

Youths as Community Builders
by Steve Fortier, M.S.
CommuniTeam Training and Consulting

There are two powerful shifts in mindset and actions taking place in communities throughout the country. One is a growing realization that the Community Building process is an essential component of efforts to create healthier communities while addressing a variety of health, social and economic issues. By building “capacity,” communities can rely less on outside assistance and more on their own internal resources. Communities can view challenges as opportunities for development and growth.

The other shift is in the community’s view of young people. Today, more and more communities and organizations are recognizing that our youth are a great resource, capable of making significant contributions to their schools and other organizations, as well as the entire community. Working separately, these shifts are having an enormous positive impact on the health and well-being of our communities. Woven together these two concepts can have an even greater impact.

This paper will feature two ways in which youth leaders are contributing to creating healthier schools, communities, neighborhoods, organizations and families by taking leadership roles in local community building initiatives. These two programs are chosen based on their simplicity, limited resource requirements and powerful positive impact.

Community Building, as we use the term at CommuniTeam, refers to a process of bringing together a wide variety of community resources and shaping them into a unified force. It is a process of enhancing relationships between individuals, between different groups of people and between various organizations so that a wide-range of experiences, passions, skills and expertise are weaved together into a powerful force for catalyzing positive community change. Community Building work focuses on weaving a rich tapestry out of the community’s human and organizational resources. While the news media might suggest otherwise, most communities are filled with goodness, caring and a desire for improved conditions. All communities have the resources needed to be healthy, to reduce violence, substance abuse, crime, etc. The Community Building process allows us to discover, develop, utilize, network and support these resources.

When this process of Community Building is led by youths, the impact can be even more significant. Young people not only contribute their abilities and energy, but also challenge adult mental models about change and the capabilities of all people. There are many ways in which youths can contribute to a community building process. I’d like to share two with which I have personal experience as a developer. The first is youth-led community building activities, which I call Youth Leadership in Action, taken from a book by the same name. The other youth-led community building process I will highlight is Teen-Adult Dialogue Nights. These community events promote intergenerational communication and understanding through a simple, yet powerful process facilitated by teens

About Youth Leadership in Action

What is Youth Leadership in Action?

Youth Leadership in Action is an approach to community-building and leadership development that is youth-led and experiential in nature. Activities are the tools for supporting the development of personal skills (decision-making, communication, leadership) and group skills, such as shared leadership, trust, mutual respect and conflict resolution. Community members are engaged in a fun, interactive process that improves their abilities to work effectively with others.

In a community building process, youth facilitators might involve a newly-formed group in activities which help members to get to know one another’s names in accelerated fashion. They might also introduce activities that help the group to discover the “common ground” that exists within the community through personal experiences, traits and facts that are shared by other members of the group. Young leaders can also reach into their “bag of tricks” to pull out some communication, trust, and problem-solving activities. These “initiatives” will develop the group’s ability to work as a team, communicate more effectively and gain respect for the leadership capabilities and styles of the various community members.

How is Youth Leadership in Action currently being used?

Youth Leadership in Action principles and activities are being used in a number of communities as part of community building, prevention, school restructuring and/or youth leadership programs. In Brattleboro, Vermont, The Leadership Project Team has led team building workshops for the local police department. In several

communities in Alaska, young people are leading cooperative games days for the entire community. A middle school group from Lowell, Massachusetts once hosted family team building days at an inner-city park. The Peer Leaders at Ridge High School in Basking Ridge, New Jersey use the activities in a freshmen orientation program that matches groups of freshmen with groups of upper classmen. The Peer Leaders at Shore Regional High School (Long Branch, NJ) use the activities to enhance the Health Education curriculum that they teach for freshmen. The Melrose Massachusetts YMCA trains teen leaders to facilitate adventure-based group and personal development processes for youth and teens living in the city's housing projects. In South Africa and other countries devastated by civil war, teen leaders participating in the Play For Peace program are trained to lead activities to rebuild relationships between ethnically-diverse groups of children. In communities all over, the activities are used to build a sense of community at the beginning of Dialogue Nights. These are just a few examples of Youth Leadership in Action.

Many of the youth and teen leadership groups mentioned above, as well as over 6,000 others around the world, have benefited from the guide, Youth Leadership in Action (Project Adventure/Kendall-Hunt Publishing Company, 1995). This book was written by eight youth leaders, ranging in age from 11 to 18, whom I had trained and coached as facilitators of experiential community building processes.

