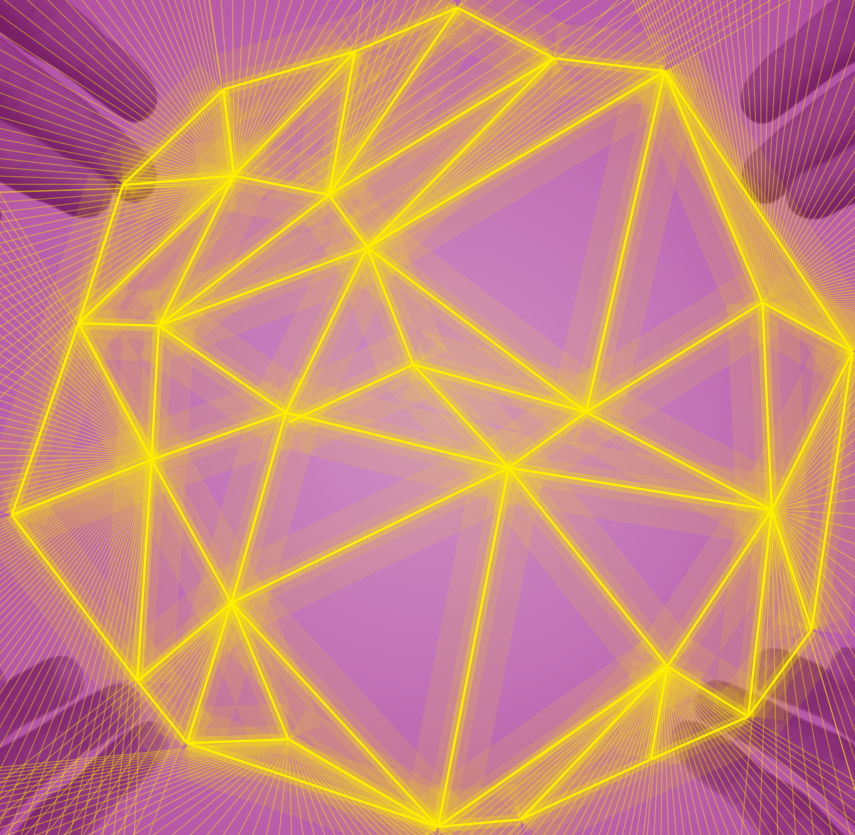


YOUTH-LED COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

IMPACTS & CHALLENGES



A LAIDLAW LEARNING REPORT

LAIDLAW
FOUNDATION



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IMPACTS & CHALLENGES

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BACKGROUND

The Laidlaw Foundation is a private foundation based in Toronto, Canada that supports passionate young people in taking action on issues that affect them and their communities. The Foundation supports the process of youth organizing, where young people work collectively with their allies to identify, advocate for and instigate change on critical issues that are having an impact on their communities and broader society. Each year the Foundation invests close to \$1.5 million in youth-led groups and intermediary organizations that are based primarily in Toronto.

Prior to 2007, the Foundation had several distinct funding programs that focused on the arts, the environment, youth engagement and social inclusion. This changed when the Foundation Board underwent a planning process to identify how its granting strategies could work more synergistically and have a greater impact. The board identified that young people were involved or had the potential to be involved in all facets of the Foundation's activities. The Foundation's experience found that young people use arts-based strategies to address the issues they are facing; that young people mobilize to address environmental and community health concerns; and that engaged young people are a cornerstone of an inclusive society. In 2008, the Laidlaw Foundation launched a five-year strategic plan that focused its granting, convening and knowledge-sharing activities on supporting the process of youth organizing.

The Foundation is committed to ongoing evaluation. As part of its evaluation activities, interviews were conducted with 48 people involved in 10 of its funded groups. The stakeholders that were interviewed included the founders of youth-led groups, coordinators, partners, participants and volunteers. Drawing on an evaluation framework called "Most Significant Change," informants were asked to share what they considered to be the most significant effect of this work on themselves, on their group, and on the community. In analyzing the data, there emerged significant insights into the underlying values of youth-led community organizing, youth organizing strategies and tools, and implications for funding practices. These have been developed into a series of reports to share the Foundation's learning with the broader community.

YOUTH-LED COMMUNITY ORGANIZING:

What We Are Learning

The Laidlaw Foundation's work is based on a positive youth development framework that asserts that every young person needs access to multiple opportunities to identify their talents; unconditional support from adults and allies; and multiple opportunities to act on the issues that concern them and that they are passionate about. Looking back on the Foundation's history of investing in youth-led social change strategies, it is clear that young people and their allies (people who support youth-led and youth-driven community change strategies) are actively reshaping their communities, redefining organizational structures and changing the script of how community and social problems are defined, and by whom. The terms 'youth' and 'youth-led' often result in assumptions that the scope and impact of this work extends only to young people, as though they live separate from their broader community and social contexts. The Foundation's learning has been that young people are not organizing in order to fix or change other youth; they are organizing to create supportive and empowering environments so that their peers, families and communities can thrive.

So what do these efforts get called? Engagement... organizing... trouble-making...

The Foundation uses the term 'youth organizing' in its guidelines and materials. 'Youth-led community organizing' is another way to capture the breadth of this work. Expressions like 'youth engagement' often beg the questions: engaged in what, and on whose terms? Often the answers are: in an external group or organization, and on terms not conceived by young people themselves. 'Youth organizing' often begs the question: organizing to do what? The assumption here is that young people only wish to work on 'youth' issues, whatever those might be.

YOUTH-LED COMMUNITY ORGANIZING:

A Working Definition

Youth-led community organizing is a process wherein young people and their allies draw their mandate from other youth, communities and their own lived experiences. From this knowledge and experience, groups develop and implement interventions, strategies and initiatives that work to improve and transform communities, institutions and social systems.

IT'S NOT ABOUT 'YOUTH'

As counterintuitive as it may seem, the work of the Foundation is not about 'youth.' The Foundation's vision is grounded in the concept of social inclusion and the role of young people in creating inclusive societies. The Foundation recognizes that young people are leading deep civic engagement efforts aimed at transforming the ways in which social problems are defined and solved. Youth-led community organizing is like most traditions of community organizing in that it acknowledges that people with lived experiences are experts in the issues that shape their lives. As one community organizer and adult ally reflected: "People's experiences and their adversities create in them resilience and a third eye, a perspective that really is so different than any other kind of perspective." These strategies place the knowledge of young people and their communities at the core of broader social and community change efforts.

The Foundation believes that the receptivity of institutions and decision-makers to young people's priorities is a proportionate measure to the inclusiveness of society. Listening to the priorities and issues being raised by youth offers critical insights into what needs to change in order for young people to feel genuinely included and valued. While the focus of the Foundation's work is on youth, the same approach could be used to assess how residents or other groups are genuinely engaged in processes that directly shape their lives and well-being. The Foundation builds from the expertise and insights of young people to illuminate experiences of social exclusion and marginalization. In advocating for social inclusion, the Foundation recognizes the pivotal role that young people play in building inclusive and safe spaces for their peers, families and communities.

The Foundation's current organizational strategies build on the Foundation's work to date in supporting youth engagement. The Youth Engagement Program was launched in 2000 and transitioned into the Youth Organizing Program in 2008.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are deeply grateful to everyone who shared their insights with us through the Laidlaw Foundation's Most Significant Change evaluation process. We had the opportunity to connect with youth organizers, community organizers, program participants, volunteers and partners. Your perspectives offered candid and rich insights into youth-led community organizing efforts across Toronto. It was a privilege to listen and to learn from you.

INTRODUCTION

“But then maybe I can break it down using their jargon to say what I know is true in plain terms: People need hope for their future, safe places to live, to be believed in, and they need a relationship with another person who cares about them and who is going to be around for longer than 10 minutes” — YOUTH ORGANIZER

Youth struggle to understand their multifaceted roles as members of the local and global communities. They are active members of their communities — supporting friends, families, and neighbours. They often work in their communities, advocate for awareness of social issues, and strive to take care of one another. However, the image of youth today is that of “rowdy upstarts” or “trouble makers.” Often, today’s youth have the image of people who make a lot of noise, but don’t actually contribute to society that we see. Or worse, they have an image of causing “senseless violence” and danger. The actions of many youth are not reflected in this negative image. And yet the continuing existence of the image of “troubled, hopeless youth” will produce a self-fulfilling prophecy. As youth strive to locate their personal needs in the larger community they do grasp onto the images and ideas of self that society projects onto them. It is easy to become what you are told you are. This image disconnects youth from our society and removes them from a position of control to one in which they are required to follow the lead of others—to become what they are told they are.

