

New England Journal of Public Policy

Volume 23
Issue 1 *Social Change & Nonprofits: Learning
beyond Borders*

Article 14

3-21-2010

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Recommended Citation

Martinez, Claudio (2010) "Speaking Up and Taking Charge, Urban Teens," *New England Journal of Public Policy*. Vol. 23: Iss. 1, Article 14.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umb.edu/nejpp/vol23/iss1/14>

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Speaking Up and Taking Charge, Urban Teens

Claudio Martinez

It takes sixteen-year-old Marisol ten minutes to walk from her summer job at one of Boston's youth development agencies to the Jackson Square train station in the late afternoon. As she makes her way through the predominantly Latino neighborhood where reggaeton, bachata, and merengue rhythms pulsate out of Toyotas and Hondas, she is beeped at, whistled at, followed, peppered with obscenities, and sometimes even touched by males who congregate in large groups on the busy urban corners. In survival mode, Marisol puts her head down, crisscrosses the street when necessary, and ploughs forward.

The next day at lunch, Marisol discusses her experience on the street with other female teens who share similar stories. Adult youth workers join in the conversation, as do some male teens who are empathetic to the girls' plight. After several days of discussion, the girls hatch a plan. With adult support, they design, write, and print bilingual cards that articulate how they feel when they are harassed by the males. They explain that they have a right to wear summer clothes without receiving accusations of being provocative. They describe the difference between an insult or threat, which they despise, and a compliment that they may welcome. The girls don't view the males on the street as the enemy, but as a group that needs to be educated, that needs to have their consciousness raised.

Within a few days, the girls hit the streets in groups of four, hand out the cards to hundreds of males and engage in discussions. For the most part the males are receptive and willing to listen. A week later, the girls perform street theatre during rush hour in front of several hundred onlookers, as they continue to try to get across

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their message. The girls then connect with a sociologist at a local university and design and implement a survey of their peers in Boston's high schools. The findings of this exercise reveal that over 80 percent of the girls surveyed have been repeatedly harassed at school. Over 40 percent report having been cornered and touched in an unwanted manner. A *Boston Globe* reporter hears about the girls' efforts and writes a full feature article. Top officials from the Boston Public Schools and the Mayor's office meet with the girls to design a system-wide strategy to address the problem. The girls receive inquiries and encouragement from girls' and women's groups across the country.

The above description of an authentic youth-led organizing effort is a model of social change that has developed at the Hyde Square Task Force (HSTF) over the past decade in our work with urban youth. We believe that members of this segment of the population are critical change agents, those with the potential to have a major impact on the future cultural and political development of our society.¹

Changing Demographics

According to the Population Reference Bureau, racial and ethnic minorities, currently accounting for one-third of the U.S. population, are projected to reach 50 percent by 2050; this trend may largely be explained by increasing immigration and high fertility rates.² By 2050, Latino youth are expected to comprise 29 percent of the U.S. youth population.³ According to the U.S. Dept. of Commerce the population of the U.S. is projected to grow from 263 million in 1995 to 394 million in 2050 and the minority population will account for nearly 90 percent of this increase.⁴ According to the Urban Institute, in 1990 there were 8.3 million children with immigrant parents in the U.S. and in 2007 that number rose to 16.4 million. Children of immigrants contributed 77 percent of the increase of the number of U.S. children between 1990 and 2007.⁵

A large number of these youth are concentrated in U.S. cities. Will these urban youth become productive members of American society? Will they bring new positive energy and unique cultural perspectives to our country's institutions and perhaps even change these institutions? Will these youth play a role in the development of a new America? Will they grow into adults who will have a voice within a democratic society?

Many U.S. citizens view youth of color with a xenophobic attitude, hoping that they will continue to be contained within urban areas, and some suburban enclaves, so that mainstream America can remain "uncontaminated." We suggest that at this unique time in our nation's history these youth can play leadership roles in a transformation of our society. We believe that these teens have the capacity to join in the construction of a new society that doesn't fear diversity and change, but rather embraces them as a positive source of strength, grounded in an emerging culture.

The Youth Community Development (YCD) Model

The HSTF has adopted a youth community development (YCD) model, a relatively new approach to teen programming that builds upon the prevention and youth development models that have evolved over the past several decades. In a prevention model, the teen population is perceived as a problem that needs to be addressed for the betterment of the overall society. Programs are set up to “keep the kids busy” and “off the streets” until they reach the safer confines of young adulthood.