About Dialogue Nights

Dialogue Nights were originally developed by Ron Gaetano, R.Ph., a national expert in substance abuse. The Leadership Project, a program which CommuniTeam's Steve Fortier helped to develop, took Ron's ideas and expanded upon the concept of youth-adult Dialogue as a community development and prevention tool. Please Talk With Me: A Guide to Teen-Adult Dialogue (Kendall-Hunt Publishing Company) was published in 1991 to help other communities provide Dialogue Nights. The book includes eleven formats which deal with various topics of interest to both teens and adults (including ones for teens and teachers and teens and police).

While Dialogue Nights were originally designed to be adult-facilitated, the community leaders we've partnered with have found CommuniTeam's approach of having youth leaders engaging adults in dialogue to be a wonderful role reversal that adds to the learning process for all participants.

What is a Dialogue Night?

Dialogue Nights are semi-structured community events that provide an opportunity for young people and adults to listen to and learn from one another. Dialogue Nights bring together people of different ages, backgrounds, beliefs and assumptions in a safe environment. Participants discuss such topics as the differences and similarities between teen experiences of today and of years past, personal values, and qualities of an effective parent-child relationship. A Dialogue Night is typically sponsored by a community or youth group. Many are open to the public. At times, the youth group chooses to target an adult group with whom to dialogue. Such groups have included PTAs, civic groups, parent education program participants, police departments and school faculties.

The typical outline of a Dialogue Night consists of a welcoming period, followed by an icebreaker activity designed to loosen people up and begin to create bridges between participants. Following the activity, the youth group might present a skit, slide show or short talk tied to the evening's topic of discussion. Ground rules for the Dialogue session are then presented and the participants break themselves up into groups of six to eight people (with diversity in race, gender and age). Family members are encouraged to split up so that the discussion can be open and honest.

Each small group is co-led by teenagers trained to facilitate Dialogue Nights. Following forty-five to sixty minutes of Dialogue, the small group discussions give way to a large group wrap-up. This open forum, moderated by a youth and/or adult leader, allows for insights gained in one discussion to be shared with others.

Why do we need Dialogue?

Today's fast-paced world has provided us with many new technological advancements. It has also taken away many opportunities which once provided for meaningful dialogue between young people and adults. The rise in youth and community issues (violence, substance use, HIV/AIDS) is often attributed to the lack of interaction between youths and significant adults and to a lack of intergenerational trust and communication. In addition, a recent survey found that 40% of all adults have no daily or weekly contact with a youth under age 18. It is no wonder that misperceptions abound regarding the extent and nature of "youth problems." Dialogue Nights put intergenerational communication and learning back into the social fabric of communities, neighborhoods,

schools... anywhere they take place.

Dialogue Nights provide a safe and supportive environment, clear boundaries and carefully crafted formats to produce conversations that are engaging, productive, enriching and meaningful. In an “us-and-them” world, Dialogue Nights provide a forum where people can listen and be heard, where there are no wrong answers only different perspectives and where we can create the foundation for working with one another to create healthier neighborhoods and communities.

Summary

There are a number of ways that young people are acting upon their concerns for their community's health and well-being. Youth Leadership in Action and Teen-Adult Dialogue Nights are two ways that teens and youths have taken the initiative to build and strengthen community. Through these vehicles, young people are promoting the development of understanding and mutual respect throughout their communities. They are bringing people together to celebrate differences, learn from one another and discover their common ground... key action steps to building healthier communities.

About the author...

Steve Fortier is the Founder and President of CommuniTeam. He has provided training to thousands of adult and youth leaders in the areas of prevention, community health promotion, youth-adult partnership development and community building. He is the editor of Youth Leadership in Action (Kendall-Hunt Publishing/Project Adventure, 1995) which he co-authored with eight youths ages 11-18. Steve was also a contributor to Please Talk With Me (Kendall-Hunt Publishing/Project Adventure, 1991), the how-to guide to Teen-Adult Dialogue Nights, a process Steve helped to create.

Steve is also the Executive Director of the Meeting Waters YMCA which serves over 20 Vermont and New Hampshire communities of the Connecticut River Valley.

He has been a member of the National Advisory Board of The Community Tool Box since 1998.