

Dear David,

February 5, 1998

This is the conclusion of this portion of this project, but it is evolving on its own and I'm running to keep up. I am learning to call in others to help me create a strategy, but there is barely enough time in a day.

In the middle school where I teach the harassment issues are escalating and, somehow I have become the harassment expert. I have created a curriculum which I am using with eighth grade girls to teach how not to be victims, and to report all harassment and report often until something is done about it. My youth leaders have also embarked on a campaign to educate their peers and the staff, and students in other schools.

More and more high school students came down to see me and share stories of the harassment at their school. I found help from someone at a Burlington High School who has dealt with these issues at their school and together we have formed a group which is beginning to plan a strategy to deal with the issues and the high school administration. Some of these same students are also volunteering every day in my classroom.

It appears that after climate surveys are conducted at both schools, we will meet with administrations and the first suggestion will be that all staff and administration need to go through diversity training before anything is done with the students. All staff needs to be committed to enforcing the anti-harassment policy. In July 1997, the State of Vermont passed legislation that all schools create a sexual and overall harassment policy. Neither school has done so to date. In the last month the high school has received a class action lawsuit from the Vermont Civil Rights Commission, because of racial harassment of students, which the school allegedly did not do anything about, or if they did it was not appropriate, according to the suit.

In the high school, some of the students we are meeting with are not safe when in the building. Some are safe, but refuse to ignore the problems.

You mentioned in an evaluation of an earlier draft of this project that you thought this was a personal journey of mine as well as a project. It has been. I have gained a lot from this experience, and now I finally have the tools to work for what I have always believed in. I only hope that the student leaders see some positive results for their efforts. They are most admirable young people, and some of them have already made some poor life choices, but are willing to change that as well as help others.

Peace and Thank You,



Priscilla

P.S. At 10:00 PM after writing this I got a call from Jeff Beney, Indian Education Director in Swanton, Vermont and member of the Governor's Commission on Youth. He was calling about the harassment at the school where I teach. He told me that after reading William Damon's How to Build Youth Charters in Our Communities, members of the Diversity Task Force in the Swanton area have started to work on a charter. He suggested that we do it in St. Albans, and that it be a diversity task force. So here we go. It seems like the most common sense thing to do as what we are dealing with in the schools is not just a school issue, but a community issue.....

Community Economic Development
Youth Leadership Development

St. Albans, Vermont

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January 1998

Community Economic Development Project

Youth Leadership Development

“ Many young people resort to destructive behavior if denied any access to legitimate forms of power to meet basic needs and aspirations”. (Stanley Polack)

Teen empowerment.....We get youth to internalize change, and therefore become agents of their own change.....If you really want to involve students-don't make decisions for them, involve them all the way.

Summary:

This project will benefit the young people and therefore all residents of Franklin County, Vermont. What makes this Community Economic Development is that now that young people are part of the process of change, they feel connected to their community and may stay as opposed to going somewhere else to find employment and a place to live. Having the opportunity as young people, to effect change in their community, they can carry these skills on as contributing adults. Instead of feeling victimized, they seize the opportunity to share decision making with other community members for the benefit of all.

Through the experience of working with young people in the community and being with them through their successes and failures, I know that given the support and encouragement and opportunity, they can effect positive change within the community. They can break community stereotypes about them and others for a positive good.

Problem Statement

If there is no concerted effort to create some kind of positive program for youth in the community, the delinquency rate, drug use and risky behaviors will increase, which will have a negative impact on everyone in the community. Providing leadership opportunity for youth is one solution to this problem. If we continue to lose young people to drugs, alcohol, teen pregnancy, suicide, inadequate education, apathy, poverty and AIDS, we won't have much hope for a peaceful productive future as a society.

Description of Problem & Background:

The youth of Franklin County, Vermont are at risk. A high percentage of them are becoming pregnant, delinquent, using alcohol and drugs, victims of DWI fatalities and committing suicide.(See Youth Risk Survey, Appendix) They are engaging in these activities because they don't see a future for themselves. Young people are harassing each other in increasing numbers, which is leading to increased violence. These problems are further exacerbated by racial and social intolerance. There are no community based prevention programs in Franklin County for youth.

There are a number of social service programs, which loosely operate together, but there are no prevention programs nor is there any comprehensive coordination between services for youth. Therefore I believe that giving young people leadership roles within the community, they can then be part of the voice finding solutions to these problems. This leads to empowerment for the youth and ownership of the solutions which will result in more of a buy in from their peers. It is a change from the hierarchical structure which puts young people on the bottom of the power structure of communities.