Youth Organizing is an alternative story of the role of youth in our communities today. It is a type of advocacy that supports youth as active participants in their communities, and is an alternative form of work that focuses on individual and communal needs with an awareness of global issues. Youth-led peer models of change support active youth leaders and work to create positive images of youth. Youth Organizing generates these alternative images through the creation of safe spaces for its members—spaces where youth participants can be physically safe and can also feel emotionally and mentally safe to explore difficult, complex ideas. To fully explore the roots of violence, racism, sexism, and trauma, uncomfortable topics must be discussed and understood. Safe spaces provide a comfortable place in which to explore the difficult and uncomfortable issues facing our communities today.

Youth Organizing endeavours to break down traditional hierarchical power structures by subverting the position of leader, understanding that the leader is also a participant and that every participant is also a leader. In youth-led groups, participants have the power and potential to share their knowledge. The creation of safe spaces in Youth Organizing dismantles the divisions between leader and participant to address the individual needs of the community group. It is through this holistic approach to organizing and structuring advocacy that youth-led models make a distinct and meaningful contribution to social change.

Youth Organizing, however, is not without its challenges. Many youth who are engaged in this type of work face real obstacles such as homelessness, violence, mental health issues, personal pain, and social trauma. Youth Organizing aims to create new systems of power outside of and within current social structures. However, Youth Organizing struggles to find funding for alternative and new forms of social justice work that are not always recognized by traditional establishments, and it faces systemic discrimination and institutional conflicts. Despite these impediments, Youth Organizing has far-reaching and powerful impacts on individual growth and communal healing. The following document highlights the challenges and impacts of Youth Organizing through the voices of many Youth Organizing leaders and participants.

“Real change is the hardest thing to accomplish in the world, in my opinion. To see someone take a risk, to share something personal is significant. People don’t get awards for that. It’s significant and it’s those small shifts and those moments that we’re trying to scale up” — YOUTH ORGANIZER

HARD TALK

OPPRESSION, CHALLENGES, AND REALITIES OF YOUTH ORGANIZING

The difficulties in creating alternative systems of change are manifold. Youth Organizing is not just messy because there is no clear map for creating new systems of organizing. The very idea of creating alternative systems of organization puts many organizers in direct confrontation with existing systems and forms of organizing. Indeed, to label something as alternative is to put one's organization in juxtaposition to something else—it exists not on its own but in opposition to another thing. Youth Organizing's challenge, then, is not only to create new forms of organizing and social healing, but to create these systems simultaneously inside and outside of existing systems. These existing systems may be systems that have oppressed their communities, and they may also be systems and ideas that currently oppress these communities. In order to face these challenges head-on, organizers and participants must work in territories of discomfort. Power, privilege, trauma, and pain are some of the tough realities facing youth organizers, and it is through the naming of these oppressions and a willingness to embrace and learn from failings that Youth Organizing gains its strength as a new form of social change. The following are reflections from youth organizers and participants on the many challenges of Youth Organizing.

NAMING OPRESSION

Many Youth Organizing groups are developed in communities that have faced oppression. Members of these organizations have been systemically or overtly discriminated against and strive to name and understand this oppression. A key step in working with and through oppression is taking the time to name it and recognize it in our society. However, active participants in Youth Organizing move beyond a simplified understanding of power and privilege—recognizing power and privilege not only in the larger community but also within their own organizations. A few community organizers comment on recognizing oppression within their communities and working through those challenges:

“Talking about power and privilege is one thing but to actually [challenge it] is extremely difficult. To be challenged around power is really hard. To not get defensive or to claim power when maybe you could have been a difficult journey for me”

— COMMUNITY ORGANIZER

“Also within the Grassroots Youth Collaborative there are tons of groups that are still dealing with homophobia. They were able to create a space where guys who had never even talked about it were stepping up into the circle and talking about experiences they’ve had where they’ve been extremely homophobic and put someone in the position where they’ve blatantly oppressed them as a result of that. They were able to hold that space without judgment and help people through that. I think that’s a very taxing process for them. Seeing them do that in action and being a part of that was very powerful” — COMMUNITY ORGANIZER

EMBRACING LEARNING AND MESSINESS

Youth Organizing groups seek out new alternatives to traditional organizational strategies that have been seen to be oppressive or have alienated much of the population. While there are clear maps and standards for traditional forms of organizing, to create an alternative without a guide is a continuous struggle in self-awareness and personal reflection. One youth organizer voices this struggle:

“It’s a really interesting dynamic and [it’s about] trying to stay true to a culture that is one of joy and energy; always connecting and reconnecting to that and remembering that even if we don’t have the right language for it; [and trying] to make sure that we don’t become this bureaucratic thing that we’ve been taking apart articulately since day one. This is the challenge: to not become what it is we’ve been critiquing, when you don’t know anything else”

— YOUTH ORGANIZER

EMBRACING LEARNING AND MESSINESS CONTINUED

In striving to create new pathways in organizing, mistakes are often made. Ideas do not always work as planned and failure is a very real possibility. To challenge and push into uncharted territory in organizing and community development is to push oneself and one's organization into unknown situations. As one youth organizer reflects, strength in organizing does not come from "getting it right" but often from the ability to reflect and understand what went wrong:

"We're like, 'yeah, we're making mistakes all the time,' and we're admitting it. Can't everybody else? If everybody could admit to their mistakes maybe we would have, instead of just public relations campaigns, we could have honest dialogue with communities and with our local politicians and engage in real healing; if we can just take responsibility as adults and say, 'yeah, we messed up.' So we're messing up, all the time. At the same time, talking about it is pushing us forward in a really surprisingly accelerated way. So, as much as we think 'we're messing up all the time,' here we are with our integrity intact, with our relationships intact and with growing resources" — YOUTH ORGANIZER

Youth Organizing is often client-based and can take on an individualized nature. What worked in one situation or for one group may not be effective or appropriate for another organization. Youth Organizing pushes its members and organizers to face uncomfortable topics and new ways of working through these topics. This discomfort develops diverse forms of understanding and organizing but it also creates a continuous system of learning. Two community members reflect on the chaotic nature of Youth Organizing:

"A lot of organizations talk about being client-centred or client-driven. I think that it's often true to a point but usually they have a small space, which is the organizational structure where clients can have a big impact. The closer you get to the hierarchal structure, the more diminished that gets"

— COMMUNITY MEMBER AND STAFF

"Some people feel very threatened but that's okay. I think that is appropriate maybe and I don't know that people need to feel—I don't mean threatened as in terms of violence—but threatened in terms of their world view, in terms of how they understand power. I think that's okay. I think discomfort is appropriate often. That's a part of change so that's how I would like to frame it" — YOUTH ORGANIZER

HAVING SUPPORT TO BE DIFFERENT

Youth Organizing is not just a messy alternative to traditional social programming; it strives to break down cycles of violence and oppression. Youth Organizing is a different process and it needs the space to be different in order to move beyond the kinds of systems that alienate their youth members. Youth Organizing also embraces the differences of its participants and provides space for their individual growth. As one organizer reflects:

“A lot of these young people come out and they can’t get a job. They can’t find education. They don’t have the support so they end up going back into the same cycle. Ways to make easy money or whatever. They end up just going back in. We don’t want that. That was a part of our grant, for us to stop that”

— YOUTH ORGANIZER

COMMUNITY CARE AND HELPING THE HELPER

In naming oppression and working through topics of discomfort, trauma is both recognized and a possible outcome. Youth organizers and participants facing hard realities within themselves and their communities use Youth Organizing as a place of healing as well as social change. One youth participant explains how personal healing can go hand in hand with social change:

“I met the People Project at a phase in my life that was really hard. It was really hard for me to see social change and social interaction as something that could be integrated with a healing process. I was going through a kind of psychological healing process and when I started interacting with the People Project I was able to discover that I could actually do these things at the same time. I could heal with people and people could help me heal. That has definitely been one of the most important things”

— YOUTH PARTICIPANT

The reality of healing is that it is needed when there is real pain. Pain and trauma cannot be glossed over and worked around if healing is going to take place. Thus, healing on both an individual and a group level often requires moments of despair and deep hurt in order to move forward. One youth organizer reflects on working through despair to find hope and healing:

