention and then visit local communities to counsel other young people. Since 1995, more than 200 MYSA youth have participated in intensive training courses.

They have since reached more than 100,000 youth with critical information on AIDS prevention.

Over time, young people have taken on a larger and larger number of vital community roles. Since 1997, MYSA has provided lunches and helped improve the jail facilities where street children, many of them from Mathare, are temporarily held in Nairobi while being processed through the justice system. Since 1998, MYSA has been actively replicating its model in Kakuma, a refugee camp in northwestern Kenya, home to 60,000 refugees from eight countries. The program now reaches out to 12,000 refugee youth.

MATHARE YOUTH SPORTS ASSOCIATION: HISTORY AND CONTEXT

In the 1950s Mathare was a rural village on the outskirts of Nairobi. Today it spreads over 80 square kilometers, the city itself having grown rapidly around it. Youth growing up in Mathare “live in some of the worst physical conditions anywhere,” according to Bob Munro, MYSA’s founder and current Chairperson, pointing to the area’s lack of electricity, running water and proper sanitation. “To get past the age of five is a serious achievement,” he adds, citing the prevalence of preventable diseases such as cholera, typhoid and malaria. The area’s worst health problems occur during the rainy season when water contaminated with human waste and garbage flows in and around people’s homes.

Born in Canada, Munro first came to Kenya in the mid-80s as an expert on environmental and resource development issues. On visits to Mathare, he witnessed young people playing with string and paper balls and soon offered them the chance to start a football league. The only hitch was they would also have to get involved in cleanup activities. “I made a deal with them,” says Munro, “if you do something, I’ll do something. It all started with the principle that if you get something from the community, you give something back.”

Young people have played a key role in managing the program since its inception. While Munro introduced the concept, he was careful from the beginning to hand the reins of program ownership over to the youth themselves. “Early on I learned to be late for all events,” says Munro, adding that if he showed up on time, the players would stop what they were doing and ask for his opinion.

How does the community view MYSA’s efforts? Parents are generally thrilled that their sons and daughters have a productive way to spend their free time. The community at large rallies behind the various MYSA teams and events, younger children now have far more positive role models, and older youth gain self-esteem by serving as mentors. “Mathare has a lot of respect for the players,” says MYSA graduate Maurice Muteti, now 23 and attending college in Ohio. For Mathare’s youth, many of whom don’t continue their secondary school educations, MYSA “is the only real opportunity they have” to make something of themselves, he says. The success of MYSA’s teams has meant that many of its players have played in national and international tournaments, experiencing new environments and finding opportunities to engage in professional level play or seek sports scholarships.

An ongoing challenge for MYSA has been controlling its own growth and resisting the temptation to take on more responsibilities than the young people can handle. Financial sustainability was and is a big issue, although matters dramatically improved during the mid-90s when Norwegian and Dutch donors started providing significant funding. Despite growing financial security, however, MYSA youth were then challenged with writing the formal grant reports required by donors. “You can’t expect kids who speak English as their third language to be able to do that kind of reporting,” says Munro, who ended up doing much of it himself. Now, older MYSA graduates coach younger participants in how to respond to donor requests.

MYSA programs yield direct impacts through . . .

- HIV/AIDS prevention and education
- Reaching out to juvenile offenders
- Helping refugee youth
- Documenting life in the community

And in 1998, with funding from the Ford Foundation, more than 30 MYSA boys and girls began documenting life in Mathare through photography and essays, resulting in the publication of a book: *Shoot-back*. The project has helped change internal and external perceptions of the community as merely a depressing slum area.

MYSA has also changed the opportunity landscape for Mathare youth by implementing programs that address some of its own participants' basic needs and challenges. With poverty forcing many talented youth to drop out of school, MYSA has also been challenged to support its participants educationally as well as recreationally. MYSA youth leaders now earn points for their voluntary activities, including AIDS education, coaching and leading cleanups. The best leaders win annual tuition awards paid to their school. In 2000, upwards of 100 MYSA leadership awards were made.