This seems to be a pivotal time to start this effort, as in the school where I work there are an increasing number of students who's needs are not being met in the traditional school setting. I have met with teachers, guidance counselors, service providers and community members, and we agree that there are an increasing number of young people who are becoming disenfranchised. They are becoming a problem to law enforcement, teachers, and creating a negative impact on the community. Community members know there is great need to do something, but there as yet is not a coordinated effort to plan a solution. There have been separate meetings on youth violence, delinquency and alcohol use as well as regular service provider meetings. So far no one has pulled all of these concerned groups together in the county. It is important to coordinate everyone's efforts so that services are not duplicated, organizations are not competing for funds, and together everyone can share resources to solve the common problem.

Franklin County is a rural county in northwestern Vermont. Quebec, Canada borders the north and Lake Champlain borders the west. The Western Abenaki People were the first inhabitants. They hunted, fished, gathered and engaged in some agriculture. The area was settled eventually by Europeans as an agricultural community. Eventually, St. Albans became a major transportation route to Canada by water, and then in the late 1800's by railroad. It became the largest rail yard east of Chicago. Many jobs and a way of life were lost when the interstate highway system reduced the need for the railroad. Nothing has replaced that loss, although there is a community development plan in place.

There is still an agricultural base, mostly dairy farming, but as the family farm is less able to compete with large agribusinesses in the Midwest and foreign imports, they too are disappearing. Currently there is some manufacturing and there are small service ventures, but there are not a lot

of employment opportunities and because of this, young people, who in previous generations had a certain job future, don't see much of a future if they stay here. Some are beginning to give up at a very young age.

What is the Need ?

To find out the needs of local youth and work with them to find solutions to the problems they face. To develop leadership skills of youth so that young people are trained to organize themselves to do this. Also to train young people so that they can then go out and train other young people.

To develop the strengths of the youth and to provide education and training to strengthen their skills so that they can develop skills and become useful active members of their community

Specific Objectives

1. Identify the needs of the youth of our community through surveys and needs analysis and meeting with interested community members, including youth.
2. Organize community members to work together to find the best way to address these needs within our community in a positive way
3. Create an advisory committee on youth, including young people, to coordinate the efforts of young people and those who work with youth work together as a community coordinated effort.
4. Identify potential fund sources and begin a fundraising strategy
5. Coordinate service providers, schools and with the Youth Center, so that when it opens

it could be the center that all could coordinate their efforts

6. Create after school programs in at least three areas of the county

7. Work with families, when needed, to provide support with their children and family issues

8. Train Youth Leaders to work with their peers in whatever capacity they have decided is needed. To lead their peers in workshops in healthy alternatives to risky behavior, mediation skills, etc.

9. Develop curriculum with young people to be used in the schools concerning issues of harassment, violence, racism, sexism, drugs, and content areas of the academic curriculum to be more inclusive in scope and perspective.

10. Develop a strategy for attracting youth to want to participate in these endeavors.

Implementation Plan:

Currently, I am the only person who is implementing this plan. I have six middle school leaders and six or seven in the high school. I plan on taking a group of my students who have been leading workshops on harassment issues, for their peers at our school to other area schools. They then will meet with a select group of students at that school to train them in organizing and leadership skills, so they can work on issues that affect them in ways that will be effective for their peers. We will also be inviting in students from another school to train my students in peer mediation. Soon within the county, we will have a network of youth leaders, who will be participating in creating a student to student participatory education process.

If this is successful, I plan on creating some kind of organization, or position within a

county organization in order to carry out this work. At this writing I am beginning to write a Department of Education Community Learning Programs three year grant in order to fund these efforts that up to now I have been running out of my classroom during the school day. The grant is to fund a position of a coordinator to use the school building after school hours and on vacations for community programs, but mostly focusing on youth.

Specific Activities

1. Throughout the project I was working closely with the Barlow Street Youth Center committee and Project Phoenix. I attended organizational meetings and participated in the planning process. I talked with other people in other agencies who deal with youth, educators, elected officials and all kinds of community people. I found out what people in the area are doing and to see if they knew what each other were doing.
2. The next step will be to find out through surveys and small community meetings and needs analysis the needs and strengths of the area's youth.
3. Together we would next have to develop an action plan to decide how to address the youth issues.
4. Always talking to young people wherever I go, to find out what they think their needs are and what they think are the solutions.