“It’s the irony of healing. You create room for despair and the reality is that’s where hope lies. That’s what keeps me doing the work. That’s the most significant change, it’s in those moments. It can happen on a micro level. It can happen on a group level. I really believe that those are all connected, that there’s no separation; that people breathe that into the rest of their lives, into to the systems in which they work and live, and that things are changing” — YOUTH ORGANIZER

COMMUNITY CARE AND HELPING THE HELPER CONTINUED

Often organizations may not have a direct mandate for healing and yet the process develops naturally as the participants interact in the program. Youth organizers have reflected on the realization that they are in a position of healing:

“From the beginning, being a person who was coming into this work as an actor and someone who loved the creative process, I feel like it has been one discovery after another. The first one was the connection with how this work can engage people and engage them in a healing process, in a process of exchanging skills with one another; in the process of getting your new sense of self. It was very pivotal for me to realize that there was more change that was possible in the engagement through arts processes. The things that came from that were huge” — COMMUNITY MEMBER

Healing does not only happen or only need to happen for the community or youth participants. Often youth organizers come from similar communities or positions of oppression as youth participants. And yet youth organizers often find themselves acting as healers; it can be difficult for them to recognize their own need for healing. These youth organizers not only voice a need for healers to take the time to heal themselves but also stress the value and potential of creating systems for collective healing:

“It was time to look at both the micro—in the sense of what is happening in the hearts, minds, and bodies of the helpers, what is happening in the world of the helpers that is not being addressed or not being honoured—and the systemic issues that are getting in the way of healers healing and healers being able to heal” — YOUTH ORGANIZER

“Can we interact and create a system of relationships in which we can lean on each other for support and healing and find human relationships and then offer that and broaden that and scale it up?”
—YOUTH ORGANIZER

“Helpers are famous for not being able to ask for help. A lot of us grew into the role from actually having been in that role as children. We made careers out of it. Not only do they not know how to ask for it but they’re also not encouraged to ask for help. The systems actually want to put a lid on the idea that frontline workers are suffering as well”
— YOUTH ORGANIZER

FEELING UNDERSTOOD

Part of the healing process for many youth organizers is the opportunity to be understood. As youth organizers meet with other organizers and work with their communities, these opportunities for understanding create space for comfortable exploration of difficult topics. One youth organizer reflects:

“Within Frontline Partners with Youth Network I found a place where those walls could very slowly start coming down. That was huge for me because it taught me also how to talk about some of these thing with people that are not even in the sector, including my partner, my parents, and other friends that I have. I started learning how to communicate what I was going through and started learning how to ask for help and for support. That was the biggest thing that FPYN did for me—when I was introduced to it, when I was volunteering in it, and when I became a member of the stewardship group” — YOUTH ORGANIZER

PEER SUPPORTS

As youth organizers work to create alternative forms of social change, they often struggle to situate these alternatives in existing frameworks. Alternative or new forms of social organizing often must seek funding from traditional funding sources. Alternative forms of organizing thus become dependent on and at times beholden to traditional forms of funding and social organizing. Youth organizers reflect on the difficulty of these conflicts of ideas and the support that they found among fellow youth organizers:

“It became clear that people wanted a chance to meet and not be judged but be supported by each other outside of their organization and outside of the system. The more we had these meetings, it became clearer that they felt that their jobs and the way that success was being evaluated in terms of their work [were] not relevant to the communities that they belonged to and were working in. They didn’t have anywhere to talk about that because often it would threaten their job” — YOUTH ORGANIZER

“We’re highlighting this sandwich group of helpers as a group that is extremely significant, almost pivotal; a pivotal group of people who—because they’re pivotal—are sandwiched. They have all this information but can’t share it because it could threaten their livelihood. They really need help because their job is hard and they see difficult things. They don’t have support but are supposed to be okay. They’re not supposed to need help. They’re the helper” — YOUTH ORGANIZER

BROADER SUPPORTS FOR FRONTLINE WORKERS

There is much attention given to “at-risk youth,” but in addition to this concern, Youth Organizing brings to the forefront the very real issue of “at-risk frontline workers.” Youth organizers are often of similar ages to youth participants, come from similar socio-economic situations as these participants, and are often from the same communities as these participants. As reflected earlier, healers also need space to heal. The following voices reflect the hard realities facing many frontline workers:

“A lot of frontline workers have substance abuse problems. A lot of frontline workers have massive relationship problems. These frontline workers who have incredible histories of trauma and difficulty trusting people and suffer from hopelessness mirror the hopelessness that they are supposed to be mitigating with the people that they’re working with”
— YOUTH ORGANIZER

“Their families and extended families lean on them. If they get lost in all of that, what are the losses to our communities? We are losing people. There are people who are losing the light because they are feeling so hopeless in their work”
— YOUTH ORGANIZER

GOALS OF YOUTH ORGANIZING

Youth Organizing faces many challenges, from issues of oppression to the daily challenges of finding shelter and food for participants. What is clear is that Youth Organizing focuses on facing these challenges head-on and moves beyond a “top-down” power structure. Youth Organizing is not about a leader teaching followers. Youth Organizing works to address society’s challenges from a collective learning perspective. All members have opportunities for learning, all members have opportunities for healing, and all members are striving for social change. Youth Organizing is about taking risks and embracing possible failure. It aims to recognize the individual as well as the whole. One organizer reflects on what Youth Organizing strives to do:

“It’s about figuring out how to make the community as a whole regenerative and just giving lots of chances for being pragmatic about how we can operate in a way that doesn’t exhaust people”
— YOUTH ORGANIZER

WORKING TOWARD COMFORT

THE CREATION AND VALUE OF SAFE SPACES IN YOUTH ORGANIZING

“Safe space” is a buzzword heard often in social, communal, and educational work. A safe space is quite simply what it sounds like—a space that is safe for all participants, where people can feel both physically safe and mentally safe. In other words, it’s a place where people are free to explore difficult topics with love and compassion. Safe spaces are not created in the avoidance of difficult topics; safe spaces are birthed from the messy, difficult nature of our societies and strive to allow those participating in these spaces the breath and freedom to explore sensitive issues, to learn, and to be themselves. There is, however, no perfect formula for creating a safe space. Not all safe spaces look the same, and yet their purpose and value should not be underestimated. A few frontline workers speak about the impacts of safe spaces:

“For frontline workers to feel safe enough to learn and to feel validated in their reality has been significant. I didn’t know how significant it would be but people have been reacting in really powerful ways, just having their experience named and having their own place to go. They are as important as anyone else, which is not reflected in the broader culture or system” — COMMUNITY MEMBER

“One of the conversations I had quite recently with a former co-worker about FPYN was around FPYN being one of the very few safe spaces for frontline workers to share knowledge about the number of rules they’re breaking to support young people... It’s one of the very few places that frontline worker can talk about the rules that they break and why they break them. It allows frontline leaders to not carry so much guilt, fear, and emotion involved in their work” — YOUTH ORGANIZER

Safe spaces have significant effects for frontline workers, but they also have immeasurable impacts on youth participants. They not only provide what may be the only safe space for many youth, but they also provide space for those youth participants to become leaders.

“Lost Lyrics has grown internally by an insane amount. Students that have come into our program have been very isolated or come from the Childrens Aid Society. They have come from places where they have been very ostracized, not only at home but at school, where they have been bullied, etcetera. It’s amazing to see these particular young people flourish in Lost Lyrics after a couple of years. They’ve become the leaders” — YOUTH ORGANIZER

Creating safe communities does not mean avoiding or setting limits on topics or issues that can be addressed. Creating a safe space often means that there cannot be a hard understanding of right or wrong—judgment has to be set aside in order to address issues of equity. In other words, people have to be seen not as stagnant agents of good or bad, but as developing, learning beings that have the power of change. In order to make all people accepted and comfortable in a group, there often must be discomfort as prejudices are recognized and explored.

