

Youth Organizing in the Northwest

Today's leaders

by Maya Muir

“Young people are often scape-goated in this society,” says Laura Timmy, administrative director of Seattle Young People’s Project (SYPP). “They’re blamed for violence, drug-use, and teen pregnancy, but they aren’t given a voice in the community. That’s where we try to help, by giving them the tools they need to speak and affect issues that impact their lives.”

among youth, but if they find no vehicle for response, complacency eventually takes over. We try to provide that vehicle and an orientation towards social change.”

Youth for Unity holds weekly meetings in Helena attended by an average of 30 young people. The meetings are a place for them to support each other, as well as to learn about the political realities they face and acquire some of the skills they need to transform it.

When a recent letter to the editor of the newspaper denounced Youth for Unity as a tool of adult homosexuals, the group sent an avalanche of responses, some organized through letter-writing parties, some spontaneous. “Because that letter was so awful, it gave us an opportunity,” says Jocelyn Furbish, Youth for Unity member.

The American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) runs a Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transsexual, and Questioning Youth Program (GLBTQP) in Seattle that is one of the oldest in the region. “We’ve found in some cases that we need to help queer youth take care of some of their basic needs before we can do anything else,” says program director Joyful Freeman. “But then they blossom into themselves and are capable of awesome work.”

Queer youth interns at GLBTQP staff an information phone line, train to participate in educational panels at schools and churches, and attend conferences such as the “Peacemaker’s Institute” given by the Fellowship of Reconciliation.

Other work by these groups has focused on high schools. “School is the scariest place if you are gay or lesbian,” says Talya Husbands-Hankin, coordinator of Youth for Justice, a project of the Community Alliance of Lane County in Eugene, Oregon. “As a result, gay and lesbian kids have the highest incidences of suicide and dropping out.” Youth for Justice sends peer education teams to discuss racism and homophobia with the incoming ninth graders each fall. They give trainings for teachers to encourage them to intervene when kids are called names or otherwise made to feel unsafe.

The Seattle Young People’s Project runs a Queer Youth Rights Initiative, which put out



Impact Visuals

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— Amara Perez

SYPP is one of several organizations dedicated to politically educating young people in the Northwest. Although involved in a wide range of activities, they share a dedication to meeting young people where they are and providing the tools for their self-empowerment — and modeling those ideas within their organizational structures. “Not only are these young folks our future,” says Debi Law of the Portland’s Lesbian Community Project, “but these kids bring an incredible gut understanding of the world and range of experience. And when we address the needs of the young, we are working at transforming the dominant culture, which is exactly what we’re about.”

Gay and lesbian youth

“Here in Helena, the issue triggering interest has been sexual orientation and gender identity,” says Ken Toole, program director for Youth for Unity. “Maybe because this state is so white, gays are sometimes the largest minority. We find a lot of anger at bigotry

a magazine, *Generation Q*, and organizes a support network for alliances between gays and straights. The Seattle group also surveyed students about sexual harassment and then made policy recommendations to the schools.

Youth of color

The other major area of work tackled by these groups has been the needs of youth of color, and racism. The Youth Leadership Program of Sisters in Portland Impacting Real Issues Together (SPIRIT), a project of the Center for Third World Organizing in Oakland, California, has been active for two years. One of YLP's main activities has been the Girls in Action for Power (GAP) program, in which young women learn fund raising, how to make presentations and do outreach, and self-defense. "We see self defense as both physical and verbal," says Amara Perez, lead organizer. "It has a strong political component, and includes how to defend yourself, for example, against racist teachers. It is also not just about individual safety but community safety, community self-defense, reinforcing the sense of collective power."

In addition, SPIRIT has led a campaign against gender violence. "We found that most intervention programs deal with boys and gangs and things like that. Very few resources are allotted to sexual harassment, date rape, or domestic violence, which are far more common," says Perez. SPIRIT invited school board members to a community speak out and worked (successfully) to get the city to pass a resolution against violence against girls, as well as writing and distributing a brochure on dating violence, and working to make school policies on the subject accessible to students.

SPIRIT's second campaign has targeted transportation. Perez points out that middle and high school students have to pay their own way to get to school on public transportation. This becomes a financial burden for low-income families. In addition, safety is an issue on city buses. Many girls are harassed by boyfriends or men they don't



SPIRIT members present their youth directed campaign

know.

Ronny Abram, program director for the AFSC Multicultural Youth Leadership Program works with at-risk youth of color in two Seattle high schools. He gives workshops focusing on developing a political analysis and basic organizing skills. One workshop, a "Tour of Resistance," is a bus trip around central and southeast Seattle where many of the youth live, during which Abram tells them the rich political history of the neighborhoods. "Otherwise they think all that activity always happened somewhere else. But when they know it happened right here, it becomes more possible for them to imagine," says Abram. In addition, the group engages in projects such as painting out graffiti or making tee shirts with sick children in a hospital. More interested kids become interns and learn more intensively. "And," says Abrams, "we also have fun."

Seattle Young People's Project recently sponsored a young women's conference where workshops were conducted on topics ranging from self-defense and safe sex to white privilege. A project by and for young women of color is just getting underway.

Empowering youth of color is also a priority for Lane County's Youth for Justice. "Racism is a huge problem here," acknowledges Talya Husbands-Hankin. "In high school, everyone is trying to figure out who they are, and they want to be with the people like them. It leads to a segregation of students that's very connected to classism. Cliques are all about who has money and opportunities, who is in the history

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Interestingly, Youth for Justice got its start after a delegation from a Eugene high school spent time at the headquarters of PCUN, the largely Latino farmworkers' union in Woodburn, Oregon. Delegations from Youth for Justice continue to visit PCUN, supporting organizing in the fields, helping in the



construction of the headquarters, and participating in boycott work for the union in Eugene.

Youth are full participants

All these groups are growing in numbers and the range of challenges they take on. "I'm just not seeing apathetic, cynical teen-agers," says Ken Toole in Helena. "I think 'Gen-X' is just a marketing myth." In fact, the Montana Human Rights Network never made the youth program an emphasis. They have no staff or monies dedicated to it, yet it is growing anyway, led by the young people in it. "I went to one meeting, and was told to shut up," Toole laughs.

Amara Perez stresses that SPIRIT is not a youth group but a truly intergenerational organization. "Of 200 members, half are younger than eighteen," she says, "and youth

are full participants across the board."

Similarly, at Seattle Young People's Project, half the board of directors are under 19 years old. SYPP hires young people as community organizers and interns, and they are fully involved in all aspects of the organization, including fund raising. "They really learn how a non-profit runs, as well as critical thinking and how to develop an analysis," says Laura Timmy.

And in most of these organizations, the projects taken on are generated out of the interest and excitement of those currently involved.

Both former participants of youth programs, SYPP's Laura Timmy and Talya Husbands-Hankin of Youth for Justice embody that excitement. On graduating, both decided to make those organizations their lives.

"I was very shy and quiet when I joined Youth for Justice in high school, and I knew nothing about organizing" says Talya Husbands-Hankin. "But this organization is about empowerment. It's been incredible to go through the process, and then be able to support others going through it." That's what it's all about.



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— Talya Husbands-Hankin