Who will be involved

Representatives from:

Area Youth

Other Concerned Citizens

Franklin Central Supervisory Union

The Family Center

Franklin Grand Isle Mental Health

Bellows Free Academy

St. Albans City School

St. Albans Town Educational Center

Health Care Providers

Franklin Northwest Supervisory Union Indian Education

Franklin County Community Caring Project

Other area Elementary and High Schools

Time Line

Oct.-Jan. 1996:

Meet with local agencies working with youth and their families

New Connections Youth Service Program

Franklin County Mental Health Youth Services

Franklin County Social Rehabilitative Services

Franklin Northwest Supervisory Union Indian Education

Law Enforcement Personnel

Meet with Barlow St. School Youth Center Planning Committee

Meet with St. Albans and Franklin County Community Development Councils

Meet with teachers and school guidance counselors

Visit other Youth Centers in Burlington and Montpelier, Vermont

Meet with Burlington, Vermont Youth Council

Meet with St. Albans Mayor's Council on Youth

Meet with young people in Franklin County and survey their needs

1996-1997 Expand work with Green Mountain Teens and "Speak Out" youth

Take GMT participants to share what they are doing to other schools

Have more youth participating on committees in school, such as grant committee

Organize youth and parents to address issues and create solutions

Outputs:

-To accomplish the project goal:

-Youth who have been identified as potential leaders need to be identified and recruited.

- These leaders need to identify the issues are in their community and find with the help of other young people the best way to address those needs so that they will be empowered to affect the change needed.

-Find supportive adults in the community.

-Diversity training for all involved in this effort, adults and youth.

-Trainers are needed to train these young people in leadership and mediation skills.

-Training for adults in how to work with youth leaders, sharing indecision making and allowing a win/win process to be established.

-The trained youth leaders then need to train other young people so that they can conduct workshops or use other methods to deal with issues affecting them within their

communities.

- Develop curriculum so that the trainers have a format from which to work
- Process for evaluating throughout this project.

(As an educator who doesn't believe in following other's curriculum word for word, if I have developed a better way to meet the needs of the particular students who are in a particular class or setting, I will adapt it to my own needs. However, I believe that a basic model is important to take off from, with evaluation to see what was successful and what could use changing. It is especially important to get assessment from the recipients of the curriculum.)

-There should also be a county wide advisory board, which includes youth from each of the twelve towns, both elementary and high schools, adult advisors, parents, social service reps, law enforcement, mental health personnel, elderly, religious leaders.....The board should assess the community needs, set goals, make a strategic plan, implement trainings and workshops, and evaluate periodically the progress and outcomes both short and long term.

Process I Went Through to Address Need:

After framing this project and going out into the community, attending meetings of organizations concerned with youth, and working briefly with the Barlow Street Youth Center Committee, I changed my focus. I reflected back on what successes I personally have had with young people and what caused a positive effect on their lives. Initially, I thought the solution for dealing with the issues which affect youth had to come from the new and yet untried. I have since learned that the successes I have had were at one time untried, but after working and reworking

with what I was doing with my students, I had already found what works. For me to spend my efforts on starting another new organization may not be what we need at this time in this community. A youth center may be appropriate and needed, but it will not solve all the problems which young people face here. A concerted community effort on all fronts is what will be effective.

So I realized that since I work at a school, and that is the community I know, I began to realize the value of the work that I have already done there, and how I could expand on it. I now believe that because of the programs I have started, there are now young people who are out in the community with leadership skills, who have taken them to the high school and other organizations and they can take them to the youth center. School is the place where all the young people are, so I now realize that it is the most obvious place for me to reach young people. This concept or model of youth leadership development or youth involvement can also be expanded into after school programs or other community endeavors.

So my project changed from starting the Youth Center to Youth Leadership Development. It is something that I personally have had success with, and believe that currently it is what young people need to experience to overcome many of the societal obstacles which they face. I now pick “high risk” students for leadership positions and see them change from not valuing themselves to more self-assured people who can stand up to peer pressure and even begin to value being role models and leaders instead of apathetic followers. This change affects how they feel about themselves and the choices that they make. They have now felt some sort of control over their lives, maybe for the first time, and they make better choices about what they do with their lives because of it.

During the past year I have interviewed a number of people who work with youth, developing leadership skills. I have found ongoing programs around the country, and have tried to incorporate other's ideas into my work. At the heart of the work I do with my students, however is to listen to them. I let them identify the need and encourage them to come up with their own solutions. If they seem stuck, I will then provide them with the information I have gathered, but encourage them to tailor it to their own needs.