“[Creating safe space means] recognizing what equity looks like in all of the spheres. What it means if one kid in the space is saying something that is homophobic; how to address that; how to practically bring up that conversation and not have people feel defensive about it; how to move forward with the intention of equity for every person coming into that space with that feeling of comfort and acceptance”

— COMMUNITY ORGANIZER

“To me, more than anything, it’s having the space to be vulnerable and having the space to be heard and valued. Not a lot of people have that and in this work you need that, in life you need that. To be able to have the space to do that has been life-changing. I remember personally coming to something and having the same attitude and feelings. All these things, all these emotions I’ve never been able to express, and actually having the chance to express it felt weird, so new and so different. Before, all those things would have caused issues. They just accepted me and everything that I’ve come with without questioning it” — COMMUNITY MEMBER

ENVISIONING DIFFERENT SYSTEMS

Just as there is no perfect formula for a safe space there is also no stagnant understanding of what safe spaces look like or what they should continue to look like. Challenging standard structures and forms of systems and education is not a neat process. There are failures and there are growing pains as one attempts to challenge the status quo and seek out better alternatives. Two youth leaders reflect on the challenges of creating different systems:

“If we’re actually going to create an alternative space of learning, what does that look like? One of the challenges I had in Malvern was teaching classes of 25-plus students. Lost Lyrics was starting to recreate an overcrowded inner-city public school. Lost Lyrics is not that. It is supposed to be the alternative. One adult with 25 students started to recreate listening problems. People who want to express themselves don’t have the time to express themselves because there are 20 kids that want to talk”

— YOUTH ORGANIZER

“It was a really hard thing to go through and we took lots of lessons away from it. Lessons in terms of the responsibility it takes to create spaces like that. I think that the Original Griots program has been the space where we took those lessons and reworked everything. So that was a hugely beautiful thing for so much of the time but then towards the end it became so much about the fact that we hadn’t created those supports. Sometimes when I think about it I forget about the good stuff, which is bad. There is so much good stuff. I don’t call Each One Teach One a stumbling block. I would just say it was challenge. It was a really big challenge, necessary, but huge” — YOUTH ORGANIZER

SMALL FISH IN A BIG SEA

SEEKING INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE FROM A YOUTH ORGANIZING PERSPECTIVE

In attempts to create alternative means of education and organizing around social change, youth organizers are faced with the realities of current institutional traditions. Although work is often focused on the needs of individuals and communities, youth organizers are also recognizing in their work the challenges and limitations of the larger institutions that govern our society. Community members and youth organizers reflect on their growing awareness of the need to change some of these institutions:

“I think before [community based education] was seen as very grassroots, looking locally. That’s not bad, but just where it began. They were really focused on smaller impacts. I’ve seen it change toward the desire to look at and challenge bigger systems issues and to look for opportunities to do work that does make a difference at that level”

— COMMUNITY MEMBER

“FPYN introduced me to a whole world of thinking that I had never been exposed to. I used to work in community development which is in very specific communities and then I went to the mental health centre and worked one on one with young people. In both settings the location of the blame was either the community or the individual. I had never even thought that other agents or factors could be involved because my vision, my world was so narrow. I’d heard the words ‘systemic issues,’ that kind of language thrown around, but there was no reality in it because systemic issues don’t matter when it’s 2 am and you have to go down to a police station to bail a young person out. I knew of those things, I knew of them institutionally and intuitively but I didn’t know the language around it. I didn’t know the role policy played in it. This was one of the big gifts from FPYN, this broader thinking” — YOUTH ORGANIZER

Youth Organizing initiatives have recognized the necessity of incorporating the needs of the individual into their institutional strategies. As such, organizations are working to incorporate the individual experience into their communal existence. This approach to community work hopes to create a more holistic way of structuring organizational power and responsibility.

“Shifts have started around how we build in these developments, as we’re building skills for these kids in our pre-apprenticeship program. I think it has dramatically changed the way in which things are delivered over the last three years. Course content and the recognition of the need for a holistic approach to dealing with individuals, especially young individuals who are in a different phase in their life and often have come here through very difficult circumstances before getting here, have been approached in a different way” — COMMUNITY MEMBER

CHALLENGING ASSUMPTIONS

A first and important step in challenging institutional traditions is to ask questions. How does an organization move beyond being the “anti-” or opposite to a system toward instigating change within that system? How does one work outside of and within traditional institutions to change whole systems? Community members and youth organizers reflect on the challenges facing assumptions around traditional institutions:

“It’s allowing us to grow in different ways and really test some of the stereotypes that large institutions have. I’ll explain what I mean about that. When a large institution is at the table with community-led organizations the power imbalances are phenomenal. You can unwittingly get yourself into a position of just doing things because that’s what you do. It’s easy because, look around you, I have divisions and people and teachers and lots of resources—well, not lots of resources, but relatively phenomenal resources. How do we then become an equitable partner and not insist that because we can, we do? How do we figure out a way that we can share this equally and all benefit from it?”
— COMMUNITY MEMBER

“The correctional officers had a huge misconception about us that we also had to break down. I saw a lot of officers come around and have questions about our program. If I took the time to tell them about the program you could tell that they were actually in some way positive. They became more and more positive and they became more helpful. They became more thankful for our program and would actually say ‘thank god you’re finally here’” — YOUTH ORGANIZER AND STAFF

CHALLENGES IN CHANGING INSTITUTIONS

Occupying a space that is both working within and outside of larger institutions is a challenge. Working within that space to challenge larger institutions can seem impossibly difficult. Often these demands for institutional change come from small groups trying to push against a system of thousands. Community members reflect on the challenges of pushing forward institutional change:

“Corrections is very big ship and it takes a lot to turn this ship so no matter what shape we’d have brought this program in, it would have met resistance anyway. And time is one of the biggest allies that we had in this and modifying the program, pulling it back. If we ran into a problem, pulling it back in numbers and just keeping ourselves as low to the ground as we can... and then when we weren’t hearing any issues then moving it forward again and getting the officers acclimatized to it” — COMMUNITY MEMBER

“With some institutions that are kind of really large, like CAMH, we’ve got some individual people that we’re getting more closely able to work with. I know that somebody there is often referring or advocating on behalf of youth. I think there’s still a lot of understanding needed to be able to get appropriate services developed. So that’s kind of larger than Sketch. It’s more of a city-wide issue I would say”
— COMMUNITY MEMBER AND STAFF

CONFRONTING SYSTEMIC RESISTANCE

Change is rarely easy and challenges are often met with resistance. As alternative youth organizers try to move within the very systems they wish to change, they are often met with strong resistance. Youth organizers reflect on the difficulties they found when trying to work within established institutions in innovative ways:

“There was a huge issue about doing the one on one [sessions]. They didn’t trust us. Every other person was allowed but we weren’t just because some correctional officers just didn’t want us there. I guess it was just ‘two Indian girls. What are they doing in here? What are their motives? Are they trying to bring in drugs?’ There were a lot of obstacles that we faced. We had to battle a lot of stigma towards us” — YOUTH ORGANIZER AND STAFF

“We’ve had a heck of a problem trying to get the police to come to our programs because of many different reasons but that cycle is broken up now. We have a police officer come into our program on a weekly basis. Some of our young kids are also a part of community policing partners so now we’ve created a youth policing community and some of our participants are in the program. That is also the biggest change or the big, big thing for us” — YOUTH ORGANIZER

HUMANIZING SYSTEMS

Trying to be a voice of change that works within a system can be challenging and frustrating. To engage with an institution that seems more powerful than you and then to feel suppressed or ignored by that institution can be exceptionally discouraging. Youth organizers speak out about times when they felt movements toward institutional change were silenced:

“I think that the most significant piece is the piece around where power lies. How decisions are made and who’s involved in making those decisions and why those people are involved in making those decisions. I think as a community of youth, in our youth sector, we have been abused a lot in our consultations. Whether it’s with the Roots of Youth Violence Report—‘What do you think we should do?’ and, ‘We’ll just go right ahead and build this jail against everything that you’ve said.’ That’s just a very aggravating example of how our voices have been consulted and then totally silenced”

— COMMUNITY ORGANIZER

Many Youth Organizing groups endeavour to create holistic systems that recognize the individual as well as the community. However, in the process of creating “alternative” forms of organizing, it can be easy to dehumanize or demonize existing systems. It is equally difficult to humanize systems to participants that have been profiled, stereotyped, or dehumanized by those very systems. One youth organizer reflects on the challenge to create a new system that also humanized and recognized existing, established institutions as people working within the same communities:

“For the youth to go back home and let their parents know what they’ve learned while in our program and be able to go back into the community and say ‘that officer is cool’ or ‘we worked with that officer’ has an impact on the rest of the community. It shows them that they have no reason to be afraid of these officers”

— YOUTH ORGANIZER

MICRO CHANGES WITH MACRO EFFECTS

CHALLENGING ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURES

Where does institutional change start? What does institutional change look like? Youth Organizing groups are working with institutional systems. In doing so they are seeking ways to have a productive and positive relationship with existing organizational structures. At the same time, these same youth organizers are looking at ways of creating new forms of operating systems. How does one create these new systems? How does one work with institutions to change those very institutions? Many youth organizers would assert that change starts with a question—with taking the time to analyze and reflect on the reasons things are done in certain ways.

