

Teen Empowerment in Rochester, NY Current Initiatives and Recent Events

<http://www.teenempowerment.org>

Spring 2009

MYAC Carves out Official Role for Youth in City's Strategic Planning

The **Mayor's Youth Advisory Council** (MYAC) is a group of 20 youth ages 14-19 that is formed using Teen Empowerment's selection process and represents youth from programs across the Rochester, as well as more disconnected youth without program support. MYAC is an outgrowth of Teen Empowerment's 2005 Youth Organizer group, which developed a five-point Youth Agenda for Change with input from nearly 1,000 Rochester youth. Mayor Robert Duffy then approached TE to form the council to advise him on policies that affect youth.

The MYAC youth participated in the city's *Voice of the Customer* sessions, which were designed to inform the City of Rochester's strategic plan and involved approximately 300 adults from around the city. The kinds of solutions coming from adults at these sessions regarding youth issues alarmed the MYAC members because they seemed shortsighted and distant from the real problems of the city's young people. The Mayor then requested that MYAC design and host a *Voice of the Youth Forum*. Nearly 200 youth and adult allies packed City Council Chambers for this powerful and youth-friendly event, which was held on June 4, 2008.

At the forum, MYAC members set the tone through a series of speeches and creative presentations. They then facilitated small breakout groups in conference rooms throughout City Hall to gather focused solutions from youths' perspectives. Following these sessions, they opened the microphone, allowing approximately 30 young people to speak out on their visions for a more effective and loving approach to youth in Rochester.

The *Voice of the Youth Forum* was attended by Mayor Duffy, Superintendent Brizard, Chief Moore, and several city councilors, school board commissioners, and city hall staff members. It was carried live on *RNews*, and the *Democrat & Chronicle* dedicated its entire Speaking Out page to publishing the youths' speeches on Sunday, June 8.

The forum and the presence of youth at the public hearing on the budget the following week resulted in the restoration of funding for school-based recreation centers that had been cut, as well as summer jobs for young people attending the forum, and commitment to developing PRIME, the City's job program that partners with unions and employers to give viable alternatives to young adults who have otherwise had a hard time getting employment and staying employed.

MYAC's report to the community, *Youth Priorities in Action*, was publicly released at a community forum on May 5.

Dr. Andrew Turner, Chief of Performance, Accountability & Customer Satisfaction at City Hall, has

officially structured MYAC into the City's system for gathering feedback from citizens, and steps have begun to institutionalize the MYAC in the City Charter. MYAC members are currently meeting with department heads at City Hall and are deploying to their home neighborhood associations to forward youth priorities and work for a better community for all.

MYAC's work was featured on WXXI's Bob Smith's *1370 Connection* on August 20, 2008, and the report was covered by the *Democrat & Chronicle*, *Minority Reporter*, *City Newspaper*, *RNews* and all the city's news stations. Here are some links to coverage:

- City Youths Voice Concerns

http://www.rnews.com/Story_2004.cfm?ID=61838&rnews_story_type=18&category=10

- Mayor's Teen Advisors Tell It Like It Is

http://www.rnews.com/Story_2004.cfm?ID=64163&rnews_story_type=18

- Youth: Building Trust with Teens

<http://www.rochestercitynewspaper.com/news/articles/YOUTH:+Building+trust+with+teens/>

The forum is available for viewing on RNews On-Demand, Time Warner Cable Channel 108, Voice of the Youth Forum, June 4, 2008

Citywide Vibe Open Mic Demonstrates Model for Safe, Healing Teen Social Gatherings

Teen Empowerment 2008 youth organizer group in Rochester created a plan for summer initiatives that began with a Citywide Open Mic gathering. Approximately 100 youth attended. The youth organizers set a positive tone for the gathering and the standard for the open mic performances through interactive activities and passionate and confident poetry, monologues, and songs interspersed throughout the evening. Thirteen open mic performers—including a girls' dance group, rappers, poets and singers—graced the stage with appropriate, thought-provoking and inspired offerings to the supportive youth audience about the challenging realities youth face in Rochester communities and how youth can interrupt destructive cycles. The dance party following the open mic performances had no incidents.

