

*Speaking Out presents excerpts from speeches delivered at the Voice of the Youth Forum at Rochester City Hall on June 4, 2008, sponsored by the Mayor's Youth Advisory Council.*

## **Democrat and Chronicle**

June 8, 2008

**Section:** Speaking out

### **Help us lift boulders blocking our way**

*Brandon Daniels, Guest Essayist*

*Los Angeles Times Syndicate*

Young people rising

Out of prison and seeking guideposts for right road

I represent a lot of youths in Rochester who struggle to get by day to day. A year ago, I was sitting in a jail cell trying to figure out how I could do something productive and legit with my life.

I am a product of a difficult environment, one that exists in most of our inner-city communities. I was told so many times I wasn't going to be anything, that even I believed it. Without support and guidance at a young age, I didn't know how to lead my own life, so I let others lead it for me.

Because of my involvement with violence and drug-dealing, I gave up 2½ years of my life to the prison system.

But I'm kind of glad that I got locked up. How sad is that! But if I hadn't gone through that experience, I might be dead right now. Being locked up gave me time to think — time that my fast lifestyle hadn't given me.

I learned a lot about myself in a cell and I got motivated to be someone when I got out.

But when I got out, there was no plan for me. No one was working with me, helping me or guiding me.

If being locked up helps the youths inside, when they get out, they're left to figure out the world on their own. And now I have a record, and missed 2½ years of school and with this kind of background, there aren't too many doors just opening up for me.

I am now a proud father of two little girls. I want to raise them on a path to success, but to do that, I need to be able to take care of myself. Since I have been out, I have struggled to find a job, I have trouble supporting my kids, I've been moving from place to place and meanwhile, I'm trying to keep myself away from the crowd I was hanging with, keep my hope up and stay motivated.

Before I got locked up, I felt lost. When I got out wanting to be on a better path, I felt even more lost. That's why so many of us go right back into the system. If we really want to change this city, we must wake up to what youths who are out there need. We do need jobs so that we can live a life that is meaningful and raise healthy families.

However, while jobs are crucial, it's not just about jobs. If we just get jobs, many of us may not be able to keep them. We need more support around us with housing, day care, legal issues and how to be a parent. Sometimes for youths like me, life issues prevent us from staying on the path to success. When I got out, if I had had someone working with me, like a caseworker, I might be in better shape.

I was lucky to find Teen Empowerment and the Mayor's Youth Advisory Council. I have had a chance to see myself as a leader, to speak up about issues and to meet some important people who might open up some doors.

But I have big obstacles to overcome and I am going to need emotional and financial help while I try to get through them and take care of my kids.

Don't get me wrong, it's not just about what the city and other adults need to do. We as youths need to step up. Mayor Robert Duffy just put \$171,000 into a job training program for youths. This is a good start.

To the youths: If we aren't motivated or willing to take advantage of the opportunities that come in the future, then we will miss out because they will be taken away.

We have to play our part. The city needs to keep expanding these opportunities and trying until they get it right, or we will never know how these types of programs might work.

But we, as youths, need to be motivated and ready to do something different.

If youths and adults both play their parts, we can solve the problems that get young men like me stuck behind bars or stuck in the cycles of poverty that lead nowhere.

*Daniels, of Rochester, is pursuing his GED.*

# Democrat and Chronicle

June 8, 2008

**Section:** Speaking out

## Provide a way out of troubled families

*Mary Brown, Guest Essayist*

### Young people rising

I was raised in a household where there wasn't much respect. I planned to move in with my cousin and her two children. However, when I finally got approved for emancipation, I found out that it took at least seven or eight months to complete the process. During this time I felt hopeless.

Fortunately, I was working at Wegmans through Hillside. Through that, I found out about the Alternatives for Independent Youth program which provides housing for youths who are having difficulties at home, or at risk of homelessness.

I was accepted into the program and was excited to have my own apartment. But I did still have to worry about rent, security deposit, food and other living expenses. I had to keep my job to pay bills and it became hard to maintain these responsibilities and also go to school.

Unfortunately, something had to give and in my case, I stopped going to school.

Having a roof over our heads is a basic need and we all should have that.

Having a living situation that is healthy and comfortable is important if we are going to learn how to be confident, strong, independent adults who can take care of ourselves.

I am 18 and I'm living with my cousin now. I'm working on my GED at Monroe Community College. I found out about the Mayor's Youth Advisory Council through the Center for Youth where I was on the board.

Most young people want the same things for ourselves as adults want for us. We want to be productive members of society, own our own homes, pay our bills on time and have a solid family structure.

But we can't do this on our own — and without the help of our government and the thousands of adults in our community, the vicious cycle will begin again.

*Brown, of Rochester, is pursuing her GED.*

# **Democrat and Chronicle**

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**Section:** Speaking out

## **Don't just crave change, make change**

*Sarah DeLaus, Guest Essayist*

### **Young people rising**

Mahatma Gandhi said, "You must be the change you wish to see in the world." We as youth crave change and want to be heard, but often don't have the opportunity to voice our opinions or take action. Many of you, I'm sure, have mixed notions about the city and its next move, but will you be a part of that move?

