

CASE STUDY 4.2

YOUTH MINISTRIES FOR PEACE AND JUSTICE

This is our community. Nothing gets done here without our permission.

— ORGANIZING INTERN

There's an old cement plant in the Bronx, right on the Bronx River. It was about to become a parking lot—but city planners didn't count on Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice organizers. The neighborhood around the plant is where they live and work, and they wanted a park, not a parking lot. The organizers stopped the bid for a parking lot and got the land transferred to the Parks department. The youth celebrated, started planning, and even organized a visioning meeting for the neighborhood.

Right in the middle of that process, they hit a snag: The city wanted to use an old road that ran through the lot to get trucks to the Hunt's Point Market. No way. Youth Ministries organized again: They circulated petitions, they used street theater to inform residents, and they got more signatures. They met with the Department of Transportation, and they got press attention. They stopped the trucks. They're still fighting to get the road off the map altogether, but they'll get that park. Children need a place to play, and everyone needs green space for his or her spirit.

In this neighborhood, 65,000 people live in one square mile. Until a few years ago, the 15,000 young people who live in this community had nothing but school and the streets. In 1994, five high school and college students decided to change that. Now, there's a place for young people ages 7 to 21 to go—a place where they learn to understand what's happening in their community and how to change it.

One of the founders is current executive director Alexie Torres-Fleming. She and her friends met in Alexie's attic at first; later, they asked to use the basement of a local church for programs for young people. Hernan Melara was 12 then. He started going to Youth Ministries "right when the doors opened," he says. Alexie's parents were his neighbors, and they told him about what she was doing. It sounded "new and different," he says, so he tried it out. Soon he was into the arts and music programs, which were offered at Youth Ministries from the start, along with sports and fitness. Now he's progressed to activism on the park.

Since 1994 Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice has grown to 15 staff members and 2 major departments, one that works with 7- to 11-year-olds and one for young people age 12 and older. Each year the programs are organized around a common theme; in 2002, it was the history of the South Bronx. The arts and recreation programs are what first draw many young people to Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice. Younger youth may first get interested in the arts programs;

older youth may come to play basketball. They come for the courses offered in drama, the art class on graffiti, or a hip-hop/break-dancing course that reminds them where hip-hop started—in the Bronx.

Programs for older youth are organized in four phases. The first phase, Arts and Activism, is designed to appeal to young people's self-interest at first, but the curriculum actually raises consciousness about social justice issues, thereby planting seeds for young people to develop an understanding of oppression and a desire to know more about it.

That brings them to the second phase, Education for Liberation. Here, young people start to learn about particular issues by discussing books like Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* and attending performances, talks, and readings that are part of the Youth Ministries' "Freedom Forum." The Freedom Forum offers lots of opportunity for discussions and, as former staff member Yomara Velez says, "Young people love it!"

The third stage of programming is Community Service. This stage begins when, as Yomara says, young people become "politicized and humbled." They begin to understand the issues and struggles of people in their community and to acquire skills to "serve, not save" others.

In the fourth phase, Community Organizing, young people have the opportunity to receive a stipend and take on responsibilities for community assessment and working on social justice campaigns. In the first three phases, young people are Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice *members*. In phase four, they're *organizers*. By the time they reach that level, they are well grounded in a social justice analysis of what's happening in their communities, and they have many of the skills needed for organizing efforts to address community issues. They also participate in facilitator and other trainings offered by the Youth Ministries Leadership Institute. When something like the cement factory/park issue comes up, they're ready to respond.

Staff members of Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice help youth organizers learn from their experiences. Hernan says he learned a lot of his organizing skills "by ear": by working with more experienced organizers and listening to staff members explain issues and strategies. In this way he learned to be a "gatekeeper."

"Say you get 10 people," he explains, "and each one knows 5 and each of them knows 5. Then you got 250 people at a rally." He learned that it's hard to get people out unless they understand the issues. "Some people don't even know we have a river," he says. So he and other Youth Ministries organizers hand out fliers and organize events like a canoe ride down the river. "It starts out recreational, but then we start to show them things like the cement factory, and where the park would be. Then they start to care about the river." Then, he says, "You'd be surprised how many of them come out!"

As young people at Youth Ministries gain more skills and more of what Hernan calls “passion for this work,” they want to take on more leadership. This can be a challenge; local officials are often not interested in talking with young people, and even other grassroots organizations, which are almost always run by older adults, are not always accessible to them. Many decision-making meetings are scheduled during the day, when youth organizers are in school. In the past, staff members have acted as “translators”: They attended daytime meetings, then told youth organizers in the evening what happened, but they learned that using adults as translators kept both power and learning out of the hands of young people. So Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice staff have advocated more and more for evening meetings. Staff members help young people create agendas and prepare presentations to community groups, but the young people do the presenting.

The youth in Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice wanted to have younger organizers in more prominent leadership roles in its campaigns, but the organizers who are paid stipends are in high school, and Youth Ministries wants them to stay there. Youth organizers therefore only work two hours for two days each week. That’s enough time to organize, but “to lead campaigns would take a lot more time than they have,” says Yomara. Young people can get so involved with organizing that they start to flunk out. When that happens, they must go back to the Education for Liberation phase, even though they resist. Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice is working on ways to help young organizers balance social justice and school work. “There’s no formula,” says Yomara. “We just have to figure it out.”

