

YOUTH-LED MOVEMENTS

The power of civic engagement By Stell Simonton



Romi Hemphill was in the sixth grade when she got her first taste of civic leadership through the Wyman Center's Teen Outreach Program. "It made me a better person," Romi said about the program, which she continued to participate in through high school. "It made me stronger."

PHOTO BY SAM NUERNBERGER FOR THE WYMAN CENTER

Romi credits her participation in Wyman's Teen Outreach Program for helping her develop empathy, a social-emotional skill, through the community service learning element of the program.

It also helped her discover a career goal. She's now pursuing a certified nurse assistant degree at Southeast Missouri State University in Cape Girardeau, Missouri.

Romi's experience in the Teen Outreach Program engaged her in her community.

Not only does youth civic engagement benefit the community, but it has great benefits for the young people involved.

Civic engagement can refer to a range of activities from community service to political activism. The Forum for Youth Investment lists five general categories of civic engagement: community service/service learning, leadership development, governance (as in youth councils), political advocacy, and peer and community education.

Romi met after school once a week with a group of students and an adult facilitator at a community center in the Near Southside of St. Louis.

The group planned activities: They took care of little kids during monthly parent-teacher meetings at a nearby school. At times they created a mini-carnival for the kids with face-painting, cotton candy and snow cones.

The group maintained graves at a local cemetery in memory of an East St. Louis teenager who died and who had been in a Teen Outreach Program.

They visited patients at the American Cancer Society facility in St. Louis "to let them know we cared," Romi said. The students even cooked for the patients.

Outcomes of the program

The Teen Outreach Program began as a pregnancy and dropout prevention program in St. Louis in 1978. In 2007 Wyman, a long-established youth development organization in St. Louis, designed a model for national replication.

The program is used by numerous agencies and nonprofit organizations around the country, reaching 35,000 youth across the United States.

Organizations pay to get the curriculum and training.

Throughout the 1990s, a number of studies by University of Virginia psychology professor Joseph P. Allen and colleagues showed the program's impact.

TOP participants are 53 percent less likely to become pregnant and 60 percent less likely to drop out of school, according to Wyman.

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Based on surveys given by Wyman to teens at the beginning and end of the program in 2015:

- 98 percent of teens in the program are actively engaged in the community;
- 79 percent say they have the ability to effectively problem solve;
- 98 percent have not become pregnant or fathered a child;
- 99 percent moved to the next grade in school.

Significantly, researchers found that the community service part of the program is directly connected to its impact. The number of volunteer hours correlated with a reduction in problem behaviors among teens.

“The community and service learning piece ... it is the area where the young people are really able to build a sense of efficacy,” said Christina Donald, senior director of partner services team, which manages the Teen Outreach Program for Wyman’s National Network.

Teens set goals and work to meet them, she said, with about 20 hours of service per year.

They feel: “I have something to contribute” and they have their voices heard, she said.

One of the key characteristics of TOP is that “young people have a lot of choice,” Donald said. They determine which project or experience to undertake based on what they are interested in.

Donald said the two other core components of the program are its curriculum and the positive support offered by adults.

The curriculum covers communication skills and assertiveness, understanding and clarifying values, relationships, goal-setting, decision-making, and adolescent health and sexual development. Students approach the topics through discussion and role-play.

Although pregnancy prevention is a main outcome of TOP, only about 15 percent of the curriculum involves sex education.

More than a decade ago, the Forum for Youth Investment, a national nonprofit devoted to research, advocacy and policy-making on behalf of youth, pointed out four ways civic engagement in out-of-school time positively impacts young people.



PHOTO BY SAM NUERNBERGER FOR THE WYMAN CENTER

It can:

- Lead to future civic involvement.
- Increase academic achievement and positive attitudes about school and work.
- Positively affect interpersonal relationships and social development. For example, young people who do service have a stronger sense of their ability to help others. They are also more likely to help their peers, act kindly toward them and appreciate cultural diversity, according to a 2004 brief by the Forum for Youth Development.
- Lower the likelihood of risky behaviors, as the Teen Outreach Program shows.

According to Wyman Center, young people involved in The Teen Outreach Program’s community service activities are 60 percent less likely to drop out of school.

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