Another challenge was to change prevailing perceptions of the role of young women in Mathare. Traditionally in Kenya only boys played football. MYSA sought to change that as a means of empowering young girls and fostering greater equality between genders. While it took time to train the girls, they now

represent a significant portion of MYSA's participants and play an active role in coaching boys' teams. "The girls now have greater confidence. They're more fit, more proud and don't tolerate any silly words or poor conduct from boys" says Munro. Gender relations go beyond the soccer field, too, as young men and women participating in a MYSA program now meet in small groups to talk about relationships between sexes, what they want in marriage and how to work together.

And, less tangible but no less important, MYSA has significantly increased the communities' social capital. The organization has helped alter community perceptions of what is possible and instilled in community members a sense of pride in local youth. MYSA has also received international recognition for its efforts, including the UNEP Global 500 Award for environmental innovation and achievement, awarded during the 1992 Earth Summit in Brazil. Youth leaders have also provided advice and assistance to youth in poor communities in and outside Kenya — in the Kibera slums in Nairobi, the Kabati District in rural Kitui, and the port town of Assab in Eritrea. MYSA has successfully fostered the development of leadership and management skills among participating youth. And these young leaders are not young adults in their twenties; most of its several hundred volunteer coaches are under 16 years of age.

Social Capital:
Community
Pride and
Leadership

CLOSE-UP

Over the past 14 years, MYSA has grown from an informal effort to get young people involved in cleanup activities by offering them help with their passion — sports — to a far-reaching organization that has engaged more than 30,000 youth since its inception. About 24,000 young people from upwards of 70 communities are on its active roles in more than 80 leagues. This blend of sports and service has clearly worked. MYSA is proof of what can happen when the energy, talents and innate leadership abilities of young people are given the opportunity to take root and grow.

Tracing the Action, from Instigation to Impact

Recreation as the Base of Action

MYSA started out as a simple self-help initiative aimed at integrating enhanced recreational opportunities for local youth with environmental cleanup benefiting the community at large. Over time, it expanded to

address other issues in the community including HIV/AIDS prevention, gender inequality, the educational needs of youth and the plight of street children and refugee youth.

MYSA has intentionally kept its overhead low, relying mostly on youth volunteer workers. Until recently, the organization was run out of one room that served as office, storage room and meeting space. Now, MYSA activities are coordinated from a small rented house. Its staff of 50 is made up largely of volunteer youth. MYSA is now challenged with expanding its organizational infrastructure to accommodate growth. With members in over 70 communities spread over 80 square km, MYSA's one office is too distant for many youth reach. As a result, the organization is exploring ways to decentralize more staff and equipment to its 16 zones. MYSA is also challenged with strengthening the managerial skills of its staff — enabling them to enhance their project management and reporting skills. Assistance is also needed with training MYSA youth leaders who have practical experience but no formal training in how to most effectively communicate their knowledge and skills to local youth.

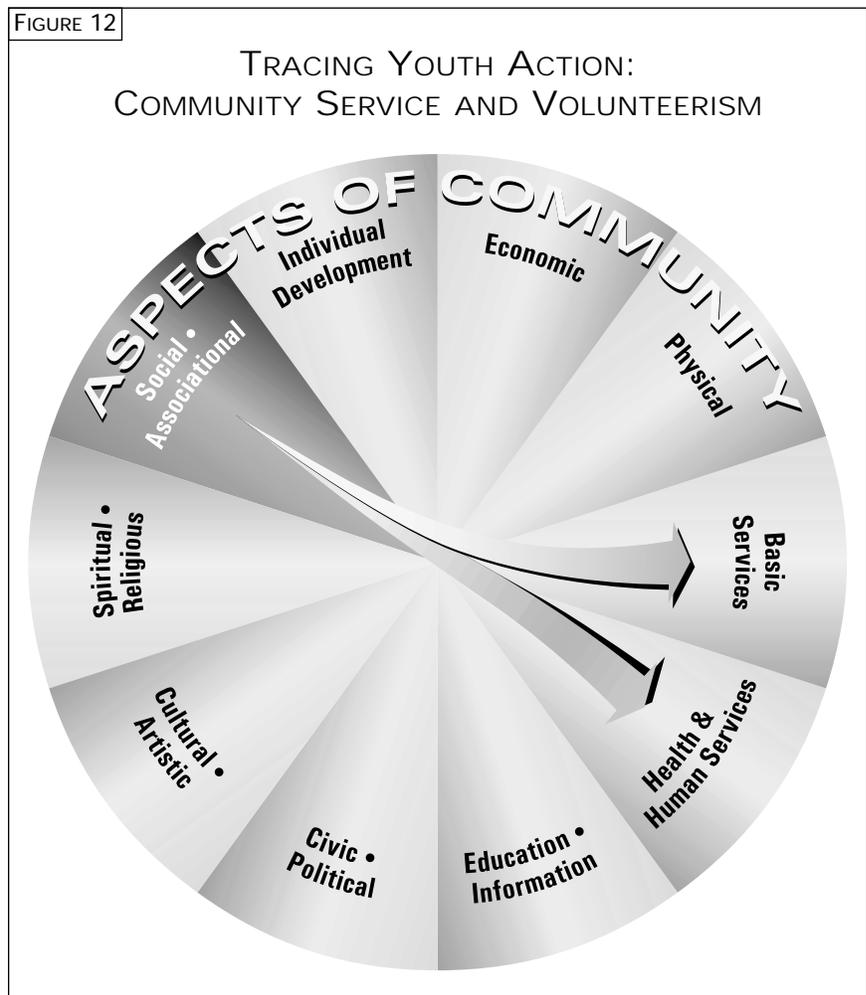
Community Service as the Types of Action

