

# YouthConnect!

*A Youth-Led Community Service Initiative*

## Advocacy

*As a supplemental resource to PASE's YouthConnect! Manual for Youth-Led Community Service, we offer a series of Profiles on Youth-Led Community Service Projects. The local projects profiled were planned, executed and documented by the staff and young people involved with the YouthConnect! Initiative in 2003-2004. The MONY Foundation and the AOL-Time Warner Foundation supported this collaborative initiative.*

*The PASE Profiles of Youth-Led Community Service Series provides concrete examples of youth-led projects in seven different categories: Intergenerational Service, Youth Councils, Environmental Stewardship, Peer Education, Arts- and Media-Based Service, Advocacy, and Service Learning. Of course, there are other categories of community service but these have been selected to illustrate to the reader the breadth and scope of this youth development modality.*

project profiles



P A S E



PARTNERSHIP FOR AFTER SCHOOL EDUCATION

# advocacy

*“I was tired of being a token youth...of not really having power. I wanted to do more of my own thing, not just be given a skeleton of what to do and be in charge of making it happen. Making flyers gets tired.”*

*--Robert Foxx, Program Coordinator, Youth Organizers United*

## WHAT IS ADVOCACY COMMUNITY SERVICE?

Advocacy is generally synonymous with community organizing and lobbying; therefore, an after-school program focused on advocacy generally entails youth researching an issue, conducting problem and stakeholder analysis, developing a strategy (e.g., rallies, a press conference, a petition drive), and organizing a series of activities both within and outside the community. In order to build community support and address the problems as well as the root causes, groups often conduct ongoing outreach and education.

Advocacy is fundamentally different from traditional community service because its primary goal is systemic change—the struggle to address societal issues of equity. This can be perceived as a risky activity for nonprofits and even riskier if the advocacy work is youth-led. “It’s a mutual give and take when you are working with young people as the organizers,” notes Ana Maria Archila, Executive Director of the Latin American Integration Center (LAIC).

Community organizations that focus their programming around youth-led advocacy afford youth great power in determining policy and program agendas and in developing sustained, sophisticated political campaigns. Staffs supervising youth-led campaigns often grapple with ways to support, structure, and link the efforts of the young people with the broader organizing efforts of adult-led advocacy mechanisms like task forces.

## WHY CHOOSE ADVOCACY AS A COMMUNITY SERVICE MODALITY?

Advocacy enables young people to develop their own voice and consciously take an active role in civic participation both as peer mentors in schools and community-based organizations and as advocates on the local, state, and federal levels of government. “I learn more about myself working at LAIC than I do in the classroom. I find myself constantly being challenged to grow,” says Santiago Rodriguez, a youth member of LAIC, a program that advocates for and serves Latino immigrants, especially young people.

Developing an Advocacy initiative as a medium for youth development can also be useful for organizations that are not advocacy focused. “Advocacy provides young people with a chance and opportunity to be heard, to realize their power as young members of society and engage in the creation of their future by exercising and actively defending their human and civil rights,” says Archila.

## THE FOLLOWING PROJECT PROFILES OFFER CONCRETE ILLUSTRATIONS FOR HOW ADVOCACY-BASED COMMUNITY SERVICE CAN HELP DEVELOP THESE PARTICULAR DEVELOPMENTAL ASSETS\* AND SKILLS IN YOUTH:

**Bonding to School:** Young people can play a primary role in improving their own educational quality and learn important skills at the same time.

**Personal Power:** Young people learn that their ideas, voices, and opinions matter and that they have an important contribution to make to their communities.

**Planning and Decision Making:** Young people gain confidence in their abilities to accomplish a variety of tasks, including public speaking, organizing, conducting meetings, and planning.