The next stage of teen programming — youth development — views teens as assets in the community. In a youth-development model teens develop their academic, social, cultural, creative, and life skills so that they can reach personal goals and develop a lifelong commitment to service in their community. We expect that teens will experience the intrinsic rewards that are gained through serving others. A fundamental belief of the youth-development model is that when youth are fully engaged and play an active role in their community, they are able to make better decisions about their lives, have a sense of responsibility for their actions, perform better in school, have high self-esteem, and have more options in choosing a college. Youth can play a role in influencing their community’s capacity and, in doing so, they enhance their own capacities.

A model of youth-community development maintains the elements of the prevention and youth-development models and goes a step further. The YCD model rests on the philosophy that we must develop comprehensive and seamless community-wide efforts that promote positive youth development for all youth, not only the youth involved in our programs. Those engaged in youth community development realize that organizations serving youth cannot do this work alone. We understand that it is our role to mobilize the community, so that all sectors of society are involved in providing opportunities for the transformation of youth. In the YCD model, youth development should be imbedded within the consciousness of the entire community so that an ecology that supports and understands youth development is created and maintained. In the YCD model, youth develop the skills so they can take the lead in this mobilization effort. Youth are viewed as valuable change agents, pushing all of us toward a more humanitarian and egalitarian society that has a vision for youth and is willing to invest sufficient resources to support the human development of young people.

In order to engage at the YCD level, youth must examine all of the social, economic, and political forces acting on themselves, their families, and communities. The youth take the lead in challenging the levels of inequality that leave many urban minority communities impoverished and isolated. The youth are supported by caring adults who work with them to develop strategy and implement political action. In this process, teens learn the rules of political engagement in this society but they also develop the awareness that they can be a historical force for creating a new exciting,

diverse society with new rules of engagement. Through these activities, teens create a new consciousness, build a sense of personal efficacy, and develop a belief that social change is possible. In the youth community development model we not only prepare youth for the future; we believe youth should play a critical role in creating a new future for themselves and their community.

The YCD Model in Action

A quick look at the Hyde Square Task Force's *Ritmo en Acción* cultural dance program for teens demonstrates the evolution from a prevention model to a YCD model.

- Utilizing prevention strategies, dance classes are offered to teens to keep them off the streets and engaged in positive activities. Along with the dance classes a whole array of services is also offered: college prep, counseling, tutoring, and enrichment activities.
- Utilizing youth development strategies, the teen dancers are offered all of the above-mentioned services but are also viewed as assets in the community. Therefore, the teens not only practice and perform dance, but they also are trained to teach peers and younger children to dance. They serve the community during after-school hours and set up a business where they provide high-quality, low-cost workshops in Latin and Hip-Hop dance.
- In the YCD model the teens also advocate for more dance programs across the city. They mobilize other youth, health professionals, parents, educators, cultural workers, political leaders, and advocate that dance be integrated into the school day in the Boston Public Schools. They conduct research and undertake power analyses to understand where there are resources for these programs, and who has the power to shift those resources. The teens challenge the status quo and take the lead as cultural and political advocates for themselves and all youth in the city.

Utilizing the dynamic urban setting as an asset, the HSTF model builds on the best practices of youth community development by creating teams of teens that engage in a wide variety of meaningful and exciting community-based projects. Each team of teens undergoes extensive leadership training and then expands its positive influence by reaching out and engaging hundreds of their peers, younger children, and adults. As teens develop the consciousness that they can change the world around them, they simultaneously develop the consciousness that they can change themselves — that they can take control of their lives — that they can define themselves and their role in society — that they can find meaning and purpose. Teens begin to develop their own personal philosophies: their basic beliefs, values, attitudes, and assumptions, which explain, shape, and reflect their view of themselves and their surroundings. This

personal philosophy will guide their lives and help them make sense of the complex world in which they move.

