

YouthConnect!

A Youth-Led Community Service Initiative

Environmental Stewardship

As a supplemental resource to PASE's YouthConnect! Manual for Youth-Led Community Service, we offer a series of Profiles on Youth-Led Community Service Projects. The local projects profiled were planned, executed and documented by the staff and young people involved with the YouthConnect! Initiative in 2003-2004. The MONY Foundation and the AOL-Time Warner Foundation supported this collaborative initiative.

The PASE Profiles of Youth-Led Community Service Series provides concrete examples of youth-led projects in seven different categories: Intergenerational Service, Youth Councils, Environmental Stewardship, Peer Education, Arts- and Media-Based Service, Advocacy, and Service Learning. Of course, there are other categories of community service but these have been selected to illustrate to the reader the breadth and scope of this youth development modality.

project profiles



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“When we say Environmental we take into account a contextual understanding of the environment – the physical, the natural world (trees and such) and the people. Every living entity has an integral role in ensuring the health of the environment.”

--Ibrahim Abdul Matin, Youth Program Director, Prospect Park Alliance

WHAT IS ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP?

Looking to the streets in which youth have been raised is the ideal starting point for practicing Urban Environmental Stewardship. Participants learn that stewardship means having a responsibility toward everything they define as being part of a neighborhood: the buildings, the streets, the homes, the gardens, and most importantly, the people.

Fostering a sense of Environmental Stewardship means that “young people will, in the process of cleaning and beautifying block by block, inspire others in local communities to do the same: showing pride and respect for their own area, manifesting a sense of accountability to their fellow neighbors. More than anything else, this service is by and for inner-city youth, proving that they can give back using their specific talent, raising civic awareness while being a role model of their neighbors, both young and old,” says Barnabus Shakur, Founder and Chief Executive Officer of Bed-Stuy’s [Bedford-Stuyvesant’s] Project Re-Generation.

WHY CHOOSE ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP AS A COMMUNITY SERVICE MODALITY?

Environmental Stewardship offers youth a concrete way to work with peers and enjoy experiences rarely available in school. For example, youth involved in local, environmentally-based service experience measurable results from their labor; they focus their intellect on something tangible, related to their own world; and they begin to understand, through concrete project work, the long-term impact of their actions. “Youth should become the vanguard of folks that will be able to communicate environmentally safe and sound policies ensuring a sustainable future for our world,” says Ibrahim Abdul Matin, Youth Program Director of Prospect Park Alliance (PPA).

Since community outreach is key to their work, young environmental stewards become adept at networking and teamwork. As community leaders, they play a role in making sure community spaces are maintained and cared for. In short, environmental stewardship offers youth a chance to grow and develop skills through what Orvill Minott, Youth Council Coordinator of PPA, calls S.O.S.: Service, Opportunity, and Support.

THE FOLLOWING PROJECT PROFILES OFFER CONCRETE ILLUSTRATIONS FOR HOW ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP CAN HELP DEVELOP THESE PARTICULAR DEVELOPMENTAL ASSETS* AND SKILLS IN YOUTH:

Adult relationships: Youth interact with adult staff and other volunteers as well as city government officials and ground maintenance crews.

Positive View of Personal Future: By becoming pro-active and committed to improving the environment, youth gain a sense of hope and empowerment.

Environmental Knowledge: In order to take care of the environment, youth learn skills such as plant identification and erosion controlling techniques.

Community Values Youth: Since the service activities are very public, youth receive positive feedback from adult community members.

Caring Neighborhood: Taking part in the immediate neighborhood nurtures a sense of being integral to the community. Youth begin to know some “friendly faces,” which in time become true allies to the program and the youth.

PROJECT PROFILE

PROSPECT PARK ALLIANCE (PPA) YOUTH COUNCIL'S "EARTH DAY" AND "CULTURAL MIX" EVENTS

DESCRIPTION:

Youth directed educational, environmental, and culturally-aware programming for other young local residents. Youth volunteered at all public events in Prospect Park, a 526-acre oasis located in the heart of Brooklyn, and developed their own projects and events including an Earth Day Park Cleanup and a Cultural Mix.

GOALS:

1. To educate young people about the environment and the importance of Prospect Park
2. To develop a sense of community responsibility among teens
3. To engage youth from underserved communities who live near Prospect Park

ACTIVITIES:

Thirty youth in PPA's Youth Council participated in and received environmental-education training, including classes in "Understanding Prospect Park," "Safety and Judgment" (including CPR training), "Civic Responsibilities and the Importance of Green Space," and "Leadership Development." The training culminated in a three-day fall retreat where youth came together and developed the basis of their spring and summer activities.