Youth-Police Unity Project (YPUP): Poised to Transform Public Safety Discourse and Policies

The Youth-Police Unity Project's Collaborative Change Process in Rochester arrives at a crucial juncture in 2009.

- Surveys and focus groups are helping to understand the state of police-youth relations in Rochester from the perspectives of youth and police themselves. Survey results have begun to be tabulated and analyzed by RIT's Center for Public Safety Initiatives.
- Police officers and youth organizers on the YPUP Core Group are preparing to facilitate results of the surveys and use them to move the community toward new ways of thinking about why

youth-police relations are as they are and how we can and must improve mutual trust and engagement for a stronger community.

- The Rochester Police Department (RPD) has requested more dialogue/training sessions between TE youth and its young patrol officer force.
- This is an optimal time for the YPUP's efforts to educate and engage the wider community, as community groups on all sides of the issue are focused on public safety concerns and measures.

5th Annual Rochester Youth Conference *Mayor Duffy, Teens Commit to Breaking Cycles of Violence & Poverty*

Forty Rochester youth contributed to the hard-hitting relevance of TE's 5th annual Youth Conference and SpeakOut, held on November 8, 2008, and attended by between 500-600 youth. This year's theme, ***Breaking Generational Curses***, engaged area youth in examining the pressing issues that have brought harm—such as violence, substance abuse, police-youth distrust, school dropouts, and teen pregnancy—and in exploring ways to break negative cycles that hold back Rochester's low-income communities. The conference featured young people's original performances and speeches, youth-led small group "connection sessions," and a Youth Opportunities Fair highlighting 20+ organizations. Mayor Bob Duffy and State Senator Joe Robach were on hand to show support to teens' efforts to empower themselves and advocate for policy changes that promote youth as assets who need help elevating the quality of life in the city.

At the first Rochester Youth Conference in 2004, attendees created a *Youth Agenda for Change* that Teen Empowerment has been working to address since then, resulting in policy changes to increase educational equity, more summer jobs for youth, creation of a city youth council, increasing arts opportunities, and efforts to improve youth-police relationships.

Infusing Youth Voice & Leadership: **Community Collaboration & Tipping the Rochester Discussion in a New Direction**

Teen Empowerment facilitates youth participation in hearings, community forums and newspaper articles/editorials related to community issues—such as education, public safety and quality of life. In each forum, the perspectives raised by the youth would not have surfaced without their presence. The vast majority of youth spoke out to prioritize the needs of youth, and move away from solely punitive approaches to address root causes of public safety issues involving youth.

As a leader in providing platforms for young people to speak out about public policy issues, Teen Empowerment has been asked by many groups and agencies who organize conferences and forums to provide youth speakers, panelists, and presenters at local, state, and regional events. The community collaborations our youth organizers and staff have actively participated in this year include:

- **TE focus group for Van White's report, *Looking Beyond the Numbers by Listening to Our Students***: Seven young people who worked with TE shared stories & solutions that might have prevented their dropping out of school.

