

Eyes on the World

Trevor emerged from the front row, ready to meet the challenge -- “You think you can do better?!” -- from rapper Stab Master Arson. Picking up the beat, he began to flow, engaging the crowd with his crisp lyrics. Soon the audience of 900 was cheering and even rapping along to the words, which took aim at the materialism, shallowness, and bling-bling style of Stab Master, the corporatized world of gangsta rap, and the self-oppression that urban youth often buy into. Trevor, Stab Master, and the others on stage were Teen Empowerment youth, and this was Act I of “Eyes on the World” at the 11th annual TE Youth Peace Conference.

When the doors to the John Hancock Hall opened at 10:00 a.m. on May 3, 2003, people began pouring in from all parts of the city and from communities around Massachusetts. Those who arrived early had time to browse the 35 tables at the Service Fair, to join in a “Connection Section” workshop facilitated by TE youth, and to have lunch to a hip-hop beat.

By 1:00 p.m., everyone assembled in the auditorium and the lights went up on Stab Master Arson and his crew. Each of the show’s three acts featured original dance and video; rappers illuminated the message with their words and beats; and speeches between acts highlighted the themes. After each act, there was an audience speak-out, with talk-show-style emcees circulating.

One act featured that popular staple of confrontational TV, “The Jenny Blinger Show.” The day’s main guests were tycoons Roberta Morecash and John Floormart, engaging in heated debate with an inner-city teacher, a high school student, a police officer, and a recent immigrant. In a series of riotous and provocative exchanges, the guests engaged the issues of poverty, privilege, and civic



PHOTO: MERRILL SHEA

A scene from “The Jenny Blinger Show” at the Youth Peace Conference, with Vianny Tejada, Denroy Thomas, and Melinda Estrada

responsibility.

Finally, the show took a hard look at the “war on terrorism” through the eyes of a teen couple whose family histories with the military led them to differing views on U.S. foreign policy and military enlistment. With these issues reverberating throughout the hall, Hanad Duale came to the podium. Hanad is a 14 year old English High student who emigrated from Somalia with his family in 1998. As he described the suffering and pain that he witnessed in his war-ravaged homeland,

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Dear Friends of Teen Empowerment,

Welcome to the first edition of the *TE Times*. This publication is dedicated to keeping you — our network of TE supporters — informed about our recent work, current challenges, and opportunities to get involved with TE's unique brand of youth-led social change.

As we pulled together the articles for this newsletter, I was struck by how much Teen Empowerment has achieved since we opened our doors in 1992. Hundreds of amazing youth have led their communities as Youth Organizers over the years, and literally tens of thousands of others have been touched by our work. The thoughtful voices of youth have been heard again and again, empowering people in Boston and beyond to act on issues that impact the quality and direction of their lives. The pride I feel when I think about this work and all the people who have made it happen keeps me looking forward with optimism as the next program year begins.

Still, bringing Teen Empowerment through these challenging times requires the utmost in hope and perseverance. Budget cuts are eliminating vital programs for the poor and working class, while the state of the economy is shrinking philanthropic dollars. In city neighborhoods, youth act out their frustration, rage, and confusion through misdirected violence. The government in Washington is moving aggressively to turn education into test prep, to put the needs of those living in poverty on the national back burner, and to shut down dissent. The war in Iraq fills our daily news with reports of chaos and death.

In these times, TE's work is more important than ever. We are bringing together youth and police to work for change in neighborhoods, teachers and students to work for change in schools, youth from privileged backgrounds and youth from the inner city to create change in society, and youth from all over the state to consider issues of destructive behaviors, economic justice, and war and peace. We are bringing urban youth into the world of civic engagement and training the adults of the next decade for thoughtful, intelligent, and inclusive leadership.

As you read these snapshots of our work, I hope you recognize in them, as I do, the impact of the support that you have provided, for which we are most grateful.

With warmest regards,



Stanley Pollack
Executive Director

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Thanks to the following dedicated individuals who work on behalf of the youth of Boston by serving on Teen Empowerment's Board of Directors.