**Equality and Social Justice:** Youth take action on issues that jeopardize equality.

## PROJECT PROFILE

### YOUTH ORGANIZERS UNITED'S (YOU) "HIT THE SCHOOLS" INITIATIVE

#### DESCRIPTION:

Hit The Schools is a youth-conceived campaign to improve HIV and related sexual and reproductive health education in New York City's public high schools.

#### GOALS:

1. To achieve direct improvements in HIV education offered at ten high schools, through in-school organizing and advocacy
2. To work in partnership with adult HIV/AIDS and reproductive health advocates in developing advocacy for HIV/AIDS education improvements throughout New York City's public school system

#### ACTIVITIES:

Youth Organizers United is a new nonprofit organization, unique because it is fully youth-owned and operated. In order to achieve direct improvements in HIV education, four- to five-person teams of part-time youth organizers, ages 14-25, visited ten New York City public high schools between November 2002 and June 2003. YOU had already documented that many of these high schools were not providing comprehensive HIV education in accordance with city-wide mandates adopted in 1992. Among other things, these mandates specify that every high school student should receive six HIV/AIDS lessons per year and have access to condoms and other sexual/reproductive health education materials and resources.

Before doing their outreach, YOU's youth organizers prepared by doing situational role-plays. Then, at each high school (as well as other youth hangouts including malls and the piers), the youth organizers approached students and educated them about the HIV education mandates, questioned them about their experiences with HIV education in their own high school, and asked those who said they weren't receiving all the elements of the City's program to sign a petition protesting that fact. By June, YOU had collected 2,897 student signatures. Now, YOU is in the process of scheduling meetings with administrators of the targeted schools to present the petitions, discuss specific problems with their HIV/AIDS education programs, and offer YOU's assistance to make them better.

At the same time as YOU's Youth Organizers were visiting the ten high schools, YOU's staff leaders began attending meetings of the New York AIDS Coalition Task Force on HIV Prevention, which was convened partly at YOU's request. YOU worked with the Task Force to coordinate the release of a final report about the findings from its 2001 survey of high school students and presented this report to a variety of public officials.

During the summer, YOU's Executive Director Nairobi Shellow met with staff from City Council Speaker Gifford Miller's office who promised that the Speaker would organize public hearings about the issue. YOU is very excited by this development, which could bring the issue into a much brighter public spotlight.

When asked to reflect on the activities the youth organizers engaged in over the course of the

campaign thus far, Robert Foxx, Program Coordinator, said: “We had to get very organized for this project. Some of us had to lose our shyness about speaking in front of and reaching out to strangers about these issues. We also had to really brush up on what the issues are and what the mandates say. We had to develop a petition without any real prior experience doing a large petition drive, and we had to make sure it said exactly what we wanted it to say. We have had to work in close partnerships with adults, including some we don’t particularly like or agree with. Finally, we have had to learn how to think long-term about what we’re trying to do, and constantly go back to see how we’ve done.”

## **CHALLENGES AND SUCCESSES:**

At the same time that it was attempting to mount the Hit The Schools initiative, as a relatively new and growing nonprofit organization, YOU was faced with the need to become independent of its fiscal sponsor. YOU’s philosophy has been to pay its staff for the serious work that they do because it helps to give youth a sense of responsibility. Unfortunately, in order to become a nonprofit, YOU’s staff (young people) had to go off payroll for several months in order to save money for a cash reserve. Youth organizers demonstrated their commitment to this project by continuing to work through that time period as volunteers.

## **OUTCOMES:**

In YOU’s work plan, youth proposed that 2,500 young people would sign their petition and learn more about the issue. To date, they have collected almost 3,000 signatures.

This initiative has given YOU the chance to build relationships with political officials, especially in the City Council, where it needs to have the most support in order to get special public hearings scheduled.

Public awareness of the issue has increased, both among young people and adults. Assemblyman Scott Stringer referred to YOU in his own assessment of health education in public schools across New York State. In fact, Robert Foxx was invited to share the podium at a recent press conference with Assemblyman Stringer.