- **Mayor Duffy's *Voice of the Customer Open Space Forums*** at Aquinas Institute & Gleason Works: MYAC youth advisors were the only youth representatives to provide strategic planning feedback at these forums.
- **Alliance for Quality Education's presentation to RCSD Board of Education:** TE staff person provided theatrical consultation, including script writing & direction, with Freedom School youth.
- **Rochester Children's Zone/Surround Care Community Action Team meetings—**Community Safety & Environment and Youth Support: TE youth inspire creativity and vision & advise grant-writing, participate in a survey of the community, and offer collaborative connections with TE's YPUP & other initiatives.
- **Monroe County ACCESS's Cultural Broker Dialogue Series:** TE and Slam High youth present to mental health and community-based agency providers youths' perspectives on coping with everyday trauma as urban youth, and the kinds of supports they really need. Communication was facilitated by TE's interactive model through poetry and fishbowl dialogue.
- **Western NY Gang Prevention Conference:** TE's program model was presented to 150 law enforcement professionals by TE's director, a Rochester Police Department officer, and 3 youth organizers (former youth offender, sister of murdered gang member, and a poet).
- **You Bet I Told** community meeting: Sharing information about efforts to improve youth-police relations.
- **Community task force to create successful re-entry employment plan for formerly incarcerated youth** led by Monroe County's community liaison.
- **Neighbors Building Neighborhoods:** TE youth who are 19th Ward & Sector 8 residents participate in community envisioning/planning sessions facilitated by Dr. Andrew Turner.
- **Coalition for Common Sense in Education—Student Forum:** TE provided the model and trained youth facilitators to prepare 24 peers to present their assessments of how to improve education to Superintendent Brizard, school board members, teachers, student teachers, and community members.
- **WXXI's Voice of the Voter forum:** Two voting-age TE youth represented the only voters under 30 gathered to develop questions for statewide candidates.
- Non-partisan **Election Night community events** where people gathered to watch election results.
- TE Associate Coordinators presented on a panel at a **Universal Declaration of Human Rights Day** event examining the impact on students of heightened security measures in urban schools.
- TE Associate Coordinators facilitate **Heart of the City** dialogue to engage 10 suburban youth with urban youth issues.

Recognition for TE's work in Rochester

TE's design of YPUP and MYAC was recognized as a **Best Practice for the Prevention of Dropouts by the US Conference of Mayors 2008**.

Nominated & chosen by **Monroe County Probation Officers Association** as beneficiary of its annual fundraising golf tournament.

RIT's Bruce R. James Public Service Award (*via Angelina Faulkner*) and **Masonic Service Award** (*via RPD Officer Moses Robinson*)

Associate Coordinator Leadership Program *Propels Movement toward Multiple TE Sites in Rochester Neighborhoods*

With the support of Rochester AmeriCorps and the City of Rochester's Summer of Opportunities program, TE is working with select former Youth Organizers (ages 18-20) to further their leadership, youth development and professional skills while pursuing higher education, and expanding TE's capacity to run multiple sites once funding collaborations are in place.

Consulting & Training Projects *Generating Revenue while Strengthening Partnerships and TE's Mission*

One of TE's revenue streams involves dissemination of our interactive methodology and evidence-based youth development model through consulting and training. Here are some examples of recent and current projects:

1. **Teen Empowerment designed and facilitated the opening and closing sessions of Rochester AmeriCorps' member orientation** where TE grounded the diverse group—most from suburban and rural areas outside of our region—to help prepare them for working with Rochester youth, through interactive relationship-building, self- and societal-reflection, and compelling and instructive stories presented by youth organizers.
2. TE designed **Monroe County ACCESS's Cultural Broker Dialogue series**, which assists in the building of meaningful and useful relationships between community members and mental health service providers toward reducing racial disparities in mental health care. The series had a profound impact on the participants, who have taken the 6-session experience back into their work in the following ways:
 - A white director instituted weekly conversations on race, welcomed by her organization's staff made up largely of people of color who valued the open, honest tone;
 - A school counselor is looking at how to build dialogue among his colleagues, including teachers, about better serving their mostly Latino population;

- An African-American community worker reports that she is more willing to reach out to mental health care providers—particularly those with whom she connected in the dialogues—when she notices a young person struggling behaviorally, emotionally, etc.

Federal auditors assessed that the Cultural Broker Dialogue series was the best step they have seen among all their grantees toward realizing individual and institutional transformation with the goal of reducing racial disparities in mental health care.

3. TE youth will expose **St. John Fisher College’s School of Education** to the real-life experiences and perspectives of urban students about how teachers can empower themselves to address students’ needs in an increasingly punitive urban school environment.

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without whom Teen Empowerment’s work in Rochester would not be possible

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