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(Watch for our updated website later this fall.)

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Two Schools, One Love: Youth Exchange for Change

The leafy campus at the Cambridge School of Weston (CSW) feels like a small liberal arts college. There are studios for painting and ceramics, sprawling playing fields, and a state-of-the-art building for music, theater, and dance performances. Between classes at this private high school, some of the 300 students hang out on the grassy quad.

Twenty miles away in Jamaica Plain, 1300 students at The English High School (EHS) sit in overcrowded classrooms in a converted gas factory. The auditorium fits only 400, there is no grassy quad, and budget cuts mean no art teacher this September.

TE's Youth Organizers at English last year wanted to explore the issue of educational equity. Thus, an invitation to make a presentation at CSW's annual Diversity Day presented a rich opportunity for collaborative work in this area. Instead of just showing up for a traditional presentation, TE involved CSW students and faculty in dialogue and planning for the day, which included skits, speeches, video, music, and a speak-out. A few weeks later, 25 CSW students attended TE's Youth Peace Conference. Then on May 28th, 26 CSW students and faculty came to English.

The visit began with breakfast, a tour of the school, and a meeting to reacquaint people and go over the goals for the day. TE staff led Name, Chant, and Motion, an interactive exercise that brings out people's creativity and breaks down barriers. As people chanted each other's names and copied their motions, the resistance of the teens and adults faded away; they were able to laugh, get to know each other, and establish trust for the conversations that lay ahead.

The students then broke into groups and headed into two classrooms, where the TE Youth Organizers led 80-minute workshops, morning and afternoon, for students from both schools. The

Concentric Circles activity brought EHS and CSW students into one-on-one conversations on topics like the conditions of their schools, their hopes and dreams, and strategies for social change. A Wordstorm on "stereotypes" led to discussions about class and race that increased understanding all around.

"We both, English High and CSW, have such fantastic ideas, and I feel if we work hard together we can achieve them."

– William Popp, student at the Cambridge School of Weston

The day ended with an after-school luncheon where students and teachers, urban and suburban, discussed what they learned and brainstormed next steps. An English High teacher summed up the experience as a "great vision," and a CSW teacher said that he came to the day skeptical that any real work would get done but left with a feeling of achievement and readiness for action.

The project will continue; its ultimate goal is to develop a coalition working for equitable funding for urban schools. Youth leadership, commitment to social justice, and the ability to build relationships across socioeconomic divides — all are playing a part in making this dynamic project a success.

For more information, contact Sheri Bridgeman (sheri@teenempowerment.org or 617-522-2700) or Andy Haydu (andrew@teenempowerment.org or 617-522-5974).

Celebrate with TE on November 19.

See page 5 for details.

Mixing It Up in the SE/LR

The South End/Lower Roxbury is a complex mix of class, racial, and social dynamics. Million-dollar condos are steps away from subsidized high-rise apartment buildings. Several cultures, including gay, Dominican, Puerto Rican, and African-American, mix uneasily. For some low-income SE/LR youth, the world is defined by senseless cycles of attack and revenge along the turf lines of housing developments, while wealthier residents often see

“Teen Empowerment is well known for providing youth with the tools to understand and change social policies.... Rather than just rail against gentrification, they searched for common ground with newer residents, who clearly appreciated such uncommon effort.”

—Boston Globe Editorial, April 12, 2003

teens in general as sources of danger and threat.

Each fall, TE's SE/LR site hires a group of youth whose job is to create positive change in the community, building trust between groups whose relationships are characterized by suspicion and hostility. In past years, Youth Organizers have concentrated mainly on youth turf wars. But recently they have expanded their horizons to take in the discord that exists between youth and adults – beginning with meetings to open up dialogue with the police.