## PROJECT PROFILE

### LATIN AMERICAN INTEGRATION CENTER'S (LAIC) "YOUTH EMPOWERMENT ACTIVISTS!" PROGRAM

#### DESCRIPTION:

Youth Empowerment Activists! (YEA!) is a youth-led advocacy campaign in support of The Development, Relief, and Education Relief for Alien Minors (D.R.E.A.M.) Act, Student Adjustment Act, and educational reform.

#### GOALS:

1. To defend all young people's right to an adequate and equitable education
2. To raise awareness about the soaring high school drop-out rate among English Language Learners (ELLs) in the public school system of New York City

#### ACTIVITIES:

YEA! was begun in the summer of 2002 by immigrant youth who were receiving language, legal, and other social services from LAIC and who wanted to take on a more vocal leadership role in the organization's advocacy work. Before the youth organizers selected and initiated campaign work, the staff engaged the group of twenty youth in two primary activities. 1) Arts & Advocacy: Youth participants attended a series of workshops to bring out key issues facing young people while simultaneously developing their public speaking and leadership skills; and 2) Advocacy Exposure and Education: Staff asked activists and policy experts from a variety of fields to lead workshops with the youth on topics including the rights of parents and students in the New York City Public School System, youth worker rights, anti-bias/discrimination work, voter rights, and the U.S. political structure and system.

From these creative sessions and workshops, a number of issues began to surface and were discussed. Among them was a recurring fear and anxiety about not being able to go to college because of ineligibility for in-state tuition fees, scholarships, and all forms of financial aid.

After a formal consensus session (in which each teen voiced his or her preferred issue on which to focus), the group selected the issue of immigrant access to higher education. The teens had already become aware of the Student Adjustment/D.R.E.A.M. Acts (pending federal legislation, these acts would allow some currently undocumented students who fit certain criteria to change their legalization status thereby gaining access to higher education) through previous training by LAIC staff. Therefore, once they decided on their issue, a natural focus of their campaign became getting this act passed by the House and Senate.

Working with staff from LAIC, the youth began attending meetings, taking notes, sharing and compiling information and strategizing alongside agency members of The New York State D.R.E.A.M. Act Task Force (via the New York Immigration Coalition) on ways to raise awareness and support. "Being part of LAIC and The New York State D.R.E.A.M. Act Task Force fills me with hope. I believe that working together we can make a difference," says Keith Chen, youth member of LAIC.

The youth attended over twenty strategic meetings to plan three citywide collaborative

# advocacy

events. When the youth discussed the events' details they felt it important that the young people of New York City have the platform after the politicians were done as a place to showcase their poetic works and practice their public-speaking skills among their peers.

YEA!'s youth organizers also participated in a number of other activities as part of their advocacy work. They went on legislative visits to their representatives urging their support and have carefully followed the legislation through the papers, online, and through information provided via members of the Task Force. YEA! performed street theatre alongside participating groups, testified before the City Council at City Hall, and has continued to expand and formulate new and creative approaches to aid in their advocacy until this legislation is passed.

The youth created their own education stories, shared them, and one youth, Barbara, presented her story to the City Council Hearing on the D.R.E.A.M. Act. The members of the City Council were so moved by her story that they unanimously agreed to support The D.R.E.A.M. Act and Student Adjustment Acts immediately following her testimony. A prominent councilman told Barbara, "I'm sure glad you're not in politics: We would all have to become more articulate, better public speakers to sit next to you."

One of the most important activities undertaken by YEA! was the initiation of a nationwide petition campaign to be delivered to President Bush. Their goal was to collect 50,000 signatures for New York City and at least a half-million nationally. A local union agreed to cover printing the petition copies. "Getting out there, meeting the community and signing petitions gives hope of a better future, not just to my efforts and attempts at making something of myself, but to the people who need the most help," remarked Olinda Tavarez, a youth member of YEA!.