Outputs:

To insure that by the end of this project that there is a core of young people in Franklin County who are trained to lead workshops on issues of importance to them and their peers. They need to be trained in leadership skills and taught how to train others. These first trained youth representatives will go out and increase the number of youth leaders in order that young people can be involved in improving their own conditions in their community in their own way. In order to accomplish this, there needs to be a series of trainings held throughout the county. Then they should conduct a needs assessment and survey each of there communities to find out what the specific issues are which are most important to their community. There also needs to be curriculum development with a committee of young people, parents, teachers and a broad range of community people. It can then be shared with others who will implement it.

When this project is completed, there should be a number of young people and adult advisors in each school in the county, who are trained to run workshops dealing with youth issues. In addition these young people would benefit from mediation skill training, so that they could also mediate conflicts among their peers. They could also train other young people in these skills.

These leaders, having been trained, will also be able to serve on boards of organizations which deal with young people. By this means, the youth of the county will be assured that they will have input into the decisions which will affect their lives and the lives of their peers. They can inform the adults of the community what will and what won't be effective strategies in dealing with youth issues. They will have a say in developing strategies and collect data from their peers. Therefore in designing programs that affect them and having ownership of the process and implementation, there is more likelihood of success. They could also help prioritize the issues to work on first from a youth perspective, or at least work with the adults who may have information which the young are not aware of in making prioritizing decisions. The youth leaders can then go out and "sell" or share the information so that other young people don't feel that programs are not done "to" them but with and for them.

To establish an ongoing effort with youth leaders in continually keeping up with the needs of the young people in the community. Then together find ways of addressing those needs and to continually evaluate both the process and the outcomes.

There should also be an advisory board, including youth members, which oversees this project and evaluates it.

Inputs:

- We need the commitment of the community members; Parents, administrators, teachers, students and non school residents to support the school and its programs.
- There is also a time commitment. To get commitment of school districts to give credence to this effort, would help it be more effective and validate its importance.

- Money is needed for trainers and possible materials needed, which would include printed and audio visual materials. Young people involved need the resources to finance them to go to regional and national conferences to network with other youth, who are engaged in similar efforts. Ben and Jerry's and John LeClair Foundations are local funders who only fund local youth initiatives.
- We need Internet access because it is a way resources and ideas can be shared.
- There needs to be a fundraising plan, and someone with grant writing skills.
- There needs to be a regional coordinator to oversee this and to help the program spread to young people throughout the region and eventually to other areas as well. This person needs a salary which would be paid with money raised by fundraising and grants. To begin with this will be a part time position, which could be possibly part of the Youth Center's Coordinator's job description, when the Center starts up.
- There is also a need to establish a forum for youth leaders in the region or the state to meet periodically to share what they are doing. To learn from the successes and failures of each of the efforts. This would be a time to establish a speakers list and to share other resources which they found helpful. Skill trainings such as board member trainings, how to run meetings, mediation skills, diversity training and anything else which the group feels is important for their increased effectiveness.

The Five Steps of How I Established a Youth Leadership Program in a School

Setting:

1. TIME:

I am an Art teacher and I have the same students for four years. I now realize the importance of spending a lot of time with young people to establish relationships with them. I see students from the fifth through eighth grade, several times a week for ten weeks. This time allows the students to get to know me and my expectations, values and limits. I also have an opportunity to get to know them and follow their rapid development which changes so much during adolescence. I don't know that if I did not spend this much time with them as their Art teacher, that I would have the same relationship with them in "Speak Out"(SO) or "Green Mountain Teens". These are the two groups which I facilitate. "Speak Out" is a "choice course" I offer. Students sign up and work on issues which concern them. They have worked on animal rights issues, school policy and discipline, racism and sexism. "Green Mountain Teens-Junior High Project" (JHP) is another "choice course" which I facilitate, for which students sign up. This group is trained and does peer education on prevention of: drugs and alcohol, HIV/AIDS, date rape, suicide and depression, eating disorders, stress, and whatever else they want to address. They conduct workshops, lead groups, bring in speakers, fundraise and hold activities to become aware of and to increase healthy lifestyle choices.

The students involved in these programs are seventh and eighth graders. Unless they are new to our school, they know me pretty well. I don't always know them as well because they often act differently in small group settings. So I don't know if less time would produce the same results. The SO and JHP groups meet daily for forty minutes for most of the year.