SYSTEMS OF ENGAGEMENT AND SYSTEMS OF CHANGE

Not only can Youth Organizing work to bridge gaps between institutions but it can also act as an entry point for institutional change. Youth Organizing is often a place for breaking in new ideas and for developing and testing out new organizing strategies. This does not just mean challenging existing institutions but also developing new ways of doing things within one's own organization. A youth organizer discusses the need for internal change before challenging others:

“If you’re trying to break ground you need to play by the rules until everyone gets comfortable with you and then maybe you can try and start to change things. You have to get in there first”

— YOUTH ORGANIZER AND STAFF

Youth Organizing can provide entry points into working with and within different institutions; it can also assist participants in understanding the multifaceted nature of many organizations. Exposure to and reflection on different institutions and people within those institutions can help break down community stereotypes and humanize different political organizations.

“Growing up in this neighbourhood, young people don’t like the police. They have an idea of the police and the police also have an idea of the young people so there is always friction, there’s never a good relationship. It’s a repetitive thing. The older generation never liked them, I never liked them, the younger ones never like them, so it continues. As we got older, as we got into this work, we realized that they have a job to do. We’re all human. Some are good and some are bad—so after seeing many different police officers we decided to have our youth form some sort of relationship with the police”

— YOUTH ORGANIZER

DEVELOPING NON-HIERARCHICAL ORGANIZATIONAL FORMS

Systems of change do not come without difficulty or challenges. In attempts to create new ways of organizing, groups can face resistance and even failure. Many forms of organizing are traditionally hierarchical and it is easy when trying something new to rely on systems and ideas that are familiar. It is difficult to create a new way of organizing without a guide. Creating new forms of non-hierarchical organizational forms is messy work, but work that has and can continue to generate great new ideas:

“It’s been really significant to work with a team that tries hard to be non-hierarchical, which was also part of the appeal. The idea that we were equal [was] manifested by me and the other two staff members make the same rate of pay. I think that’s pretty outstanding and a very concrete way of developing hierarchy. We do different types of work but it’s equal. Two staff members work more hours than I do but we generate the same income per hour. That’s really rad. I’m used to very traditional hierarchy within organizations, either not for profit or for profit.

It’s been helpful to be part of the discussions and figure out how we make this work”

— YOUTH ORGANIZER AND STAFF

“How do we make decisions when we are collectively delivering something? That has presented challenges but has also presented opportunities for very rich dialogues that I don’t think we would have had if they had come and said, ‘hey, we have an idea. Do you want to go get some money and we’ll help you?’ It is very different and very strong”

— COMMUNITY MEMBER

MODELS FOR HOW THINGS CAN BE DONE DIFFERENTLY

Experimenting with and exploring new structural strategies is not only valued among Youth Organizing groups but can also be applied to larger institutions within the community. Youth organizers may challenge traditional power structures within their organizations but they have also found that many organizations that rely on traditional structures are taking notice and applying their strategies as well. Sometimes active change outside of Youth Organizing comes from first applying those strategies of change within the organization.

“We’ve become an example of what can happen if you generally trust your employees. Organizations are slowly but surely showing interest in our model, in how we work; why we’ve chosen to not have a hierarchy; why we’ve chosen to not become an organization... Not only are we influencing emergent groups and networks but we’re also very actively pushing back on organizations. Workers are going back and saying, ‘hey, there is a place that I know of where this is how they work,’ and organizations are starting to take notice”

— YOUTH ORGANIZER

Youth Organizing places great value on innovation of organizational strategies and challenging structural norms. Challenging established models for youth groups can be difficult, but can also lead to breakthroughs in the way that frontline work is delivered in communities. Many youth organizations do not strive to create a new, “correct” model for running an organization, but instead strive to stay open-minded and share learned experiences with other organizations.

“That message stays alive and transfers itself out to the broader community. They want to understand how we do things. They want us to share practices with them... It has some things, just a very base that we can share with other people, even if it’s just ways of questioning or thinking about things. The important thing for us is not to franchise and not to say that this model works in other places and not to become stagnant. We’re just one prototype. It’s all based on this understanding that we have, which is that the imagination is infinite. It’s a part of helping us to live as better creatures, people, and persons” — COMMUNITY MEMBER

RELEVANT STRATEGIES

There are many models for new forms of learning and new strategies for effective Youth Organizing. Youth organizers and participants are in a continuous state of learning, reflection, and development. As such, new strategies for social advocacy are often based in education and also social interactions—addressing how we learn and how we interact with one another.

EXPERIMENTAL LEARNING

One organization we spoke to focused on stressing real-life connections to its material and developing lessons from hands-on experiences. A youth organizer reflects on these experimental learning strategies:

“I got involved with Schools Without Borders because I recognized, in my own life, a lot of struggles with institutional schooling systems. I reflected on a lot of the challenges that I had within that structure and realized that most of my profound learning experiences came from real life and hands-on experiences. The initial interest was to share some of my memorable experiences in the real world and figure out a way to support other people in the same way that I was supported” — YOUTH ORGANIZER

CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Youth Organizing does not exist on its own. In principal, Youth Organizing works to create safe spaces for its members, but the intentions of the ideas and safe spaces inevitably spill out to its communities; as such, it is communal and involves many individuals. Youth Organizing thus demands active strategies in appropriate conflict resolution and works to create positive means of dealing with conflict.

“I’ve been helping support the formation of a restorative process of justice or consequences, or however you want to put it, so that when there are major conflicts here we broaden our range of responses beyond firing, which is kind of what a lot of agencies go through typically; to try and find ways to keep people engaged and to repair any harm that they may have inflicted on people”
— YOUTH ORGANIZER

YOUTH ORGANIZATIONAL CHALLENGES

Youth organizations and youth groups take on the arduous task of helping individuals work on social change in communities. This task asks many groups to challenge existing institutions and also work within those existing institutions. It asks them to recognize the oppression they have faced and then often to work with their oppressors. The creation of and work around safe spaces also allows many groups to work beyond the binary of oppressor and oppressed, helping them to recognize times in which they have been discriminated against and times in which they have discriminated against others. Youth groups are challenged by systemic issues and are often faced by personal tragedies. Individual and communal trauma co-exists as organizations strive to create safe spaces for the deconstruction of the many cycles of oppression. But what does this abstract challenge in Youth Organizing look like? Youth organizers reflect on the realities of being accountable to their communities:

“As an organization that was used to responding to people hanging out, panhandling, or sleeping under a bridge, it took us a while to broaden our view a little and to recognize different versions of homelessness; to realize what we need to do to make this a welcoming space because of these different facets; and also in particular how to get these different communities to co-exist without being threatened by each other” — YOUTH ORGANIZER

“Even the dynamic between ‘I’m the helper and you’re the helpee’ immediately divides us. Institutions and organizations as they exist currently in the sector, I think, are being more and more divided from the community. Before, an organization was an expression of what the community needed. I find that the larger the organization is, the more likely you’re going to find certain kinds of toxicity or separation from the community—this also relates to certain types of funding” — YOUTH ORGANIZER

REFLECTIONS ON SUSTAINABILITY

Despite what any organization's ideal goals are, there are very real, physical needs that have to be met for that organization to function. This could be an issue around money or it could be a challenge around having an actual space to work in. Creating a sustainable organization can be challenging for many youth leaders, who are often in transitional stages in their own lives. Many youth organizers aim to create organizations that can not only transition from one leader to another, but can also grow and adapt to the needs of their communities and youth participants. The following participants reflect on some of the issues found in creating a sustainable organization:

“We still want to be committed to that same value but we should be looking at what's sustainable in any organization, any youth-led organization. What does that mean? We came up with four factors. One is financial ability. Another is succession and being able to always provide meaningful opportunities for people who are coming through your organization to pick up where you leave off or to be engaged in a way that they're ready to take the lead in certain instances. Next is knowledge transfer. I guess that has to do with succession as well but it's not having stuff lost or stories just lost or things being undocumented. It happens so much. The last part is organization stability, which is like that golden goose we all want. It's getting your organization to a place where it's somewhat stable as a whole, administratively or funding or whatever” — YOUTH PARTICIPANT AND COMMUNITY MEMBER

