

Mayor's Youth Leadership Council

Youth Services Bureau, Stamford, Connecticut

Teens Don't Care. Yeah, Right.

When asked "What should adults know about teens today," Andrea Gross, a graduate of Connecticut's Simsbury High School, said: "We want to be involved in the world around us. We have an incredible drive to be active. Adults should utilize our potential, not stifle it and put us down as 'only kids.'" The response of Rebecca Cremona, a graduate of Enrico Fermi High in Connecticut, was more pithy, but no less accurate. "We don't bite."

Then you have the words of Danielle Shapiro, a graduate of Stamford High School and the Mayor's Youth Leadership Council: "When you see someone my age walking down a street in Stamford don't get hung up on stereotypes. Look at me right away as a leader. Look at me as someone who can change Stamford. Look at me as a problem-solver rather than a problem that has to be solved."

Those quotes capture the meaning of the Mayor's Youth Leadership Council (MYLC), which is a program of the Youth Services Bureau in Stamford, Connecticut. MYLC has been described as a laboratory for learning; a place where people our age promote social change through activism. Social change? This is how Susan Beresford, a former president of the Ford Foundation, defines it:

"I believe that most social change begins when someone wakes up in the morning and is inspired or angry or otherwise determined to alter something in their world. These people perceive something as unfair or needless...and do something about it."

Our change efforts do not focus solely on tangible things like laws, donors, and programs. We also look to change the attitudes, beliefs, and practices of people and the organizations they work for. And this is how we do it.

Socially Engaged Philanthropy: 4 Elements

Socially engaged philanthropy has four things going for it. Like other youth philanthropies in Connecticut MYLC raises money and awards grants to organizations. But it's the three other things we do - public awareness and activism activities, volunteer programs, and social change campaigns - that place us at the forefront of the youth activism movement in Connecticut.

"Our version of philanthropy has a lot of benefits," says Alexa Petersen of MYLC. "We focus on just a handful of issues, which helps unite our members. The grant making allows us to influence the work of agencies. The public awareness and activism activities educate people and sharpen our advocacy skills. The volunteer programs add real faces to our work and make us more discerning grant makers. And the social change work influences policies."

"I want to laugh and
joke and cry and join an
institution that will
fuel my mind."
My New Resolution by the
Heartless Bastards, 2005

Another important element of socially engaged philanthropy is its emphasis on campaigns. We're not big fans of one-shot deals, which are often passed off as "making a difference in the community." We tell prospective members of MYLC that they are joining a campaign; that they are investing their time and energy in a program that may not show dividends during their high school career. Members have to be comfortable planting seeds of change for the future.

Mayor's Youth Leadership Council: Nuts and bolts of managing our chapter at Stamford High School

- MYLC is managed by an executive committee comprised of six students and an adult advisor. Members of the executive committee complete 20 hours of training in leadership, social change and activism. The training, which is based on the lessons we've learned since 2004, is completed during the summer before each school year.
- The executive committee meets weekly from mid-August through mid-June. General member meetings are held once a month during the school year.
- General members complete a three-hour orientation that is led by members of the executive committee.
- The MYLC chapter at Stamford High is governed by an agreement that is designed by members. It includes clauses about attendance, roles and responsibilities, and activities.

"You will, undoubtedly,
meet people who will
try to shut you up or
entice you to
compromise your
principles in any
number of ways.
They'll try to seduce
you and distract you
with money, power,
security and perhaps,
most dangerously, a
sense of belonging.
Don't let them; it's just
not worth it."
Samuel Jackson

"Once you see not only the problem, but also the solution, there's no escape. You see it, you can't look away from it. I want it to feel like an adventure, not a burden, this helping others, this changing things. I don't mean just for me. I mean for everyone."

Bono in "The Rolling Stone Interview," Rolling Stone, November 3, 2005

Mayor's Youth Leadership Council and teen dating violence

The mission of MYLC is to promote safe schools and communities, with an emphasis on teen dating violence. We selected teen dating violence after reviewing statistics in Connecticut and elsewhere. It's an issue in Stamford, like other towns, and it needed a youth voice to address it.

How MYLC addresses teen dating violence

MYLC address teen dating violence in three ways: public awareness activities, a volunteer program, and social change campaigns.

Public awareness

These activities include body-art posters, silent vigils, the Balloon Project, the Chairs Project, Unmask the Truth, the Storyline Project, and others.

Volunteer program

Once a week during the school year, members of MYLC visit the domestic violence safe house in Stamford. They do homework with the children, play games, and just hang out and talk.

Social change campaigns

Our campaign for the 2008-2009 school year includes two elements. One asks the Connecticut Department of Public Health to add a question about emotional-verbal abuse to its survey of teens (accomplished in December 2008). The other element is HB6494, which calls on middle schools and high schools in Connecticut to teach teen dating violence. Members of MYLC proposed the legislation in December 2008 and testified before the General Assembly's Education Committee in February 2009.

Teen dating violence

It isn't an argument every once in a while, or a bad mood after a bad day. It's a pattern of controlling behaviors that one partner uses to get and maintain power over the other.

- 10 percent of teens surveyed in America experienced physical dating violence last year (Centers for Disease Control)

- 13 percent of teens in Connecticut experienced physical dating violence last year (Department of Public Health)

- Connecticut is ranked 9th in the nation among states that report teen dating violence (Department of Public Health)

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