The youth divided into three working groups: Events, Community Service and Environment, and Education. Working groups met on a weekly basis to conduct community assessments and develop action plans for their work in the spring, with staff input on feasibility. The Events Working Group planned a Cultural Mix, a community gathering in which youth groups showcased their talent and people enjoyed food from around the globe. Staff coordinated stage, sound, tables, and chairs while youth conducted intense outreach, including writing letters and making calls; designed a program; secured youth entertainment; and organized the potluck. Approximately 100 people attended from the surrounding community and other youth groups.

The Community Service and Environmental Working Group planned the Earth Day Event. At this event, volunteers planted around the Youth Resource Center, a small park-owned building and lawn area near the main park land that is solely for the use of youth participants. The Earth Day Event engaged approximately 80 young people in weeding, hedging, edging, planting, team building, food, music, and fun. To prepare for the activity, youth surveyed the land to be worked on, designed a paper model of their gardening plan, sought feedback from the Landscape Management (Park) staff, and secured supplies and materials, including T-shirts to give away to volunteers on Earth Day. The green space required substantial "sweat labor" by

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the Working Group, including removing iron bars and wood planks that were underground in order to add new soil.

To enrich the activities planned by the other two groups and to build ongoing educational and outreach activities, the Education Working Group developed and distributed literature on water conservation and recycling that included websites on sustainable environmental practices. To create this literature, youth informally assessed what they knew/felt about environmental issues and brainstormed materials on topics that might be useful to the community. They then did extensive web research, met with a local City Council member to get information on local water preservation and current recycling rules. They then set up information tables at every entrance of the park during the Earth Day Event.

“The radius of one’s understanding is equal to the circumference of one’s environment – wherever you are, that is part of your community – the upkeep and improvement of your community should be your purpose. One is more equipped to accomplish this if you are exposed to other environments so that you can compare the state of your community to that of others.”

*- Orvill Minott, Youth Council Coordinator
Prospect Park Alliance*

Concurrent to the planning of these activities, youth participated in a variety of other activities, including team-building projects, participation in other park-wide events, and serving as Park Guides. Youth Council members also went to Washington D.C. over the summer to meet with elected officials in the Prospect Park’s continuing quest for public support in the face of the economic downturn. They met their senator Hillary Clinton and got assurances from Senator Chuck Schumer’s office (who lives across from the park) that their request would be in his federal budget proposal.

All of the Working Groups improved their communication skills by engaging in a number of activities, including cold-calling to youth organizations and word of mouth outreach, journal writing, speaking to community members at information tables, and working as MC’s at special events and as volunteer coordinators/educators. Youth also engaged in technology activities (designed a PowerPoint presentation to represent the program and helped to design and create the Youth Programs brochure) and gained environmental knowledge through gardening and ground maintenance.

CHALLENGES AND SUCCESSES:

The youth and the formal organization--Prospect Park Alliance--sometimes operated at different speeds. The youth were volunteers and had developed a mission that was suited to their needs. This mission was based around securing a space for youth autonomy. The Prospect Park Alliance, which birthed the youth component, often felt that they must “reel the young people in” to make sure they conformed to the organization’s mission and engaged in projects that were park-centered.

An example of the tension between youth autonomy and organizational constraints that is

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common for many youth service agencies that seek to empower their youth is illustrated by Prospect Park Alliance's Youth Council's experience designing flyers and other outreach materials. The organization has a brand and a look they are trying to institutionalize in the public eye, while the young people wanted full autonomy to develop and disseminate their own materials for Earth Day and the Cultural Mix. Solution: A staff member of the marketing department who has youth-work experience came to the working group meetings to discuss basic design principles, show the designer's portfolio, and deliver a workshop on how to make a flyer. A template was then created that the youth can use in the future.

OUTCOMES:

Approximately 600 youth, ranging in age from 10-21, participated in community service in the park. They represented local diversity: Caribbean American, Black American, Latino and Eastern European.

At least 500 pieces of youth-created educational literature was disseminated during community outreach activities.

The Woodlands Youth Crew planted 2,752 herbaceous plants and 148 trees and shrubs in the spring. They also ran 150' of fence to protect plantings. The green lawn space of the Youth Resource Center was "sculpted," meaning that it is now physically safer and more amenable to public use.

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PROJECT PROFILE PROJECT RE-GENERATION'S (PR-G) RITES OF PASSAGE (ROP) "COMMUNITY PRIDE DAY"

DESCRIPTION:

Youth conducted an eight-week cleanup pilot project and surveyed the community as preparation for the first annual Community Pride Day (CPD). The celebration was followed by the launch of a youth-led newsletter.