Using this model, groups of youth have taken on a multitude of projects over the past decade. They led a community-wide mobilization to prevent a K-Mart from being built on several acres of publicly owned land in the neighborhood. The teens practiced a home-grown version of self-determination by defending the dozens of local small business owners against the corporate chain. Through marches, protests, and by turning out in the hundreds for community meetings, the youth convinced the Boston Redevelopment Authority and the Mayor of Boston to instead build a \$220 million community-friendly urban development consisting of a youth and family center, recreational facilities, affordable housing, and locally owned businesses. Youth have written and published books for their peers and young children on health and nutrition issues. They have produced a documentary film on violence that has been shown on local cable television and is used as a tool in schools, churches, and living rooms to talk about this issue. They successfully lobbied for the right of youth aged 16 to 17 to both vote and run as candidates for the Jamaica Plain Neighborhood Council, and they have elected over ten of their peers to this decision-making body. Recently, a group of youth successfully lobbied for a Civics in Action course to be taught in Boston public high schools. Not only has the course since been piloted in four high schools, with plans to go city wide, but teens have also worked with professionals to write the curriculum.

After realizing that electoral politics is a major factor in determining the amount of power they have, the youth work each year on voter registration, voter education and voter turnout. In the past decade they have transformed the predominantly minority and immigrant precincts in Hyde/Jackson Square voting precincts from one of the lowest turnout areas to one of the City of Boston's highest turnout areas. The youth have used this growing electoral power to successfully lobby for millions of dollars in renovations to public parks. They have also used their clout by making frequent trips to the Massachusetts State House, where they have been credited with adding millions of dollars to the state budget for violence prevention and youth jobs programs.

The goal of the Hyde Square Task Force is not only to make political change, but also to create opportunities for youth to develop and express their dynamic and evolving urban culture — a culture that embraces diversity and change, a culture of justified anger, a culture of love, authenticity, and hope. Therefore, we consciously integrate the arts into the organizing campaigns and actions. In the summertime our youth organize outdoor concerts and cultural events that attract thousands of young people and local residents. There, the youth build and educate their political base through spoken word, theater, comedy, original rap and music, and dance. They design and paint murals throughout the community to stake a claim and advocate

for themselves. As the youth create social change and the foundation for a new democratic society, they are also creating new cultural forms and patterns that are representative of the “new” America. We encourage youth to work to create change through our daily interactions with each other, through exploring new ways to relate to and support each other.

What is most exciting about this work is that we never know when or how future organizing campaigns will emerge. In recent months, our youth have reported that they have been pushed, shouted at, insulted, and generally disrespected by the Transit Police as they travel to and from school on public transportation. Diving into meaningful action, they have devised a multilevel strategy that includes the creation of a Civilian Review Board and a new training program for police officers in how to communicate with and positively engage youth. In the coming months, these police officers and their supervisors, as well as local elected officials, should expect to be sitting down at a conference table with our youth to address these issues.

Reflection, Transnational Learning Exchanges, and Hope

The model that has developed at the Hyde Square Task Force has come about through constant dialogue, reflection, and change. Our learning organization has been energized through regular transnational learning exchanges with individuals and groups that are engaged in social justice initiatives around the globe. Staff, board, and youth have had opportunities to both travel and welcome a wide variety of community development practitioners from all continents. We have also engaged interns from Ireland, worked on arts projects with South African women, and hosted colleagues from Israel, Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Colombia.

Our long-term relationships with the Boston–Haifa Learning Exchange as well as the Barr Foundation Fellowship have given HSTF a unique opportunity to expand our “glocal” (global/local) knowledge and strengthen our relationships and networks in Boston and internationally at the same time.

Through these exchanges we not only gather ideas and best practices, but also develop the consciousness that indeed there is an international movement for social justice. Knowing that there are sister organizations spread across the globe is immensely comforting and provides a deep sense of hope. And it is this hope and inspiration that fuels our youth with the power to create authentic, compassionate change at an urgent and ripe time in our global history.



Notes

1. Francisco Villarruel, Daniel Perkins, Lynne Borden, eds., *Community Youth Development: Programs, Policies, and Practices* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2003).
2. Kelvin Pollard and Mark Mather, "10% of U.S. Counties Now 'Majority-Minority,'" Population Reference Bureau, 2008. <http://www.prb.org/Articles/2008/majority-minority.aspx>
3. "Fact Sheet on Latino Youth: Population," Institute for Health Policy Studies, University of California, San Francisco. November, 2002. http://bixbycenter.ucsf.edu/publications/files/LatinoYouth_Population_2002.pdf
4. "The Emerging Minority Marketplace," U.S. Department of Commerce, September, 2000. <http://permanent.access.gpo.gov/lps70698/mbdacolor.pdf>
5. "Children of Immigrants: Immigration Trends," Fact Sheet No. 1. The Urban Institute, October 2009.



