

# YouthConnect!

*A Youth-Led Community Service Initiative*

## *Intergenerational Service*

*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.*



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*"I was a little hesitant at first to work with the seniors. I wasn't sure what to say to them, and I was scared that they weren't going to like working with teenagers. I was wrong. I feel really good after visiting with them. You can tell they like it when we come because they're always smiling and saying how good it is to see us."*

*--17-year-old youth participant, VISIONS' Senior Speak Out Program*

## WHAT IS INTERGENERATIONAL SERVICE?

One of the most beautiful and powerful things about intergenerational activities is its reciprocal nature: youth serve seniors and seniors serve youth. By building collaborative relationships, Intergenerational Service facilitates young and old people learning about different generations, breaking down barriers between age groups, and eliminating stereotypes. Whether the activity is basket making or participating in open forums and discussions or offering home-bound elderly companionship or assisting with errands and shopping, Intergenerational Service offers these two often marginalized and underserved populations opportunities for meaningful interaction.

Young people involved in Intergenerational Service need to be trained and supported (and seniors need to be oriented and given guidelines) so that they can work with each other in safe, non-threatening, and meaningful ways. Because of prevalent stereotypes, frequent physical differences, and safety concerns, this form of service is challenging and not to be engaged in casually.

## WHY CHOOSE INTERGENERATIONAL SERVICE AS A COMMUNITY SERVICE MODALITY?

Intergenerational Service creates awareness and sensitivity to age-based (and often class and ethnic/racial) differences, and provides rich learning opportunities for both age groups. By offering companionship and assistance to seniors, youth assume a role of critical importance in the lives of someone outside of their family; this can be a wonderful opportunity for personal, professional, and leadership development. By providing comforting guidance, seniors can be mentors, friends, confidants, and better neighbors.

Intergenerational programming reinforces holistic youth development in a variety of ways. It allows young people to build relationships with seniors who provide guidance and knowledge to youth by sharing life experiences; similarly youth provide a meaningful and non-threatening connection to the realities of growing up in the current generation. Intergenerational programming encourages youth to become advocates for the elderly and offers youth the opportunity to see the positive impact they can have in another person's life.

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

**Adult Role Models:** Participants have exposure to mature adults.

**Caring:** Youth demonstrate empathy and caring when working with seniors and develop new levels of appreciation for the elderly population as a whole.

**Responsibility:** Once placed, teens make a commitment to the seniors and by doing so raise their level of responsibility. This instills an increased level of integrity and professionalism in youth.

**Cultural Competence:** Stereotypes are challenged by youths working with people of an older generation.

**Interpersonal Competence:** Youth develop communication skills as well as empathy and friendship skills.

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## PROJECT PROFILE

### VISIONS/SERVICES FOR THE BLIND AND VISUALLY IMPAIRED'S "SENIOR SPEAK OUT"

#### DESCRIPTION:

Blind/visually-impaired youth joined sighted youth to plan and lead recreational and social activities with blind/visually-impaired seniors.

#### GOALS:

1. To provide blind/visually-impaired teens the opportunity to become leaders and volunteers
2. To create opportunities for blind/visually-impaired youth to positively interact with sighted peers

#### ACTIVITIES:

Weekly seminars, titled "Senior Speak Out," include guest speakers on topics of interest to seniors and offer an opportunity for socializing, volunteer services, and a hot evening meal. Senior Speak Out currently has over 90 blind seniors enrolled.

Originally, the VISIONS' Intergenerational Volunteer Program, which consisted of sighted youth volunteers, assisted with Senior Speak Out. In an effort to develop meaningful community service opportunities for blind youth, VISIONS expanded the existing program. They recruited blind youth to work alongside the sighted youth, thereby offering blind youth a leadership development and community service opportunity in an environment that is adapted to their special needs.

By working with seniors who are blind, the blind youth have exposure to mature people who have experienced being blind and have grown up blind. The seniors serve as mentors for the blind youth, particularly for those who may be having difficulty adjusting to their

blindness. And the youth serve as companions to the seniors, many of whom have been isolated and need social and recreational activities.

At the start of the program, VISIONS staff recruited three blind young people to volunteer on a monthly basis at Senior Speak Out. The youth attended an initial training and orientation to prepare them to work with the seniors. Training activities focused on breaking down barriers and stereotypes. Activities included role-playing, cultural and disability awareness exercises, and a quiz on "Who are the elderly?"