From the beginning, MYSA set out to actively engage youth in the development of their communities, while promoting their own personal and social development. While its initial appeal to local youth centered on playing football, up to 15 percent of participants now join MYSA for other reasons — to coach teams, to participate in HIV/AIDS education, to take part in its theatre program and to serve on organizing committees. Through MYSA, they learn by doing. The program instills in youth the notion that there are no

problems, only solutions. This builds resolve — and hope — in communities where difficulties abound. Rather than sit in a house surrounded by garbage, MYSA youth have proven that they can do something about it — if they work together, says Munro. This then applies to other areas of their lives as well.

Health and Basic Services as the Target of Action

Since its inception, MYSA has contributed substantially to enhancing the health and well-being of community members by building infrastructure and by building knowledge and increasing options. Through its garbage removal activities, HIV/AIDS education efforts, drama and puppetry program, and outreach to street children and refugee youth, MYSA worked to address basic health issues. By engaging young girls in its activities, MYSA has strengthened their self-esteem



and leadership abilities, while altering perceptions within the community of young women's capabilities. The participation of MYSA youth in local, national and international tournaments has broadened the horizons of its players and in many cases, paved their way to new opportunities — either playing at the professional level or yielding scholarship funding for further education.

Strategies

Motivation

As a youth self-help organization, MYSA has capitalized on its greatest resource: young people themselves. By attracting young people to sporting activities, in this case football, MYSA has engaged thousands of youth in a range of supplementary activities benefiting youth and their communities. To enter the program, youth require little more than a strong interest in its various activities and a willingness to work hard. Over time, they develop teamwork and conflict-resolution skills, learn responsibility and can be trained by their peers to assume additional tasks — coaching, record keeping, coordination, training and management — in accordance with their interests.

Capacity

MYSA's strategy of empowering more and more youth to assume leadership roles within the program and surrounding community has allowed the organization to grow over time, continually training younger youth to assume greater levels of responsibility. "After five or six years, we realized that older youth could now serve as role models for younger youth," says Munro.

By relying on open and democratic procedures, MYSA has also enabled a wide range of young people to take an active leadership role in directing its activi-

ties. "Youth make the decisions and feel responsible for making sure they're implemented. That's one of the reasons it [MYSA] works," says Munro. Most recently, MYSA youth have launched a drama and music program to support their other activities.

Opportunities

Leadership opportunities abound. Each league is run by local committees made up of the various teams' coaches and captains. The chairpersons of each committee comprise the MYSA Sports Council, which is responsible for all of its sports programs. A Community Service Council, composed of local youth and community leaders, organize all of MYSA's weekly slum cleanup activities. Both Councils elect several members to an Executive Council, responsible for MYSA's overall management and budget. Currently, a 16-year-old girl heads the organization's Executive Council. The Executive Council meets once each week, beginning with a review of income and expenditures since the last week. All meetings, records and accounts are open to MYSA members, the press and public. Since its inception, MYSA has received pro bono auditing assistance from a major accounting firm.