Shaped by TE's interactive methodology, these sessions brought out intense emotions, including the negative feelings that youth and police often have for one another. The officers talked about how it feels to face danger every time they answer a call and about horrific experiences intrinsic to their jobs, such as seeing a young accident victim whose legs had just been severed. During a role-play exercise, an officer acted out a confrontation he'd had just days before with a teenager carrying a machine gun. The group discussed how it feels to be in such danger and to make a split-second decision whether or not to shoot another human being. They talked about how officers under stress can see menace in someone who's minding his or her own business. They talked about the high levels of stress among officers, about racism and prejudice, and about how these issues affect police work.

The youth-police group then organized a neighborhood dialogue session, hoping to bring more people together to discuss these issues and develop ideas to address them. More than 50 people participated in the session, including police from different areas, youth workers, and neighborhood young people. The youth learned how the threat of terrorism and the downsizing in the Police Department have created longer hours and higher levels of stress



PHOTO: JENNIFER BANISTER

Boston police officer Fabio Cabrera and TE youth Lex Vega during a dialogue session.

for the officers. The officers acknowledged how important it is for youth to have a variety of recreational activities, programs that promote community, and legitimate opportunities to make money. All came to see how a community can dysfunction when it lacks avenues for positive youth involvement.

In a subsequent meeting, officers from the SE/LR unit, BPD District 4, identified tension between adult residents and youth as a major source of misunderstanding and hostility between youth and police. According to the officers, when adults, acting out of fear or prejudice, lodge complaints about area youth, superior officers often demand that police crack down.

The SE/LR site decided to organize community dialogue sessions as a way to address this unhealthy cycle and raise awareness among residents about the realities that youth face. By passing out flyers, contacting neighborhood associa-

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Thanks to our Supporters

In 2002, TE employed 55 teens and 15 adults and implemented more than 50 projects and initiatives that involved over 4,000 people in helping to improve their schools and communities. The youth and staff of Teen Empowerment are most grateful to our donors, who have played a critical role in making possible these vitally needed programs. In these times of contracting resources, your continued support is more important than ever.

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Contact Alex Ocasio: alex@teenempowerment.org
or 617-536-4266 x 301.



PHOTOS: MERRILL SHEA

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tions, and getting coverage in the local paper, TE youth recruited more than 75 adult residents to attend these sessions. In a series of rich and intense discussions, youth and adults probed some of the dynamics that set them against one another — gentrification, soaring rents, loss of neighborhood stores, homophobia, prejudice, racism, lack of youth services, and lack of community policing.

Resident Fern Beschler, who attended a dialogue session, stated it best from the adult perspec-

tive: "I am learning that the best protection for personal safety and property values is a longer-term effort to know our neighbors, to support people and programs that are working with youth in the community, and to create more opportunities and events that bring people together."

For more information, contact Jennifer Banister (jennifer@teenempowerment.org or 617-536-4266 x 310) or Banjineh Browne (banjineh@teenempowerment.org or 617-536-4266 x 313).

Expression Sessions at Dorchester High

Of the 900 students registered at Dorchester High School in a typical year, only about 10 in each class had listed Dorchester as their first high school choice. “I’m transferring next year” is a common refrain among the freshman. But after a year or two most have made friends, know some teachers, and have learned the tricks to help them make it through. They have become part of the community that is Dorchester High. “At first, I

the room and invited them to find a seat in the horseshoe of comfortable chairs. Interactive exercises like Name Whisper/Name Shout and Wind Blows set the tone for an informal but structured session in which everyone’s opinions would be heard. “Basically, we wanted to show people that their voice was important, that together we could make a difference,” explained one Youth Organizer. “This is happening, and we can’t stop it from happening, but we can change the way it comes down.”

“This was the most important thing for us to do — to get the voice of students out there, so that the change doesn’t just happen to us.”

— TE Youth Organizer at Dorchester High School

couldn’t stand it and wanted to transfer so bad, but then I got into being here, and now I’m proud of being at Dorchester,” is how one senior put it. In an underperforming inner-city high school, this pride is one of the bright spots.