GOALS:

1. To have young adults take stewardship of the Bedford-Stuyvesant area by beautifying and maintaining selected areas of the community.
2. To pilot first annual youth-led neighborhood revitalization event.

ACTIVITIES:

Twelve youth members were involved as regular organizers of Community Pride Day (CPD). This project involved brainstorming, planning, implementing, evaluating and documenting a local clean-up and unity event.

Before the actual planning and implementation of CPD, youth received training in outreach and public speaking skills and "practiced" outreach by tabling at another organization's city-wide event; they practiced volunteerism by participating in a clean-up of an abandoned lot in Bed-Stuy; and they honed their project planning, critical thinking, decision making, and writing skills through the development of a newsletter that was published as a post-CPD activity.

As part of the planning for CPD, youth launched an outreach campaign targeting schools, churches, community businesses, youth organizations, and business contacts of PR-G's leaders. The goal was to gather hundreds of volunteers to participate in CPD. Participants researched other youth groups and sent flyers, followed by phone calls confirming receipt of the mailing, a confirmation e-mail, and an additional round of calls the week of the event. The goal was to gather a minimum of 20 youth groups to participate at CPD. Each participating group was responsible for bringing a minimum of 10 members. Incentives for participation in the event included free food, T-shirts, and fun.

Other pre-event planning included obtaining the city permits needed for an outside public event (through the Parks Commission for use of a local park and the Police Department for a noise permit). The neighborhood's precinct also had to be notified to send a police presence for the event. The youth wrote and distributed a press release and followed up with phone calls to specific local newspaper journalists, requesting their coverage of the event. The youth developed a budget for the day and were responsible for purchasing the supplies and bringing them to the park on CPD. Some supplies, including gloves, bags, rakes, and brooms were secured as an in-kind donation by the Department of Sanitation.

Activities on CPD included a community clean-up scavenger hunt, a picnic with entertainment and games, and a citywide youth group information exhibit. The scavenger hunt was designed by youth: Each team of 10 was responsible for dividing their members to do a variety of tasks ranging from picking up one full bag of garbage, to surveying local passers-by

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on their interest in having youth maintain their neighborhood, to finding hidden items in the community as a way of helping youth get to know the Bed-Stuy community better.

To ensure that the day was not seen as a “one-time” commitment to revitalization, PR-G initiated an eight-week clean-up project following CPD. The activity consisted of youth participants cleaning up one chosen block: cleaning its sidewalks, gutters, front yards, stoops, and removing garbage to the curb for Sanitation. Youth wore their PR-G T-shirts, were supervised by at least one adult staff member, and worked together as a unit. The block was chosen based on a survey of 10 linear blocks; the block that had the most homeowners willing to accept the free service was chosen. By focusing on one block, the youth were able to see their concrete impact and forge a relationship with a small portion of the local community. “Neighborhood credibility will be achieved one block at a time,” explains Shakur, CEO of Bed-Stuy’s PRG.

Also following CPD, program participants began distribution of PR-G’s first newsletter called Agony-n-Antidote. The newsletter was created, designed, and distributed by the youth; the cover story, written by several of the participants, was about gangs and youth groups. Other sections of the newsletter included a story on the founder of PR-G and information about the organization and their kick-off event. Over 1,000 copies were distributed.

SUCSESSES AND CHALLENGES:

Staff gave youth participants the responsibility of project management; therefore, youth were responsible for administrative tasks including taking notes during planning meetings, and distribution of notes to staff and members after each meeting to facilitate follow-through and follow-up. On many occasions youth who had volunteered or been picked to take and disseminate notes were forced to re-do their work (due to poor note-taking) or notes were either forgotten or lost. This resulted in a loss of time and inefficiency. To resolve this problem, staff utilized their incentive system (that requires youth to log “volunteer hours”) and began to “give hours” to those note-takers who did a good job. As a result, this administrative responsibility become coveted and taken seriously. Incentive hours have become a huge part of the program’s success.

OUTCOMES:

Youth completed a minimum of 120 volunteer/community service approximately every four months.

Youth service concretely improved the physical condition of Bed Stuy streets. For example, the cleanup of an empty lot involved youth removing debris and trimming trees. Plans are currently underway with the landlord to plan continued renovation and community use of the future greenspace. Community Pride Day involved the clean-up of three square blocks.

CPD and the follow-up block cleanup and community newsletter created community recognition and credibility of PR-G.

Youth gained a renewed pride regarding their community.

***Narrative contributions for the above profiles were made by the following youth practitioners:
Barnabas Shakur (PR-G), Ibrahim Abdul Martin & Orvill Minott (PPA)***