I've learned that change starts with a vision, a mental picture of what could be and what we feel should be. But what are we doing to put that into action? How are we moving forward to make that become our reality?

I encourage all of you to speak out and emphasize your own vision of change.

But the idea of being the change you wish to see in the world is not to just speak of change and then back away. To all the youth: Your voice is one of your strongest and most powerful tools and can move many. We have to speak out, reach out, walk the talk. Be that next step. Take action. And be the change.

Change starts with us young people, everybody.

It's our time.

*DeLaus, of Rochester, is a student at Wilson Commencement Academy.*

# Democrat and Chronicle

June 8, 2008

Section: Speaking out

## I may wear baggy pants and hood but I'm no crook

*Tajh Ryland-Iverson, Guest Essayist*

### Young people rising

It's true that Rochester's crime rate has dropped since the arrival of the Zero Tolerance initiative and I applaud the city's effort. But we forget to talk about how the excessive policing is affecting relationships between the police and the community.

I'm from Dewey Avenue, and the officers patrol the area 24/7. That's fine, but is there really a need for three cop cars on the same two corners? The unnecessary police contact can flip a man's view on life or the police just like that (snap).

Do you have any idea how degrading it feels to be pulled over in front of your friends and family for no apparent reason? It hurts to know that you're considered suspect if you wear a hood and baggy jeans. And who cares if my friends and I decide to take a stroll down the street when it's nice outside? If we can't stand on the sidewalk, why is it there? If an officer stopped me and found out that I'm a college-bound senior on the Mayor's Youth Advisory Council, his outlook on youth like me would be different.

With all the extra money paid to the police officers on the streets, we could use a percentage of it to open youth-based programs, like nice recreation centers, skating rinks, maybe even some teen clubs, and anything else to keep youth occupied. Not everyone plays basketball. We have some very artistic individuals in Rochester who have nowhere to showcase their talents. People with speaking talents like myself have nowhere to recite. The city needs to think about opening theaters and workshops to further us on the path to achieving our goals. That way we can have something to do instead of standing on the block bored and starting trouble to entertain ourselves.

If the city showed a real commitment to us, there would be less violence and negativity.

*Ryland-Iverson, of Rochester, is a student at the School of the Arts.*

# Democrat and Chronicle

June 8, 2008

Section: Speaking out

## Community lifted me from grief over brother's murder

*Eileen Santiago, Guest Essayist*

### Young people rising

In 2001, my brother was murdered on Avenue A, and my family, including myself, began to self-destruct. But during my grief, I had shoulders of organizations and groups to lean on. I feel like I had the shoulder of the community.

In school, I had the opportunity to involve myself in a grief group that opened up a venue to release my inner feelings by writing and performing poetry. I had the opportunity to volunteer for Puerto Rican Youth Development and I landed a job as a peer educator for HIV/AIDS. I had the opportunity to work for Teen Empowerment and I have stayed involved. I landed a job at Wegmans, graduated from high school and in the fall, I'm going to be a sophomore at St. John Fisher College — and it all happened in the blink of an eye.

When I think back to where I was after my brother's murder, I would never have imagined that I would be where I am today. With the right supports, we can make changes, healthy changes, as individuals and as a community. I just wish my brother was alive to see me today. I sometimes think that if he had found the supports I have, things might have been different.

We have to continue to open up opportunities to all youths if we want to save lives and rebuild our community. I'm not saying that all youths are going to go toward the right path if they have more opportunities, but I am saying that the probability of young people selling drugs or committing a violent act would be far less if positive opportunities emerged.

I just wish my brother was alive to see me today.

*Santiago, of Rochester, is a student at St. John Fisher College.*

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## Listen up, adults, and then act on words of the young

*King Swank, Guest Essayist*

### Young people rising

Imagine you are in a room filled with adults and some kids. The topic is youth. You stand at the podium, palms sweaty and your stomach filled with butterflies. You have an excellent idea for making youth more powerful. So you calm those butterflies and deliver a message. You feel great. But, were they really listening?

At one point in my development, this was my story: delivering a powerful message when I felt that the audience was judging me based on my age, appearance and lack of life experience. However, no one, no kid should ever feel that their voice is wasted.

Over the past couple of years, I have learned through my involvement in valuable programs, that to make a difference, I have to speak up, that my voice is important and needs to be heard.

Adults cannot see things the way that we do and they can learn from our experiences just as we can learn from theirs. Two voices are better than one and if we are going to come up with the right answers, the right policies, the right laws, the right changes, we need the right people at the table. And that means us.

Too often adults will say, "We need more youth input," but then they disregard it. Or, they listen to what youth have to say and instead of taking it in, they just say, "Wow, that youth knows how to talk really well. How articulate."

Do you ever feel like something is missing from the endless meetings and PowerPoint presentations? Well, many times, youth have the missing pieces to the puzzles our community tries to solve. But our lives are not puzzles and the issues we face are not part of a game. So the solutions are not easy to find. Getting the right outcome takes time, engagement, commitment and effort.

*Swank, of Rochester, is a student at Marshall High School.*

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