“There are many challenges. One of them is to finally be able to figure out ways to keep a sustainable and healthy staff team. There is so much joy here but there is also a lot of heartache and often a lot of chaos. We've tried different kinds staffing models and stuff. Burnout is certainly an issue and some of it is attached to personalities, work styles, and to perspectives. Some of this attests to the fact that, daily, people are being confronted with some very serious issues” — YOUTH ORGANIZER

FINANCIAL INSTABILITY AND FUNDER RELATIONS

As youth organizations work to create spaces of safety and security, they face the real volatility of finding and securing funding. Funding is difficult to find and is often found in complex and complicated application processes that can seem overwhelming. As well, funding is often short-term and project-based. Funders can pull out unexpectedly or change the application requirements. It is often the very institutions that youth groups are trying to instil change in that control the finances of that group. Additionally, when funding from one source dries up, often organizations end up disbanding. Finding funding can become a full-time job for an organization. Youth organizers reflect on their experiences with funders and the time and energy that goes into finding funding:

“Being at the core of this prestigious pilot project and seeing the way the federal government actually works and that the work that we’re doing in the sector is very vulnerable because they can just cut the funding by \$1.5 million dollars in a day via a phone call. That doesn’t instil confidence in me that the government is actually committed to helping people. The corporate sector is kind of a joke in terms of social impact because now they’re doing all these stupid campaigns to get people to Twitter about their products—the Viva Canada Fund, Pepsi Challenge. It’s kind of a big waste of time for charities. People are trying to do work and so we really need to rely on government and if we can’t rely on them then what is the point?” — YOUTH ORGANIZER

“In our latest CUE conversations we’ve been asking where we’re going to go if this is already CUE’s third year of funding from Laidlaw. Are they going to fund us more? Do we have to go to somebody else? Who would fund us or is this the last year that CUE can exist because nobody [funds re-grantors]? For CUE I think Laidlaw is accessible because you were able to give us the money. So, yeah, where do we go from here? Now that we’re in our third year can we actually start asking for operational grants from the Toronto Arts Council? Where can we get multi-year grants? What’s our next step? That’s where we are right now and we’re not sure”

— YOUTH ORGANIZER

“Funding has been a huge challenge for us. The first year we got it really easily so I think we took it for granted. Both grant applications we wrote, we got. In the second year a big headache happened with the Youth Challenge Fund. We went through a lot of strong-arm stuff because of their organizational stuff. We thought we were getting money and then we sat down one day at the United Way and they told us we couldn’t get the \$30,000 that they said they were going to give us. We eventually got it but getting it was so intensely terrible. That was the first year we decided to hire people and we couldn’t pay them. It was a nightmare. We had to develop policy to protect them”

— YOUTH

“Overall, the general model of this whole sector, how it’s dependent on project funding, is a challenge, a systemic problem. We’ve got to do something. Someone has to do something to either get it to a level of entitlement funding from the government or find new ways to bring in revenue. Balancing that with programming services and all the kind of good stuff is tricky”

— YOUTH PARTICIPANT AND COMMUNITY MEMBER

BRINGING EQUITY INTO THE ORGANIZATION

Even though youth organizations challenge institutions and promote social equity, this does not mean that youth organizations themselves do not struggle with issues of equity and safety. The purpose of creating a safe space is often to provide a place where uncomfortable topics can be addressed and explored in an engaging and healing manner. This does not come without growing pains or personal and communal reflection. Youth organizers and members speak out about the challenges around equity issues in their own organizations, and the understanding of the learning process that all people and groups go through:

“As I understand it, before my time it was a pretty white organization, pretty upper middle class. It has definitely moved to be able to impact the real Toronto, what Toronto looks like in a lot of ways. They’ve had some really good ties to people who do work in the queer spectrum community or Toronto Housing. They have definitely grown and they’ve been able to have meaningful programs or meaningful engagement with those communities. They’re still growing. There’s still blind spots and room for more inclusion in stuff” — YOUTH PARTICIPANT AND COMMUNITY MEMBER

“I think now they’re trying to address equity. It’s definitely not easy because it’s about interpersonal relationships and personal investments to ideas and accountability. That makes things human but it doesn’t make things easy. It’s the process that they’re going through. It’s interesting to see an organization try to take that on. I think that’s pretty remarkable. It’s a unique thing to see” — YOUTH PARTICIPANT AND COMMUNITY MEMBER

“Sketch has been really dedicated to a lot of equity and anti-oppression stuff that came out. We needed a complaint system for when things would happen in open studio. For example, this is a safe space, so when anyone felt threatened by any type of behaviour, whether violent, racist, sexist, or homophobic, we needed a way to deal with that. How were we going to negotiate with people and set those boundaries? That’s been a really big process that I’ve been a part of and seen happen over the past year or two. It’s always ongoing but that’s been pretty cool”

— YOUTH PARTICIPANT

IMPACTS ON YOUTH “PARTICIPANTS” AND OTHER INDIVIDUALS

CHANGED PERCEPTION OF WHAT IS POSSIBLE

Many youth struggle with negative self-images and stresses attributed not only to their perceptions of their own value but also to their value in society. With media images of youth as delinquents or as the “problem” with society, many youth are not only disconnected from their larger communities but also struggle with a feeling of rejection from the world around them. This rejection from society pushes youth to the fringes of political activity and tells many youth that they have no place or future in the world around them. Youth participants have stressed that having someone believe in them and foster a positive image of who they are and what they can become has had a major impact on their lives.

“I see that people just need a chance rather than the media’s perception of the situation. If you actually grew up here you’d know that people just sometimes need a chance. If they believe that they can do something they will actually be able to reach the types of places that they didn’t think that they could”

— YOUTH PARTICIPANT

YOUNG PEOPLE SEEING THEMSELVES IN ROLE MODELS

Youth Organizing groups are often developed by people within the community that come from similar situations. Often these role models create additional positive images of youth from the community. The power and strength that come from having a role model with shared life experiences is immeasurable.

“For those that know me, I do have a lot of respect on the streets. Seeing me or knowing me from my past and seeing the contrast between now and then has had a huge impact on myself and a lot of people” — YOUTH ORGANIZER

“The youth being able to see themselves in me and also giving them hope that things can actually change, you can actually do well for yourself. The biggest impact has been seeing the domino effects of having this opportunity and see[ing] other youths starting to head in that direction, seeing a lot more youth starting to write grants. The word must have spread that this guy came out of a situation to this, and it was definitely hopeful for a lot of people” — YOUTH ORGANIZER

BEING TREATED AS A STAKEHOLDER

The isolation from community that many youth experience often comes from being treated like an outsider. Stepping forward and becoming a decision maker means having a stake in the community. Youth express great value in not only having the opportunity to be treated like an active member of society but also being treated like a stakeholder in the community.

“How we communicate with people in other organizations, regardless of their age or their participation, and how we always treat them as adults is important. The last thing a high schooler wants is to be spoken to as a child. That’s what their parents do and that’s why they don’t listen to them. When you speak to them like adults they respond like adults. Part of really treating them like an adult is being open with them. As a mentor, my strategy is to be open” — YOUTH ORGANIZER

TAKING PRIDE IN SOMETHING

Youth participants often get to create something tangible. Youth Organizing groups provide many youth with opportunities to create and take pride in their work. Youth reflect on the value of taking pride in one’s own creations and contributions:

“We do a lot of on-the-ground projects where people can see tangible results, whether it’s a rain barrel project or the fence rain catcher or the raised garden beds made out of earth block... What’s really neat is to see them walk through the community and point out their accomplishments to their friends and say, ‘I built that’” — YOUTH ORGANIZER

“I think I was 15–16 when I first started to see that there was not necessarily a problem but a gap and that I as an individual could have an impact” — YOUTH ORGANIZER

“I’ve never been in space where I’ve had so much impact. I’ve learnt so much. I’ve come across different artists’ spaces but never with an emphasis on GBLTQ youth and never on the emphasis of people of colour. I was definitely glad to run into them and be a part of that space” — YOUTH PARTICIPANT

“At the age of about 16–18 I got the activism bug. I was actually in high school at Central Tech and decided I wanted to do something around the environment” — YOUTH ORGANIZER

INCREASED AWARENESS OF SOCIAL, SYSTEMIC ISSUES

Youth participants have found that they not only create shared experiences and concepts of community but that they also develop themselves. Youth Organizing has provided the space for many youth to participate in the development of their communities while also recognizing themselves as individuals and understanding who they are within the broader social arena.