Once trained and oriented to working with the seniors, youth attended their first of four Senior Speak Out meetings. Youth introduced themselves to the seniors and discussed the goals of the project. Some were anxious about introducing themselves because they'd had little experi-

*"I feel like I'm giving back to the seniors. They have given up so much for us. It's funny how we treat the elderly in our society. I feel like most people don't want to be bothered with them. They see them as a burden."*

*--C.W., 17, Youth Participant*

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ence working with seniors and were unsure how the seniors would react. But the seniors embraced the idea of being surrounded by the youthful volunteers. The blind youth transitioned well into the program. Not only did they volunteer alongside the sighted teens in assisting the seniors with their meals,

*“Some of my friends have teased me about working with the seniors but I know they are the ones that are missing out. I have been learning so much from them. And I think they’ve been learning from me too. I’ve realized that the seniors that I have been spending time with have so much to share if only there is someone to listen. I am there to listen.”*

*--M.J., 18, Youth Participant*

but they also took time to get to know the seniors during mealtime. The lines of communication continued to open and strengthen between the youth and seniors.

## CHALLENGES AND SUCCESSES:

While the interactions between youth and seniors were positive, there still were obstacles to overcome. One of the biggest challenges faced by staff and youth was the actual amount of time the volunteers had to interact with the seniors during Senior Speak Out. Because of transportation and scheduling of classes for seniors at the resi-

*“It is a wonderful thing that these students are doing. I get energy from them. I became blind late in life...in a way they have been teaching me how to cope with my vision loss.”*

*--V.H., 79, Senior Participant*

dence, there was not as much time allotted as needed. However, the blind youth introduced the idea of a “game hour” that would allow youth and seniors to spend more quality time together while enjoying games adapted for people with vision loss. The youth recruited seven seniors to participate during “game hour” and planned monthly sessions to coincide with Senior Speak Out. (Other seniors also ended up participating.) The additional time spent together proved to be beneficial. Both youth and seniors agreed that the “game hour” enabled them to get to know each other better and form closer relationships.

*“I don’t get out of the house much. Senior Speak Out has given me a chance to socialize again. I enjoy the youthful spirit of our young volunteers.”*

*--B.B., 82, Senior Participant*

Along with assisting at Senior Speak Out and “game hour,” youth attended group discussion sessions focused around their experience with the seniors.

A written survey was distributed to both the youth volunteers and senior partici-

pants at the completion of the program. Staff and youth participants also gathered informal feedback through group discussions and personal conversations with the seniors.

## OUTCOMES:

ü Intergenerational experiences occurred and lines of communication were built between seven seniors and thirteen teens (blind and sighted).

Barriers surrounding people with disabilities were broken down, strengthening both blind youth and elder relationships as well as blind and sighted youth relationships.

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## PROJECT PROFILE

### PROJECT REACH YOUTH'S (PRY) "PROJECT TOUCH"

#### DESCRIPTION:

Project Touch is an intergenerational community service group which connects neighborhood youth to senior centers and elderly clients so that they can come together in a variety of activities including meal sharing and shopping.

#### GOALS:

1. To provide youth an opportunity to develop their sense of responsibility to the community
2. To build bridges between teenagers and senior citizens while eliminating stereotypes and encouraging an understanding, mutually supportive relationship
3. To minimize the isolation experienced by senior citizens through the companion of a youth partner who provides assistance with the seniors' daily needs

#### ACTIVITIES:

Founded in 1985, Project Touch pairs low-income youth with senior citizens of Brooklyn. Teens provide shopping, escort services, light housekeeping, and companionship to frail, homebound, elderly clients. Both youth and seniors benefit from this relationship.

Twenty-two youth participate in Project Touch. The screening process is comprehensive. Youth complete an application and are interviewed, answering questions, such as: Why are you interested in the program? What is your (related) job experience? What is your commitment level to the program? What skills can you offer (to the seniors)? And, what are any other (potentially conflicting) commitments you have? As a job-preparedness opportunity, staff tries to interview all applicants. The interviewers ask in-depth questions so that staff can gauge each youth's maturity, commitment, and interpersonal skills. Lastly, staff checks references for each candidate.

Youth are required to submit timesheets logging their time spent with the seniors; seniors (and/or the supervising staff from senior centers) sign youths' timesheets and write comments (for review by the program coordinator) to ensure hours logged, punctuality, and quality of interaction. The program also has published various program materials including Work Rules, a (teen) Job Description, Guidelines for Individual Companionship and Shopping that they distribute and refer to with the teen participants. The youth are also rewarded for their efforts by receiving a small stipend for their participation.