However, in the face of continuing logistical, organizational, and resource problems at DHS, the School Department decided to radically restructure the way things work in the old Dorchester building. The superintendent announced in January that DHS would close at the end of the academic year and the building would reopen in September as the Dorchester Education Complex, containing three separate high schools. While this initiative has exciting potential, the news had the immediate impact of lowering morale and the unintended consequence of creating substantial instability among teachers and students.

TE’s Youth Organizers had already designed an action strategy, which they were in the process of implementing, to address other important issues in the school. But they felt a strong need to respond to this crisis and recognized that this situation demanded a new approach. What emerged from their planning meetings was a series of 20 “Expression Sessions” to get students talking about the changes and involved in the process.

With the support of teachers and administrators, students in groups of 15-20 attended a session in the Teen Empowerment space. For each session, TE youth and adult staff welcomed students into

Through the small group discussions that followed, students laid out a range of responses to the school changes, from fear about conflicts between the schools to concerns about what would happen to their favorite teachers.

Almost every student enlightened the group on some aspect of what school should be. Kenny, a tenth grader better known for his jokes than his insight, talked about the oppression and the racism that he sees. Students generally seen as “high risk” or troublemakers talked about how Dorchester teachers believed in them when no one else would.

In the end, after 300 or so students had said their piece, a set of recommendations emerged and was presented to the superintendent’s reorganization design team. Based on their clarity, scope, and sophistication, these recommendations — including finding ways for the three schools to come together, consistent behavior management, creativity in the classroom, and more resources — could have come from a panel of experts on school reform. And they did, for who could be more knowledgeable about the issues facing a school than its own teachers and students?

The process of developing the new schools in the Dorchester Education Complex is complicated. Many questions are still to be answered and many doubts overcome. This is an experiment that must succeed, for the futures of today’s 900 students, and the thousands to follow, are in the balance. Thanks to the powerful voices of the students, there are now some concrete action steps that can ease the way.

For more information, contact Sapna Padte or Nick Richardson at 617-288-4504 or sapna@teenempowerment.org.

Bridging the Language Gap at Madison Park

John Riccio had been to some Teen Empowerment Events at Madison Park High School and was impressed by what he'd seen. So when he received a memo from TE offering classroom assistance, he arranged with TE's Program Coordinators to help out with his most difficult class.

The class had about 20 ESL (English as a Second Language) students, speaking four different native languages and all lacking sufficient English fluency to learn effectively in a mainstream classroom. Problems included disruptive behavior, disrespect, cliques based on ethnicity, and the absence of a common language. In this milieu, Mr. Riccio was struggling to cover the curriculum to prepare students for required standardized tests.

In a series of eight classroom sessions from January to June, TE staff and Mr. Riccio worked together to transform the students' learning experience. Before class, they took the simple but important step of arranging the desks in a semi-circle. The first session concentrated on using interactive exercises like Bag Toss and The Good Show to build relationships among the students. Subsequent sessions continued working on communication and

respect, while also using custom-made interactives (such as Sentence Relay, Conversation Theater, and Pop the Possessive into Place) to work on specific elements of the curriculum.

Tensions that had consumed class time and teacher attention decreased dramatically throughout these sessions and student engagement and productivity increased. According to Mr. Riccio, the new approach allowed students to feel more at ease expressing their opinions in class and this freedom played a major role in helping them to speak and learn English. One student said, "I have learned more English during this time than I have all year."

Developing interactive ways of teaching the ESL curriculum challenged the TE staff and required many hours of focused preparation, but the investment of time and energy proved to be worthwhile – for the students, for the teacher, and for a concrete demonstration of the adaptability of TE's interactive methodology.

For more information, contact Kim Molle or LaTia King: madison@teenempowerment.org or 617-989-0804.

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To receive notification when ***Moving Beyond Icebreakers®*** is published, contact Mary Fusoni: mary@teenempowerment.org or 617-536-4266 x 307.