“The most significant thing is the way that the work is done here; how different it is; how it provides me with the space to be myself first of all and be honest in who I am and the things that I believe in; having that space to actually make mistakes; having that space to explore; having that space to truly and honestly be myself and seeing that progress”

— COMMUNITY MEMBER

Creating a safe space for participants allows them to explore prejudices in a non-confrontational manner. Yes, these discussions can be uncomfortable and challenging. But the creation of a safe environment lead by youth has allowed many participants the opportunity to safely explore and overcome prejudices.

“I think 'cause you have tons of prejudices—I mean, you just do—so it challenges them all. Even when you think you've got this under control and then think, 'no I don't,' you'll push it further. You might have a discussion with someone and then you stop at a point because now it's uncomfortable. You're not going to say any more because you've hit at a point and then you really try to push it through. We keep playing with it and playing with it because it's not always comfortable” — COMMUNITY MEMBER

LOCATING PERSONAL EXPERIENCES WITHIN BROADER SOCIAL CONTEXTS

Youth participants have emphasized the importance of safe spaces within their organizations. These safe spaces also allow for more in-depth critical thought around community and organizational policy. This opportunity for critical thinking allows youth to explore their connections to their local and larger communities.

“We have always been given the opportunity to think critically about what we are doing, why we are doing this, the tools we have, the backgrounds we are coming from, what we are entitled to take, and what we are taking. It’s a process that’s really important in activism but not often valued. In my opinion the most valuable thing is that we got a chance to create our own community out of an already existing community. That is priceless. I’ve never seen something like that before” — YOUTH PARTICIPANT

Making connections between local and global communities creates space for youth to understand their identities both individually and socially. This social positioning opens up opportunities for understanding as well as participating in larger communal and political activities.

“The biggest thing is the connection between being a queer young person and being able to connect with a broader not-so-queer community, realizing that we could make those connections. Both ends realizing that we exist and can interact and can love each other even though we have things that we need to learn about each other, specifically anti-homophobia or anti-transphobia. I guess that we’re connecting”
— YOUTH PARTICIPANT

BROADENED NETWORKS

Youth participants use Youth Organizing to make connections and networks outside of their own communities. These opportunities create bridges between organizations, neighbourhoods, and larger community groups. These opportunities also broaden understandings of society and the different peoples and groups that strive to work together. Young people are also then given the opportunity to experience what life could be like through the lens of another culture.

“The biggest impact it had on me was to realize that you can’t generalize people because they’re from one neighbourhood. They might be from one culture, but somebody’s story could be complete different and they need different intervention”
— YOUTH ORGANIZER AND STAFF

ACCESS TO SPACES OF EXCLUSION

Access to spaces of exclusion can be very discomfoting. Safe introduction to places that may feel unsafe is an empowering moment where youth can start to connect to the larger community. During such safe introductions to otherwise exclusive spaces, youth take the opportunity to make personal connections to a place in which they may have otherwise felt marginalized:

“You’d be surprised how many youths don’t leave their community, have not even been downtown, or have passed the museum millions of times but have never had a chance to go in there or even had a desire to go in there. I found that there is a lot of discovery when you look under the rock type of thing. I find that it’s a great impact over here in terms of social inclusion because these kids going to the museum, they felt, ‘wow, okay, we’re in the museum.’ The type of kids that I deal with, many of them might feel marginalized at a place that’s not for them. It was powerful for them, being there. They were able to learn something. They were able to educate themselves but at the same time they’re in a place where they belong. When they left they felt they belonged. Who knows what doors that will open now?” — YOUTH ORGANIZER

ACCESS TO NEW EXPERIENCES

Youth Organizing provides many youth with alternative modes of learning and alternative educational experiences outside of the traditional classroom. Youth Organizing has the advantage of being able to address the needs of a specific community and can also connect that community to larger social networks. Often this education is very holistic, addressing the needs of the individuals in the group and locating those teachings in broader worldly concepts.

“What I really wanted to know was, if I wanted to stop laws, how do I stop them? How do I gather people up and stop these things? No one seemed to be able to tell me that. Through the mock trial workshop I realized that as a lawyer you can make change and that’s when I really learned the value of education. I had given no importance to education when I was younger. I couldn’t see how it was going to help me in the future. I had no plans to even finish high school. It showed me how important education really is and it made me regret that I didn’t focus harder in school and that I didn’t work harder and that I didn’t graduate earlier. At the same time, it’s almost a blessing that I didn’t because I might not

have met the people that I’ve met and I might not be the person I am” — YOUTH PARTICIPANT

“I know how much education was an interest and now I can give a book to an inmate and he’s excited to read this book or they will pick up a book off a library cart and actually read it because there is a stigma towards picking up books and reading it. Little changes like that to me [are] like an overall progression in their minds of the importance of education. I know that Amadeusz broke the stigma that education isn’t cool”

— YOUTH ORGANIZER AND STAFF

FEELING LIKE YOU MATTER AND CAN OCCUPY SPACE

Youth Organizing provides the unique experience of youth leadership. Programs are developed by, for, and with youth—as opposed to “adults” telling youth what they should care about or what they should be doing in their respective communities. This engagement with all aspects of grassroots organizing empowers youth to become strong leaders and have a deeper connection to civic action.

“I feel that I am part of the decision-making process, which is empowering itself. I’m part of grappling with the challenges. It’s not someone imposing this on me. It’s me trying to create solutions with the community. That feels amazing” — YOUTH ORGANIZER AND STAFF

“Some kids who came to the program were apologetic about the space that they took up, but now to see them navigating their environments—they are like, ‘Oh Natasha, this person came to my school and they recognized me because I did the performance for Lost Lyrics.’ To see their confidence, to see young people who usually wouldn’t take up space now take up so much space. They love Lost Lyrics”

— YOUTH ORGANIZER

BEING CHALLENGED TO BE DIFFERENT

We often do what we know—the problem then becomes when crime, “easy money,” and other limited options have turned into all that we know. Many youth organizations work to create alternatives in education and civic engagement in order to challenge youth with new ways of thinking and being.

“I also give them new experiences and more knowledge. I think for me, a lot of the crime, a lot of the issues at hand [have] to do with ignorance and one not knowing enough and having enough sense and smarts to evaluate the situation logically. I educate them so that they can make sound decisions in life, navigate through life properly, without going back to the same situations that were unsavoury to them”

— YOUTH ORGANIZER

FEELING CARED FOR

The power of love and care should not be underestimated. In some cases youth participants do not have community or family support. For many people the youth organizations that they are engaged with are the first groups to show interest and care in not only their physical but also their mental well-being. Youth reflect on the value of the love and care they found in youth organizations:

“That this was often their first caring intervention of any kind and that the only way they got it was by being arrested is indicative of a many much larger problems” — YOUTH PARTICIPANT

“In the second session of our first week one of our participants said to me, ‘it’s good to know, when you’re in a situation like I’m in, that somebody actually cares and it’s good to know that there are people out there that actually still care for other people. I know that you don’t have to care about me and I know that I’ve done something bad in order to be here and you gave me hope to know that there is a point to carry on because you’re here caring about me when you don’t know me.’ That made me realize that the more youth we could reach, the more hope we could give” — YOUTH ORGANIZER AND STAFF

“The clients that we were working with in the facility, their attitude and outlook on life, [being arrested is] not the end of the world to them, they might have to spend some time in the correctional facility but when they get out there’s hope and there are people that care. Even just someone saying, ‘this is the first time that someone has ever cared about me,’ that’s a huge impact in itself. I’m sure to that one individual it will change their life as we are able to support them”

— YOUTH ORGANIZER AND STAFF

“Through the interaction with the youth I noticed that some of them had nobody—literally, no parents that they could trust or talk to, no past girlfriends or boyfriends, no brothers and sisters. Nobody. So I figured it would be good to do this, to share it amongst each other and to state that it will never go outside of these walls”

— YOUTH ORGANIZER AND STAFF

LONGER-TERM RELATIONSHIPS

For many youth participants, the relationships that they develop in their respective organizations are not fleeting “meet and greets.” Many of these relationships develop into long-term groups that support and care for one another. In other words, many of these organizations strive to create long-term relationships with their patrons—moving beyond the “summer project” aspect of social development projects and into long-term growth and development of the individuals.