Because the program is well-respected and institutionalized, program staff draw from pre-established relationships with senior centers and receive referrals or requests for specialized activities such as a pre-Thanksgiving dinner or help with talent show preparations. Caseworkers or managers from senior centers complete application forms that outline the needs of their clients. Once the senior client and youth have been "matched up," the referring caseworker and the Touch Program Coordinator maintain regular contact to monitor the relationship. If a senior wants to report a problem with behavior or punctuality, he or she contacts

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the caseworker who then relays the information to program staff.

Before receiving their “assignments,” (assisting seniors in shopping at a local supermarket; visiting an individual homebound senior; and/or going to senior homes to participate in recreational facility-based activities), youth participate in training provided by program staff. Each introductory workshop lasts about two hours and addresses some of the issues that youth face over the course of the program, such as dealing with age discrimination and bias as well as health issues for seniors. For example, one of the first training sessions dealt with ageism, stereotyping, and negative attitudes felt towards the elderly. It also reviewed issues such as physical and quality of life changes among the elderly and statistics on suicide among the aged. During weekly discussions about intergenerational communication, students were asked to share their thoughts on a variety of issues relevant to elderly populations, identifying possible “barrier” and “breakthrough” moments in interacting with this population. Students learned the importance of active listening, making positive “I” statements as opposed to negative “you” statements, and the importance of non-verbal communication.

Students also visited nursing homes and adult day-care facilities during their summer training/orientation period. At one center, the young people and the elderly worked together to make baskets in a Native American art tradition. Also, the nature of the activity allowed for cultural learning, the development of teamwork and ample opportunity for conversation.

In addition to the creative arts project, participants “practiced shopping” in preparation for their more extended experience shopping for and with the elderly during the fall. Many of the youth learned first-hand the importance of specific clear communication during this activity. Because of the lack of specificity (of the lists they were given by volunteers and their failure to ask clarifying questions), many teens purchased the wrong items for the volunteer residents and had to return several items to stores. Others spent more than what was allotted.

During the school year, teens were placed at least once a week in a recurring intergenerational activity. The program met weekly to receive ongoing training and support. During these sessions the teens worked directly with the Program Coordinator, a Group Worker and a Social Worker to discuss feelings, challenges, and successes.

## **CHALLENGES AND SUCCESSES:**

Issues that arose over the course of the year included grief and loss and how to advocate and maintain appropriate boundaries with the senior clients. Staff used games and interactive exercises to explore and develop empathy for the elderly experience. However, understanding mortality from the senior’s perspective was only one side of the challenge; teens often regarded seniors as “grandparents” and had to process their own feelings related to the health of the seniors they worked with. Another challenge that arose was how to build relationships by generating new conversation topics (because of Alzheimers and other possible characteristics of the elderly, conversations can have a repetitive nature).

“Students used to discuss their interactions with seniors as a bit challenging because they did not know how to always communicate with them, but they are now constantly expressing how much easier it is for them,” says Vagnes de la Rosa, Director of Educational Services at Teen Services at PRY.

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## OUTCOMES:

Sixteen youth maintained weekly contact with their senior clients. Most forged and maintained a long-term relationship.

The number of youth involved in the program as well as seniors receiving services has grown steadily. At its peak, Project Touch had approximately 28 youth participants and 200 senior clients.

Weekly services were provided to an average of 100 (senior) clients living at Senior Facilities or receiving services from Senior Centers (arts, recreational, and social activities); five to ten clients at a local hospital (friendly visits); seven home-bound clients (assistance with shopping and household tasks like reading the mail and escorting to appointments); and four clients who participate in a van-based shopping excursion to a local shopping center (assistance with the shopping).

One-time holiday-based activities, including meal-sharing, were coordinated with approximately 150 seniors and involved all program youth participants.

A total of 12 Senior Service Providers collaborated with Project Touch. As staff observed the youth participate in group activities, they noticed an improvement in their behavior and their disposition towards each other. One of the interesting dynamics was that interacting with seniors helped youth learn to accept different kinds of people and improved their interpersonal and communication skills in general.

project profiles

***Narrative contributions for the above profiles were made by the following youth practitioners:  
Amanda Slattery (VISIONS), Maricela Brea, Vagnes de la Rosa & Alphonso Saville (PRY)***