2. Structure:

As a teacher and have created an environment in my classroom which I believe creates a safe space for all of us who are in the room while we are there. I doggedly adhere to enforcing the no violence, homophobia, racism and sexism rule. I address publicly to show my intolerance for any infraction. Students usually end up enforcing the rules themselves, or at least don't hesitate to report to me. I have asked former students if harassment goes on in my room which I don't catch and they said no. The reason they say that it happens elsewhere is that some teachers ignore so much or don't set clear guidelines or aren't consistent. I think part of this may have to do with the fact that some teachers don't know where they stand on these issues and are uncomfortable with them. Consistency is key. It is what makes the whole thing work. There is no compromise here.

Also I cannot underestimate the importance that Art has in increasing self esteem for young people. This may be another reason that there is a safe atmosphere in my room. There is student artwork all over the walls and doors. Students sometimes make things just to hang in the Art Room so that they have a part in creating the atmosphere.

In addition, I teach art from a cultural perspective so that the cultural heritage of all of the students is listed every year on a banner which is on the walls wrapping around the room. So far this year I have students whose backgrounds are from forty two countries and Native American Nations. This again stresses the importance of who the people in the room are, how diverse we are and to respect that diversity. This is as important a goal to me as teaching Art.

3.Coach

Unlike my role as an Art teacher, I am more of a coach when I work with the JHP or SO groups. I model to the students that teaching doesn't have to be hierarchical, and we all can become teachers as well as learners. I provide a forum for discussion of the issues and try to let the students do most of the talking. I help them find resources, which they must pursue themselves to find the answers they are looking for. I actually do no legwork, scheduling, phoning, etc. to pull together presentations which the groups put on. I only remind them that they need to know their subject and organize how they are going to present it. Mostly I have to bridle their enthusiasm. They want to get right out there and preach to the unconverted. I try to get them to think of creative and bizarre ways to present to their peers. After they have had a few successes and failures, they start to understand what works. This year I have also allowed them have failures, because I realize that they learn a lot more from the experience than if I told them it wouldn't work.(I use my judgement on this one, as I wouldn't let them do something totally outrageous.)

4.Importance Of Choice:

The students who are in SO and JHP are involved by choice. Sometimes it's because they really believe in the mission, and sometimes because their friends signed up. In addition, I don't have to keep anyone in the group, although I have only kicked one student out in three years, and I usually have some "tough" participants. Sometimes I try to attract students who I think would benefit from the experience of being in a leadership position. Most often it's the students who have already participated in one of the groups who will recruit others.

Scott's story: Scott is new to my school this year. He is in the eighth grade. For reasons

only known to the perpetrators, he immediately was picked on by a lot of students. He is skinny, wears thick glasses and is quiet. When picked on, he never rats on anyone, but just takes it. I have seen other boys slam him into the wall in the hall on several occasions, and he would do nothing. I would turn in the students who did it and tell Scott that he needed to start to do that himself. He always said that it didn't bother him. One day my "Speak Out" group members were telling me about the harassment at school, I asked them about what was happening to Scott. They told me that he was under constant attack. I saw him in the hall and asked him if he was being harassed and he lied and said no he wasn't any more. The next day he came up to me and said that someone had hit him. I told him to go to report it immediately. He did. I know from working with victims of domestic violence that the first step for the victim to gain back the control over her own life is to make a police report herself. When he got back to the classroom, he got beat up for telling, which is why he never reported before. I felt like I had betrayed him and he would never stand up for himself again. The "Speak Out" group then decided that the first issue that they were going to deal with was the increasing harassment in our school and what an unpleasant environment it had become for all of us. The administration wanted to have a speaker to come in to speak to 350 students. We all knew that wouldn't work. So the idea of writing skits about actual harassment that had happened to the students and performing them for their peers evolved. They needed more actors, because there were only seven students in the group. They got class lists and went through them for names of harassers and victims. Scott's name came up and they asked him. He said no, but some of the students realized the value of having him perform in front of the people who had been harassing him would have a huge impact on the whole group. After working on him for a few days, he agreed. The first thing I asked him to do after we all told him we knew what was going

on, was to scream at the top of his lungs “I’m not taking this anymore”. He did and he was in. He did a great job, and made some new friends in the process. He has more respect from everyone because he was very brave to get up and do it. When I heard sniveling comments from some of the harassers, I asked them if they would like to perform with us and they said “No way”.