In expanding its programs and services, MYSA has relied on its own youth leaders to receive training in such areas as HIV/AIDS education and to share their knowledge with peers. Likewise, MYSA has used the popularity of sport to not only engage ever greater numbers of youth in its activities but to create role models within the community.

Asked about future plans, Munro says MYSA's youth are interested in finding ways to share what they've learned with communities facing similar concerns outside Kenya, adding that there's much that wealthier countries like the United States could learn from MYSA's approach.

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APPENDIX A

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APPENDIX B

AUTHOR AND CONTRIBUTOR BACKGROUND

AUTHORS

Joel Tolman coordinates the Forum's work related to youth action, high school reform and effective learning environments. He is a founding board member of Global Youth Connect, a youth-led organization that encourages and supports young human rights activists around the world. He has also served as an advisor to a number of national initiatives related to youth action. Tolman is the author, co-author and editor of publications and articles on youth activism, out-of-school opportunities for young people, human rights education and ethics education.

Karen Pittman is executive director of the Forum and senior vice president of the International Youth Foundation. A sociologist and recognized leader in the youth development field in the United States, Pittman has worked at the Urban Institute, at the Children's Defense Fund (CDF) promoting its adolescent policy agenda, at the Academy for Educational Development where she founded and directed the Center for Youth Development and Policy Research, and as Director of the President's Crime Prevention Council during the Clinton administration. A widely published author, Pittman has written three books and dozens of articles on youth issues and is a regular columnist and public speaker. She has served on numerous boards and panels.

CONTRIBUTORS

What Kids Can Do is a national nonprofit organization founded in 2001. Its commitment is to document the value of young people working with teachers and other adults on projects that combine powerful learning with public purpose for an audience of educators and policy makers, journalists, community members and students. **Barbara Cervone**, president, previously coordinated Walter H. Annenberg's \$500 million "Challenge" to improve the nation's public schools from its inception in January 1994 until June 2000. **Kathleen Cushman** is a journalist who has specialized in education and school reform for more than a decade. Her work has appeared in the *Harvard Education Letter*, *Educational Leadership*, *Phi Delta Kappan*, *Atlantic Monthly* and the *New Yorker*, and she is author or coauthor of a half dozen books. **Lisa Rowley** is a writer, editor and former teacher, working as a documenter and evaluator for the Annenberg Challenge and the Rural School and Community Trust. The What Kids Can Do staff was primarily responsible for the case studies of Educational Video Center, The Food Project and the Philadelphia Student Union, and contributed to the development of the Lubec case study.

Sheila Kinkade, an independent consultant, was until recently communications manager at the International Youth Foundation. Deeply committed to furthering multicultural education, Kinkade is author of two non-fiction children's books — *Children of the Philippines* and *Children of Slovakia*. She is also author of *Travel Smart: Maryland/Delaware*, a local travel guide. A graduate of the Columbia School of Journalism, she has written book reviews, magazine and newspaper articles for a variety of publications, and now works with nonprofit organizations to help “tell their stories.” Kinkade developed the case studies of the Southeast Alaska Guidance Association and Mathare Youth Sports Association.

Jeanie Phillips has been working as a consultant with the Forum since 1999. Her work at the Forum focuses on coding key resources, interviewing leaders of national and local organizations on the topic of youth action, and consulting about information services to support the Forum and its members. Previously, Jeanie consulted for Newsbank, Inc., an online educational service. She is a school library media specialist by training and a full-time mother. Phillips is primarily responsible for the Cambodian Volunteers for Community Development case study.

Sabrina Duque writes for the journal *El Comercio* in Ecuador and has documented Cefocine's work for that publication on several occasions. She graduated with a degree in social communication from Catholic University of Santiago in Guayaquil. While a student, she volunteered at Cefocine. Prior to that, she had her first stint at *El Comercio*, where for a year and a half she contributed to the society, youth, business and policy sections. Duque contributed to the writing and on-the-ground research for the Cefocine case study.



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