Coming Soon

TE's Training Highlights

Teen Empowerment offers consulting and training services to police, teachers, youth agencies, and social service workers, using and adapting TE's methods to help our clients meet their goals. We train people for working both more effectively with youth and more productively with adult colleagues. Often, TE youth are involved as trainers.

“With positive responses from all participants, the MBTA Police Department is considering ways to expand the current pilot program and incorporate it into the curriculum for all patrol officers.”

— Press release from the MBTA regarding TE's training sessions for police recruits

Recent projects include:

- Training students at the Harvard Graduate School of Education on interactive learning methods and best practices for teaching in inner-city schools.
- Training newly-hired MBTA police officers, with the focus on relating to urban adolescents, discussing positive and negative aspects of authority, and exploring the issues that youth and police face and how these issues affect the daily job functions of the officers.
- Helping the Boston Partners in Education staff to structure their meetings to be more effective and engaging.
- Working with a group of 12 young men in a court-monitored treatment program to explore the issues they face and the strengths they have, and to begin acquiring the skills they need to transform their lives.
- Organizing the efforts of the Boston Student Advisory Committee (city-wide student government for the Boston Public Schools).
- Organizing a youth summit for the city of Fall River at the request of the mayor.

For information about TE's consulting and training, contact Wendy Jebens: wendy@teenempowerment.org or 617-536-4266 x 306.

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the crowd went silent. “If you have experienced war like I have,” he said, “you know that war can never be an easy answer. Our leaders need to know that we will not blindly follow them into war. We, the African-American, Somali, Asian, White, Latino, rich and poor people need to work together to make hatred, violence, and wars things of the past. I pray that this day will come soon.” When Hanad looked up from his written speech, the audience was on its feet, cheering, and world issues had gained new meaning.

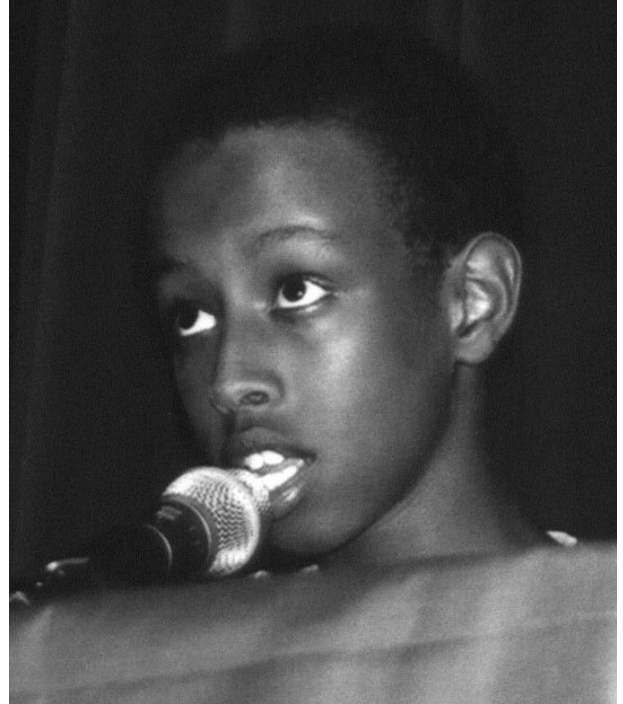


PHOTO: WALTER BULLOCK

Hanad Duale speaking at the Youth Peace Conference

It took four months and over 70 Teen Empowerment youth and adults to create everything contained in this dynamic and ambitious social change presentation. The dances, videos, speeches, plays, set design, and outreach were all driven by the Teen Empowerment Model's reliance on youth voice, creativity, and action.

If you want to see Hanad and the other youth in action, a two-hour highlight video is available from the Teen Empowerment Office. And the 12th annual Youth Peace Conference is set for Saturday, May 15, 2004. See you there!

For information or tickets, or to volunteer at the Youth Peace Conference, contact Stephanie Berkowitz: stephanie@teenempowerment.org or 617-536-4266 x 304.