Youth Call All Shots in New Community Group

by Emily Torgan-Shalansky
Jewish Community Reporter

Rhode Island resident Karen Feldman doesn't dismiss teenagers as "just kids."

"Because she thinks far too many people do, she recently founded Youth in Action, a uniquely youth-operated non-profit organization devoted to helping teens develop themselves and their communities."

"This group is controlled by young people," Feldman explained. "There are plenty of organizations in which young people make decisions, but they ultimately have to answer to adult boards. We, too, have an experienced adult board, but because youth have the super-majority, the adults cannot outvote them."

As the ethnically diverse participants work toward YIA goals of community outreach and education on issues such as teen pregnancy, drug prevention, HIV and racism, they will learn about fund-raising, grant-writing and community organization.

"These are pieces of what it takes to be a leader," said Feldman. "No one thinks young urban people can do things, but once they acquire the skills, they're incredibly capable."

There are local youth and adults who agree with her — at present, nine teenage board members are deeply involved in YIA.

The organization's adult volunteers include Bert Cerenka, artistic director of AS220; Aisha Adullah-Odlase, a Providence School Board member; Rob Deltoes, a school director; Michael Aaronson, an accountant; Herb Kaplan, a community activist; Linda Cyn, a parent; and Susan Kavanagh, a VISTA volunteer.

The group is already incorporated, thanks to Aaronson and the efforts of the youth board, which raised the necessary money by soliciting small contributions.

Cerenka has provided meeting space in the AS220 building.

"Eventually, we hope to obtain our own space inside a home," Feldman said. "A lot of young people don't feel at home in their own houses, and this would give us place for Friday night dinners. Teen mothers would also be able to come by and share childcare arrangements. Others could just hang out."

Feldman, 30, combined her education, experience and Jewish beliefs to develop the concept behind the fledgling organization.

"Originally from Long Island, she came to New England to earn her B.A. in psychology from Wellesley. After spending three years as a substance abuse counselor at the Long Island Homeless Shelter in Boston Harbor, she obtained a master's degree in public administration from the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.

"About a year ago, she moved to Rhode Island to be near a former boyfriend."

"I came here for love," joked the exuberant Feldman.

"But while her romance fizzled, her love of working with young adults flourished."

Feldman took a job at Visions for Change, where she became director of all youth and prevention programs in Newport County.

"On weekends, she worked at the West End Community Council, where she helped a group of teenagers successfully obtain an $11,000 United Way grant to help renovate vacant lots in Providence."