5. Validation by Adults and Peers:

Initially I thought that this was only important for the students, but it is also important for me. I get very little feedback from my peers, and sometimes I know the attitude is “There goes Priscilla again overreacting and getting the students all charged up over issues that are best left alone.” I have always felt like a solo act in this work that I do with my students. My experience at the CED program has finally put me in touch with others who have the same passion for social justice work, and some of them have felt extreme isolation themselves. I never knew if what I was doing was meaningful or important and hardly ever took time to reflect on whether it was making much of a difference until I had to write this thesis. So the value of writing this has been to evaluate and network with others who are doing the same work and finding out that, yes, it is important and has value. I realize that I, as well as my students, need training and support. We offer it to each other, but sometimes we need more than that. I encourage my colleagues to make a point of telling the students what a good job they are doing.

Then it all proved true when Stacey and then other former students of mine kept coming down to my classroom from the high school to tell me about the harassment that was occurring there and that the adults were ignoring it, and what could we do. I then realized that these students had learned from their experiences in SO and JHP to identify their values, where to go for

support, and to stand up against the ignorance and apathy of an entire school and want to make a change. It just isn't acceptable to them and they don't care what anyone thinks, because they know they have each other and they also know that they can attract other like minded young people, because they have been able to successfully do it in the past. They too were validated when two years ago they were invited to the University of Vermont by two professors, Paj Wadley-Bailey and David Conrad at The Center for World Education. Paj and David were so impressed by what these young people were doing they were put in touch with UVM students so they could hear from them. Then three of the SO students were invited to speak as the only youth on a panel on racism and anti Semitism in Montpelier, Vermont. They had been listened to and were respected for their work.

What I Learned from this Process:

I learned that young people are very capable in identifying issues which affect their lives and can plan and carry out solutions to those issues. They are thoughtful and honest and often want feedback from adults. They need to be supported in their trials and errors and to be encouraged to continue to try to come up with solutions to the issues they are working on resolving. They are good teachers and even become good role models for each other when they understand the importance of what they are doing. I also learned that it is often difficult to get adults to listen to young people and value them as potential active participants in creating change for a community.

For instance when Stacey decided that she wanted to start the E.R.A.S.E. chapter in our school, she was just thinking that racism was a black/ white issue. After a few discussions in the

Speak Out group, she said that students called her derogatory names because of her looks. I told her to go home and find out what her cultural heritage was. She found out that she was part Abenaki, which explained her features. Others then became interested in their cultural heritage and some found out that they were part Native American, but their families had never told them before. This collective experience caused them to realize that racism was broader than they had previously realized. There was a reason their families did not want to recognize their Indianess, so the students researched the history to find out why.

They then realized that this was not the history they had been taught in school. In order books on accurate Native American history, they fundraised themselves to raise the money necessary. They challenged their teachers whenever the history was taught incorrectly, or Native Americans were stereotyped in negative ways. Eventually some of the students asked their Social Studies teacher if they could teach a unit on stereotypes and she agreed. They shared what they had learned with their classmates, and were well received. Not only did they teach historically accurate information, but they found out how hard it is to be a teacher and to hold the interest their peers.

The experience changed them. They were much more likely to stand up for what they believed in and to find resources to find out more if they didn't have the answers. They learned to be critical thinkers and not just take everything at face value, but to question perspectives. Two of the students went on to the summer Holocaust Institute to learn more, and brought all that information back to share with their peers. There they also met people from other areas of the state who are able to come and share their experiences with St. Albans students.

These are also the students who came to me when the racially motivated harassment

occurred at the high school this fall. They were upset that the adults they spoke to at the High School did nothing. So I have seen and continue to see that when young people are given the chance, they can do amazing things. Sometimes they even have to be held back. It takes a long time for all of this to happen. Together we are working on this issue currently. We have started meeting formally and have found that there is no harassment policy at the High School ,or at the school where I teach. They are now in the process of organizing other students, and we are working with adults and students from Burlington who have already dealt with this issue. We will next conduct school climate surveys and then try to get administration to sit down and work on the harassment issues with us. There have been three lawsuits filed against the High School in the last two months because of harassment and assaults. They were filed because the school has apparently done little to nothing to deal with the harassment, and it is not a safe place for many students. The same is becoming true for the school where I teach. Stacey has conducted a survey at the high school on harassment concerns and issues. I am currently organizing with a group of students, parents and administrators to write a harassment policy. It is hard to get the adults to accept the idea of students being part of this process, but I have the students who are willing and I think the adults will be impressed at how much they have to offer.