Youth Ministries programs work with young people up to age 21. Organizers often want to continue with the program after graduation from high school, but at that age and in that community, they have to make real money to contribute to the family income. A stipend isn’t enough, so Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice created the Internship Program as a stepping stone, which brings young people, says Yomara, “a step closer to receiving a salary” for their work. It’s a little more money, it requires a little more time, and it is real leadership. Interns feel a sense of ownership for campaigns. They write training curricula, organize events, and support youth organizers. It’s been really, really great,” says Yomara. “It creates space for them to learn, take ownership, and be held accountable. It teaches them what it’s like when you have a job—how you’re expected to act at work.”

For some young people, it’s an adjustment. They move from two hours twice a week, working on campaigns that someone else has final responsibility for, to being in charge and accountable. Staff members expect them to show up when they say they will, to do what they said they’d do. And it’s not about some boss making money; this job is about changing their own community. As an intern, Hernan says that working 30 hours every 2 weeks at a job he loves is great. He’s a senior in high school, so this is enough work for him right now. When he graduates, he’ll get other work: “Right now the only thing I know is organizing. I want to see what else is out there for me. But later on, I’ll come back to organizing.”

A few years ago, Youth Ministries organizers and staff drove out to Westchester County, a wealthy suburb of New York City. They rode around for 50 minutes looking at the part of the Bronx River that flows through Westchester. Hernan remembers what they saw there: “A green walking park, geese, turtles, other wild life.” Their own part of the river was full of old cars and tires, tangled with weeds, and bordered by factories and roads. Hernan says, “We were asking ourselves, ‘Why can’t we have this? Why can’t we have the geese and the turtles, and the place for little kids to play?’ And the answer was: We can. We just have to organize.”

“I grew up here,” Hernan says. “I feel safe here. I’ll stay here. I see things in the future, how they can be. I don’t want a cement plant. I want a park for my children and their children. This is my community. Nothing gets done here without my permission.”

Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice Lessons Learned

- ★ Using adults as “translators” kept both power and learning out of the hands of young people. It’s important to make sure that young people have access to the work and address barriers (such as daytime meetings) that hinder their direct participation.
- ★ Young people can be drawn into civic activism programs through arts and sports programs that integrate information about the community and community issues into the curriculum. Information can lead to a sense of ownership, and that can result in a commitment to social change.
- ★ The paid internship program has been the solution to the problems of not having enough young people in lead roles and of older youth leaving the program because they need to support themselves and their families.

Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice Top 10 Tips for Youth Organizing

- 1.** Training in youth-organizing skills is critical.
- 2.** Join coalitions, but carefully. Partners should share at least one interest and gain additional power by working together rather than working alone.
- 3.** Less experienced members or participants can contribute to campaigns. Do not limit organizing activities to those with formal organizing titles.
- 4.** Be flexible about staffing, finances, and time lines. Different campaigns require different levels of resources.
- 5.** Get some initial closure in the first 90 days. Build in regular times for reflection.
- 6.** Create clear time lines for campaigns. If the goals have not been met by the projected dates, reshape the goals or acknowledge defeat, and move on.
- 7.** Organizing teams should provide regular updates to the organization.
- 8.** Assess parents' interests and skills and involve them in the work.
- 9.** Regularly evaluate the organizing process and its outcomes.
- 10.** Whether you win or lose, celebrate the effort!

Community Leadership Activity

COMMUNITY MIND MAP⁷

Overview

An experiential activity designed to help participants to an understanding of the perceptions of their personal community and the importance and roles of different elements of community in their work

Purpose

To share personal pictures of the community

To identify common elements and the role of community

To identify ways in which connections between youth and adults can positively affect the community

To target specific sectors of the community for the work

Time Required

Approximately 40 minutes

Materials

Flip chart, markers

WHAT	TIME	HOW	MATERIALS
Step 1: Lecturette	5 min	Welcome, session overview, and objectives	Flip chart with session overview and objectives
Step 2: Mind Mapping	10 min	<p>Explain that a mind map is a visual way to identify thoughts, feelings, concepts, and other not so tangible things. Set the stage by asking for examples of communities.</p> <p>Ask the group, “When you think of your community, what is the first word you think of? You might think of things like your family, places you go, and things that are special to you. Draw a picture that captures all those things. You will have about 10 minutes to draw, and then we will share our drawings or mind maps.”</p>	

⁷ Source: Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development, *Building Community: A Tool Kit for Youth & Adults in Charting Assets and Creating Change* (see Appendix 2).

WHAT	TIME	HOW	MATERIALS
		Participants then draw a mind map representing the personal communities to which they belong. (Sample mind maps can be found in the Handout.)	
Step 3: Sharing	10 min	Participants briefly explain their mind maps to the group (or in pairs, if the group is large).	
Step 4: Discussion and Reflection	10 min	<p>To help them process the experience, ask,</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ★ What pictures jumped out? ★ What words do you remember? ★ What feelings did you see expressed in the maps? ★ What did it feel like for you when you made your map? ★ Any surprises? ★ What common themes were expressed? ★ What differences emerged? ★ What gaps were there? What was left out of our collective maps, if anything? ★ Based on our discussion, what insights do we have as a group about the community? ★ Reflect on the maps. As community members committed to helping strengthen the community, what are some things we should keep in mind as we move forward? ★ What is the importance of understanding the community of our young people? ★ How can we value the community of our young people in our work? ★ What parts of the communities must we be sure to work into our plans as we move forward? 	Use a flip chart to record answers from questions 9–13
Step 5: Personal Reflection	5 min	The next step is to think about how the participants can apply what they learned from this session to their work. Ask them to write a “note to themselves” of one thing they would like to remember from this session and one thing they would like to do as a result of this session.	

COMMUNITY MIND MAP HANDOUT

Sample Mind Maps

