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Positive Power Of Youth

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Youth In Action is a teen-run city group that designs its own programs, writes grants to fund the programs and devises its own long-term strategy for making a difference in city neighborhoods.

By KAREN A. DAVIS
Journal Staff Writer

PROVIDENCE — Two years ago, Luis Pagan found himself drifting from one community organization to another, searching for a group that would allow him to develop projects for teens and share his perspective. He was only 15 at the time.

And even though, two years ago, Misty Wilson, 17, was brimming with creative ideas and enthusiasm, attempts at expressing herself came forth in street slang and incomplete thoughts.

Like many teens, Luis and Misty felt that they had no voice in their own community, no means by which to effect positive change.

That was then.

Now, Luis and Misty are part of a teen-run city group that designs its own programs, writes the grants to fund the programs and devises its own long-term strategy for making a difference in city neighborhoods. By putting teenagers in charge, the group also helps members hone their leadership, problem-solving and planning skills.

The group, called Youth In Action, was founded two years ago this month by Misty.

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three other teens — Julie Monti, Alee Loeur and Sophiap Khong — and their adult adviser, Karen Feldman.

“Our dream was that, with support, youths could run and control their own organization,” Feldman, who serves as executive director, said. “We wanted to empower youth[s] to be leaders and develop leadership to make a better community. Two years later, the achievements of YIA have exceeded our expectations. We’ve come a really long way.”

Youth In Action, which has a very small office in the AS220 building downtown on Empire Street, has reached about 2,000 youngsters through its programs emphasizing health, community action, community service, and multicultural arts.

The group’s future plans include eventually finding office space large enough for meetings, continuing to create programs for youths and leading a campaign to promote positive change in their neighborhoods.

Youth In Action includes 56 active members, most of them between the ages of 12 and 21, and is governed by a 27-member board of directors — comprising 24 members who are under 21. An advisory board of 18 adults provides guidance, but does not vote on issues.

The organizational and individual accomplishments are numerous.

Misty — a student at the Metropolitan Regional Career and Technical Center — developed her speaking and writing skills and has become a dynamic leader who runs board meetings, makes presentations to possible funding sources, and writes grants.

Luis, who attends Classical High School, coordinates a 12-stage comprehensive health program that informs youngsters about HIV/AIDS, other diseases, teenage pregnancy and gender equity. So far, the health program has been taught to more than 300 students.

Luis estimates.

Group members have given their input at such forums as one sponsored by Lt. Governor Charles Fogarty to discuss the spending of tobacco settlement funds.

Shortly after its formation, the group worked with local artist Munir Mohammad to create a 150-foot mural that now graces a wall behind Roger Williams Middle School, near the corner of Prairie Avenue and Richardson Street. The larger-than-life-sized faces of the teen founders are featured in the colorful mural.

Group members conducted door-to-door surveys of some South Side neighborhoods to find out what residents liked and didn’t like about the area and what they thought should be done to improve it. They also informed residents about how to combat lead poisoning — having just been trained on the problem by the Childhood Lead Action Project. Some members also took training with Direct Action for Rights and Equality (DARE) to address the problem of vacant lots.

The group sponsored a successful program for Black History Month, has received funding from the last six small grant applications that it submitted and publishes a quarterly newsletter.

In March, members of the group were chosen to meet with retired Army Gen. Colin Powell, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who, during a visit to the state, asked to speak with a group of dedicated young people who were doing something “unique and positive.”

Earlier this month, Youth In Action sponsored a community celebration, in a courtyard behind Roger Williams Middle School. The four-hour event drew about 600 youths, who gathered peacefully to watch several disc jockeys perform in a “battle of the deejays.”

The location of the celebration was not random. Group members have been successful in lobbying the city councilmen who represent the area — first John Rollins, who left office last year, and then Luis Aponte, the incumbent — to set aside $300,000 in bond money to create an “ArtPark” behind the middle school. A plan of the B.

Jae Clanton Elementary School.

Group members came up with the idea after residents complained that the neighborhood had no safe place in which children could play. Misty recalls. While Youth In Action succeeded in getting Rollins to commit the funding to the ArtPark almost two years ago, the groundbreaking for the park has not yet taken place.

After the group came to him, Aponte said, he agreed to fund the park and decided to expand the plans to make it “a more active park,” with a water park, playground equipment, green space, trees, a walking path, and two handball courts. The park will also contain a performance stage, public art, and creatively designed benches, group members said.

Even though city officials had previously committed to begin work on the park last month, parks officials said last week that construction will not start until spring.

Feldman said Youth In Action — which has worked with the nearby schools, a daycare, and CityArts on the project — is eagerly awaiting the opening of the park because the group has been building community interest around it for the last 18 months. Members plan to get residents involved in planting flowers and trees, and painting and designing the art, to inspire more community spirit and unity.

They contend that the park is more than just a park; it’s a catalyst for disenfranchised members of the community to come together to work on bigger social issues, such as vacant lots, illegal dumping, and violence.

And group members reject the notion that the park will be vandalized.

Luis notes that the mural behind the middle school has seldom been touched — he believes because nearby residents were recruited to help paint in the figures drawn by the artist.

Stephanie Alexander, a member of Youth In Action who attends Feinstein High School, said she believes residents will feel a sense of pride and unity in an ArtPark that they helped create.

Part of the frustration in dealing with adult-led youth groups, members said, was that it took forever to get things done and that ultimately, decisions were made by the adults.

By having their own group, they are able to project the voice of youths, “have their say and do their own thing,” Feldman said.

Misty said she believes young people do want to get things done and will stay committed to seeing a project through, as her group has with the ArtPark.

As Youth In Action prospered and acquired an office, the teens took on the task of advertising for, interviewing, and hiring an office manager.

Misty said she believes one of the group’s greatest accomplishments is the impact it has had on individual lives, including her own.

While she once had dreams of being a singer/actress, she now plans to go to college and ultimately “work in the community, with people.”

Personally, I’ve become more involved with everything,” said Luis. “I have this power, and I know how to use it and I feel comfortable. … Youth know what’s best for their peers.”

Luis said he got involved with his community at a young age because “the community needs so much” and because “I refuse to be statistic,” even though it falls in every high-risk category in being young, minority, gay, low-income and urban.

His motto? Do something to make things better.

Luis disputes the notion that Youth In Action members are exceptional super-teens. In fact, he said, they are ordinary young people who share the common goal of wanting to make their community better and act on it. It’s the youth-led process which allows them to learn and make their own decisions that is both unique and empowering, he and his peers maintain.

“People say that we’re the future leaders,” said Stephanie Alexander. “If we don’t learn now, what’s going to happen in the future?”