As I tried to think back on what the first step was, I realized that it is to establish relationships between myself and the students and between each other. Then I created a safe space. I have rules and mutual respect is demanded. On my wall there is a sign, which four years ago I felt that I had to post because my students needed a constant reminder. The first poster read “This is a Violence Free Zone”, because I was seeing an increasing amount of violence in artwork. Because of other things that were happening or being said in the room with increasing frequency, I

had to add to it. The sign now reads “This is a violence, homophobic, racist, sexist free zone”. I am very strict about the adherence to this. Now the students police each other, because they know how strongly I feel about upholding this atmosphere. Former students say that I was strict about this, but they knew my boundaries and they actually appreciated it, because it was safe for them. From this I learned that young people need clear boundaries, and if they are explained and there is discussion and input, then everyone knows what is expected of each other. Only after this, the discussions began to evolve about what young people are most concerned with. They like the high standard, to which we are all held. Some even carry this message out of the classroom. So I learned that young people care about how we all treat each other.

They are also very quick to point out the double standard that adults often have. That they tell young people things that they don’t hold themselves to. Young people have a pretty clear outlook on much of societies’ inconsistencies. In creating a place where young people can talk about these thing that they think about a lot, but don’t often have the opportunity to talk to an adult or each other about the things that they see around them which don’t make sense.

For example several of my student leaders are on the Act 51 Grant review committee. They help us decide how to spend the drug free school money which comes to the school. They were talking about how it doesn’t make sense that adults tell them they shouldn’t do drugs when they go to concerts with their parents and people are smoking pot and the police are there, but don’t do anything, and that some of their classmates parents smoke with their children and others aren’t allowed to and it’s illegal for everyone. The mixed messages in advertising that is directed at them containing adult themes and behaviors that we tell young people they shouldn’t engage in. They know this advertising is created by adults and they just don’t understand it.

These are the types of discussions that go on before they actually decide what to do about the issue we are working on, or even choosing an issue. This is the process I let them go through to feel safe with me and each other. I then encourage them to think of ways to inform their peers about the media and the other mixed messages they are bombarded with every day and what to do about it. I give them ideas from letter writing to boycott to guerilla theater to curriculum change. I then leave them on their own to come up with their own way of dealing with an issue. This too takes a lot of time, as in the school setting students are not often given this much control over what they are to learn and how to learn and then teach it to their peers in their own way. They need lots of encouragement at this stage not only for the value of the content of what they will teach but for creative ways to carry their message.

In this process, I have learned that even though I had very definite ideas about how I wanted young people to deal with issues, they have their own way, which is more relevant for them and their peers. Whether it is dealing with issues such as sexism and racism or more palatable school issues, the young people know best how to present the information so that it is fun, relevant and can illicit feedback from their peers.

I was sure that the Youth Center was what the young people in my community need, which they do, but I already had something that I was doing and didn't know it. I was developing youth leaders in my school and they were educating their peers themselves in their own way on issues which concerned them. I am now trying to decide how to keep this effort alive and to keep it going. One idea is to take my youth leaders to other schools to tell about our model. Another is to have youth leadership development be part of after school programs in the school and to have a more intensive project during vacations and summer months. In the last two weeks three high

school students, who were former students of mine, have asked to come back and work in my classroom. They are and I also have them go out to students who need them in other classrooms.

Young people have a lot to say, and I have learned that they mostly want to be listened to and be validated. They think a lot more about serious social issues, the environment, their future than I had previously thought. They don't feel as though they can effect change, and it takes a lot of convincing and trials for them to believe that they can make a difference. Once they have a few successes, they are more willing to believe that they can effect the change they seem to want. I had one student, who a few weeks ago say that kids nor adults cannot change the way that the world is. After a successful presentation to their peers on harassment issues, he has changed his mind.

I have also learned how stuck adults are both in and out of the school setting in how young people and their issue should be dealt with. Top down style of management does not work. They think that if the top down way of dealing with issues is not received by the youth, it is the fault of the youth. Very few realize that if they ever asked the young people themselves, that they know what their peers are going to listen to and how that material or issue should be presented. They just need encouragement and support of adults in order to take the risk and do it. I have found that adult resistance and power and control issues are the biggest obstacles to this project. It is that reluctance to share in decision making that turns young people off from attempting to effect change in their environment. The adults need training in how to share the power with younger people, and have everyone come out a winner.

Change takes a long time and the buy in by adults and youth is the key component.

