

Youth Empowering Youth through Learn and Serve America

By Holly Gillespie, Senior Project Coordinator, Youth Resources of Southwestern Indiana

I can still recall being a teen chosen to participate in Youth Resources of Southwestern Indiana's programs. As a member of the Teen Advisory Council, I remember being excited that, for the first time, adults wanted to hear what we as teens had to say. We planned, implemented, and evaluated projects, not our adult sponsor or teacher! Youth Resources taught us how to be a voice in the community and then listened to what we had to say. I had the first inkling of what I would later learn is called "empowerment."

The focus of Youth Resources, empowering young people through meaningful community service projects, is as important today as when I was a student. The service project, however, has evolved from community service to service-learning. This happened in 1993-94, when Youth Resources collaborated with Evansville Vanderburgh School Corporation to develop a service-learning program. From this collaboration, the elements of the Youth As Resources/Service-Learning model emerged (see model on screened side bar). The model is one of student/teacher decision making in creating service-learning projects.

One of the unique components of this model is the teen screening committee. This committee can be formed through schools, youth service agencies, or community foundations. In Evansville, the screening committee is part of a teen leadership program called the Teen Advisory Council. The city's mayor has named this council his official teen advisory group.

Teen Advisory Council's Screening Process

The 60-member teen council has 15 students who volunteer to serve on the screening committee. The review of the projects is a carefully developed process, with every member integrally involved in decisionmaking:

- Committee members are paired as first and second reader, and each review the grant proposal they are given

- Each rate all areas of criteria on a scale of 1-5, with 5 being the best, with notes explaining their scoring rationale
- The two readers contact one another and determine a final recommendation for the Teen Advisory Council
- The council meets and the first reader presents the grant project; council members discuss and ask the reader questions about the project
- After all questions have been answered, the committee determines their final recommendation for the Youth Resources Board of Directors
- The committee chairperson presents the grant screening committee recommendation for each grant proposal to the Board of Directors for final approval

Because the proposals are projects for youth being reviewed through the eyes of youth, the teen screening committee is better able than the adult board to discern which proposal is promising and viable. They can quickly tell whether or not youth have been involved in the planning process, if youth can actually implement the project, and if the project will realistically enhance the curriculum being studied. The committee is also instrumental in improving the screening process, by providing suggestions and feedback.

Seeing so many youth experiencing the same empowerment that originally excited me as a youth by participating in community service is certainly rewarding. Teach youth the skills they need to be a voice and then open your ears, mind, and heart, and truly listen.

For more information on using youth councils for reviewing Learn and Serve America projects, contact Holly at 812-421-0030, e-mail: hgill@evansville.net. The Youth Resources website is: www.youthresources.org ■

Youth As Resources/Service-Learning Model

- 1 Study a unit of material
- 2 Brainstorm about community problems or conduct a formal needs assessment
- 3 Think about a community service that addresses the problem
- 4 Decide how the curriculum or academic learning can be used to plan and implement the community service
- 5 Receive funding for the project, if approved by the teen screening committee
- 6 Complete the service project
- 7 Reflect on the experience
- 8 Celebrate the service



Our community's best resource wears sneakers.