Throughout the petition work the youth continued to conduct research and follow the progress of the bills. They soon discovered how difficult it can be to follow legislation that is not highly publicized. "How does the average U.S. citizen know what governing laws are passed while they're at work?" questioned a YEA! youth member. As a result of this discovery, the youth sought assistance and located two policy organizations in Washington D.C., The Center for Community Change and The National Immigration Law Council (NILC) that were able to provide continual clear updates on The D.R.E.A.M. Act and the Student Adjustment Act.

To escalate the campaign, LAIC created a core group of seven youth advocates who gave workshops about The D.R.E.A.M. Act and the crisis in the public school system and the ways in which immigrant youth, particularly ELL's, are being affected. These workshops, created and facilitated by youth, were delivered to community members at LAIC's centers in Queens and Staten Island, local PTAs, churches, and community centers.

Other ongoing activities include conducting research among students and parents (surveys/interviews) about the high school dropout rate/ illegal discharge and language access in NYC. Through online research, youth continue to locate useful information for students and parents about the protection of their rights.

Supplemental LAIC programming to the YEA! program included the engagement of seven youth participants in a peer mentoring program in which they built English language skills and literacy by mentoring other Spanish-speaking students/parents and community members through writing workshops and reading groups.

Some of the original founding members have continued with YEA! and worked with staff to recruit new youth organizers from their schools, the local community, and other youth organ-

izations. Program recruitment was through flyers, word-of-mouth, website, e-mail, and press releases (in Spanish and English newspapers). Word-of-mouth outreach to friends and family has proven to be the most successful approach to both youth recruitment and retention (the personal ties strengthen youths' motivation to stay in the program).

## **CHALLENGES AND SUCCESSES:**

LAIC's staff and youth confronted issues of access while trying to gather information from local community centers and schools. On two occasions youth were blocked by security guards and asked to leave. "When they didn't agree to let us in I found it difficult to convince them of our perspective. Knowing what the right thing to say is in those situations can be difficult," says Julieta Pina, one of LAIC's youth leaders. Actions such as these empowered the youth to re-think and develop sound approaches for how to gain the access they needed to reach their goals.

Youth members of YEA! also confronted political opposition while attempting to suggest to certain members of Congress that supporting equal access to higher education was in their best interest. The staff members of the LAIC, who accompanied the four youth on the legislative visit, discovered the youth were more outraged than discouraged and decided that external pressure was necessary. "How can an elected representative, in an immigrant community, not support a bill that would open the doors to higher education for community members like me?" asked Barbara S., an undocumented high school student and member of YEA!

## **OUTCOMES:**

Three school administrators, three teachers, six parents, and nine youth met at the International High School in Queens to discuss access to an appropriate and equitable education for immigrant children. Information on youth rights in education was distributed to those in attendance.

Reaching over sixty community members, youth advocates conducted seven workshops at LAIC on topics such as "Youth Advocating for Youth" and "The Rights and Responsibilities of Students and Parents in NYC's Public Education System."

Working in collaboration with immigrant rights organizations around New York City, YEA! held three large D.R.E.A.M. Act events in Queens and Manhattan with 500 participants, gaining national media exposure and public political allies.

Youth made three legislative visits in the hopes of getting their representatives to sign on as supporters of the legislation.

So far, LAIC has collected over 2,000 signatures for the Coalition's petition in support of the proposed legislation.

Through the connections established at the policy organizations in D.C., LAIC and The New York State D.R.E.A.M. Act Task Force became aware of a 3-day Back to School Event created as a national effort to connect members of Congress with the people directly affected by the legislation, undocumented immigrant youth. Organizations across the country sent youth to shadow their members of Congress at the beginning of September, 2003. LAIC's youth were the only youth representing New York City.

***Narrative contributions for the above profiles were made by the following youth practitioners:  
Jesse Taylor & Ana Maria Archila (LAIC), Robert Foxx & Nairobi Shellow (Y.O.U.)***