I learned was that the political climate of the community is reflected by the politics inside the school. The attitudes of administrators towards faculty and students is a hierarchical one that

traditionally has kept the students in a powerless position. Because of their sense of powerlessness and lack of hope in affecting change, students have become increasingly disruptive and disrespectful. They now are taking their frustration out on each other when not trying to take it out on the adults, with their disruptive behavior in the learning environment. This is like the society at large. People feeling oppressed, and blaming the closest victim instead of looking at the root causes for their oppression. Just as in the larger community, punishing behavior without trying to change the environment or change behavior or asking the opinions of the people involved is fruitless. It will just continue or get worse until the young people can be part of the process to find their own answers and solutions.

Change cannot happen without the buy in of all effected. One of the things I do is to explain to my students where the power is from and where the money comes from, the power structure from teacher to administrator to school board. The community, including parents, have power in that they vote school budgets and provide most of the money. Some schools get state aid to education monies. This way the students understand who has the control and makes decisions and who they need to go to ask for what they want.

I have them practice before going to talk to whomever, stressing respect and good manners, and doing it in a nonconfrontational way so that the other person will listen to them. Whenever they need to bring in other people from the outside as guest speakers or facilitators for workshops, I have the students do the phoning and scheduling. They have to coordinate it with the teachers and administrators, reserve rooms, make posters, put it in the announcements.

From What I Learned, Where do I Want to Take This?

That in every school in Franklin County, there is a forum for young people to speak about the issues which concern them. Through the use of trained youth leaders and adult supporters or advisors the young people can themselves find the answers which best suit the needs of their particular community. The youth leaders then become youth trainers, who train other young people.

There also be an advisory board representational of the communities being served, who will assess needs, set goals, create strategies and evaluate the project on an ongoing basis. The long range effect would be that through this process these young leaders will grow up to be adult leaders who will have had the experience in making a difference in their community, and therefore may be more likely to be agents of positive change throughout their lives.

Eventually I could envision this project growing. After the program has been in existence for a period of time and has been evaluated and reworked to fit the needs of the particular community, I could take my leaders out of our communities to train others. We could also network with others who are doing the similar projects in other places and share ideas and resources. This is in the beginning stages right now. We have started to contact other schools and are bringing in students from other schools to share what they are doing with youth leadership.

Solutions:

1. Give young people responsibility so that they can see that they can have a positive impact on creating a better community
2. Prepare young people for the future in which they will be living. Currently our educational

system is not working for increasing numbers of young people.

3. Teach critical thinking skills so that young people can be better prepared to deal with all that is put in their way by society and the media, which is being responsible to them. Currently advertising is aimed at young people because they are the ones with disposable income.

D. Explain the power basis and have them become part of it.

E. I would like to see a comprehensive youth services program in Franklin County. There are successful models in other parts of Vermont. One is the King Street Youth Center in Burlington. They have many services, one being “Teen Futures” which focuses on seven aspects of achieving healthy lifestyle choices for young people. Another is the Washington County Youth Center, which offers similar comprehensive services for youth. Burlington also has a youth services bureau, which meets monthly so that agencies who work with youth can network and coordinate their services. I would like to see that there would also be coordination between the schools, social service agencies and the youth center which may be operating within a year in this county. I would like to see young people being a part of all of the programming, coordination and running of the center. With training they should have positions on all of the boards of agencies who deal with youth issues.

Conclusion:

This work is not easy and what I have learned about myself is how strongly I feel about tolerance issues and my dogged and tirelessness in working with young people around these issues as well as trying to live it myself. Sometime I even have learned that I have to make compromises. I have softened what I call what we do to make it more palatable to those who are afraid of controversy, which is just about every administrator I have worked with. I now say that we are

working on harassment issues instead of naming racism, sexism etc. When dealing with domestic violence and date rape, we now call it dating violence. The message is still the same, only the names have changed so that we can deliver the message to those who want it and think that adults are stupid because they don't want young people to know about things that are going on all around them.

The other thing I realized that I no longer am on a solo mission to save the world. I now have allies who feel as passionately as I do for a variety of reasons. They are young and old and everywhere. I have learned that in talking to most everyone I come in contact with in this community about the problems facing youth, there are a lot of concerned people, but they are not organized. This has been an amazing experience. Last night I took some young people to Burlington to share their stories about the school harassment issues and asked for help. They are going to get it and they learned how to organize and they were so excited that they were listened to and together we will try to effect change.

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