“I can tell you [about] every single person’s childhood to their adulthood life. That is how much they’ve shared with me and they change in a way. The first impression you get when you meet somebody that’s institutionalized is that they’re depressed or sad. Now there’s a smile waiting for me so I know that Amadeusz is something that they look forward to. To me that means they know what comes with it. They’re eager to learn. They’re eager to share, to discuss, to debate. They’re eager to talk and to me that’s important for youth and so I think that individually they have grown” — YOUTH ORGANIZER AND STAFF

“We’ve seen our kids grow up. We literally have a student that was with us since grade 8. We went to his high school graduation in June. It was like, ‘woo, we’ve seen you grow from a boy to a man.’ And we hired him! Just to have that relationship with him and to see all of these changes. To have relationships where you know you are family. The family invites us to the wedding and stuff. I mean, that has changed me in terms of what being in community means, in terms of what investment means and what kind of role I want to play”

— YOUTH ORGANIZER

ACCESS TO “CHOSEN FAMILY”

Youth Organizing provides access to “chosen families” and alternative support structures. These connections can act as guides in an increasingly difficult and complicated world, can work to provide alternative activities and focus for some youth, and can simply provide family support that may not otherwise be present. Youth reflect on working with their “chosen families”:

“So it is a whole group of people that hold their own space, which is incredible. Now they’re here and they are having a space where they [can] talk with all of our young people that understand them because all these are the young people that are seen as different or odd” — YOUTH ORGANIZER

“It’s creating this connection—this family—giving everyone importance and knowing what, as mentors, we’re going to continue on doing isn’t just disappearing, because if you’re going to mentor then it’s going to come back in a cycle, and I think that is pretty significant” — YOUTH PARTICIPANT

“There was this great sense of belonging and reaffirmation of my identity and my cultural heritage. I had never really had many friends from my community because we didn’t have people from our cultural community in our social network. Being older and being independent and able to choose my own friends did a lot for my confidence and sense of self. With the skills I’ve learned working with Young Diplomats (YD), I’ve gained so much more confidence and belief in myself”

— YOUTH ORGANIZER

ACCESS TO CULTURAL HERITAGE

The multicultural nature of Toronto is a world of diverse experiences, ideas, and identities. However, some youth experience a loss of cultural heritage, knowledge, and identity. Culturally specific youth organizations can help connect youth from specific communities and also preserve culturally specific knowledge. Specific youth organizers have expressed how their organizations have helped them connect to their cultural identities:

“I was really inspired by the cultural-specific or ethno-specific work that YD does. It definitely inspired me to reconnect with my own Korean roots and identity. I’ve always been so moved by how they all work together. With that in mind, the impact that YD had on me as a person has been huge because I’ve seen the importance of culture and heritage and the importance of family and the importance of community. I think those are YD values for sure” — COMMUNITY MEMBER

“We have contacts with Schools Without Borders. They’re our friends and so are Emerge, Manifesto, and a lot of the people who are in the 358 Dufferin building. I think it’s great for changing the culture of the next generation. I like the fact that we are not as closed off, that we’re not continuing the legacy of being only Ethiopians for Ethiopian youth and really being able to connect with other people from other groups” — YOUTH ORGANIZER

ACCESS TO BASIC NEEDS

Although the access to people that care about your mental and social well-being is invaluable, Youth Organizing also provides many youth participants with basic human needs, such as shelter, food, and clothing.

“There are so many levels to Sketch in terms of how it had an impact on me. It sort of has its basic stuff like food and laundry, access to things that you need, which is really important. Once you get those needs met that you can expand” — YOUTH PARTICIPANT

“Once I hit my later teen years I didn’t feel like art was something that I could do. It was really great at Sketch because it really made it available. Art has always been a really therapeutic thing for me so whatever stuff I’m trying to work through I find arts really helpful. I think that even though it’s not planned or structured or controlled like art therapy or anything, it’s really therapeutic to people”

— YOUTH PARTICIPANT

FEELING INSPIRED

Youth participants often harness their learned experiences in Youth Organizing and channel that into new leadership roles or into their daily lives. Skills developed while participating in Youth Organizing do not end when a specific project is over. Youth often transfer these ideas and knowledge into their workplaces, into new civic action projects, and into their schools. Youth Organizers reflect on the many ways they have seen participants engage in leadership roles inside and outside of their organizations:

“As they’re getting older and they’re seeing how hard we work and what an impact it has on their lives, they really want to be part of that organizing process and create these events, which is like bomb because it shouldn’t be top-down. Eventually we’re going to grow out of our youth status so it’s good for them to be really youth-led and youth themselves. I think that’s the greatest and most exciting growth I’ve seen in the organization” — YOUTH ORGANIZER

“The other one is the community and the youth. I’m excited to see youth excited. I’m excited to see them wanting to do more and to have ‘aha’ moments. To realize their potential and to not feel so alone because they know that there is someone else going through the same thing. This organization is so much about being able to be with your peers and people who go through the same things you do”

— YOUTH ORGANIZER

“A lot of these youths are people that we’ve been seeing at different drop-in groups that have been working but keep saying, ‘I want to do more; I don’t know how to do it in a safe way.’ They created something for themselves”

— YOUTH ORGANIZER

“Actual participants who have finished the program also want to volunteer. They are leading by example, discouraging young people who they knew were going to get into trouble. Asking them to change and seeing that if you can’t change them by asking, then you make the change and you be that different person. So that’s what we try to encourage”

— YOUTH ORGANIZER

INCREASED OPPORTUNITIES BEYOND YOUTH ORGANIZING

Youth opportunities to participate in organizational strategy and development are often limited. Youth who participate in programs or attend classes are often not engaged in the development of those programs, classes, or other community events. Youth Organizing provides many participants with the opportunity to actively engage in the organizational structure and development strategy of community programming. Many youth participants transfer knowledge and skills gained in Youth Organizing projects into the next steps of their lives:

“Within the community that we are a part of, there are lots of Executive Directors now that we have been working with or supported, people with independence, autonomy, decision-making power, people who are working with budgets and working with numbers. Maybe they don’t see it that way but I would definitely say that a lot of people have really moved on to some special things”

— YOUTH ORGANIZER

“We can’t take full credit but I think we’re able to use our platform to really leverage the skill sets that exist around us so that people can say, ‘I’ve done this training and this work with SWB and now I’m ready to take on the next bit of work’”

— COMMUNITY ORGANIZER

INCREASED CONFIDENCE

The sense of self and ownership gained from Youth Organizing gives many participants confidence and a strong sense of accomplishment. This gained confidence supports positive risk-taking as youth are willing to strive for more challenging jobs, push their artistic development, and seek out more opportunities.

“Having older peers, older youth to look to, to talk to, it’s so reassuring. I wish I had had YD when I was their age. With so much guidance, I feel like they’re able to take so much leadership because they are not afraid. The shy ones who were afraid aren’t as afraid anymore”

— YOUTH ORGANIZER

“The opportunity that he got in Emerge (and I hate giving any program that much credit) really helped him come out of his shell. I’ve seen this fearless guy come out of that. It’s been that way for a lot of people who have been in that program. They’ve forged a community of people like themselves and they are all going to go on to do different things and have this network that gives them the ability to connect with each other over time. I think it’s going to serve the community in general really well”

— COMMUNITY MEMBER

“I think I’m just braver. They empowered me to not be afraid, to show my performance art or my visual art. I think it’s just empowering”

— YOUTH PARTICIPANT

IMPACTS OF YOUTH ORGANIZING ON THE COMMUNITY

CHANGES IN PERCEPTIONS OF YOUNG PEOPLE

“Alongside [positive changes] has come the painful realization of the obstructions that are in the world to young people realizing their sense of agency; just how contradictory the message is from the greater society of ‘yes—we want you to be the future but we are going to make you get squished into these particular boxes in order to be able to become the future,’ and ‘no—we’re really not that interested in your free-formed ideas and your alternative ways of doing things.’ So that has also been a painful realization, the continual hardship of trying to exercise a voice. As an adult and I guess as a young organizer, because that’s what I’ve been doing since I was younger, I have seen this change. Now in this role as an adult I think, ‘why does the world make it so hard for this to be viewed as a very prosocial thing?’” — COMMUNITY MEMBER

Images of youth in current society are rarely positive. Youth violence, bullying, and “delinquency” receive increasing airtime in our media. Youth creating positive impacts on their communities are considered exceptions. More disturbingly, youth are considered outside of our communities and outside of community participation. The political sphere is viewed as a place for adults and the images of youth in politics is as “noisy protesters” more than community healers or participants. In other words, young people know how to make a “scene” but they don’t know how to get down to work! These negative images in the media are clearly not the only story of youth in our societies but they create a dangerous story in their ability to shape the actions of our youth and become self-perpetuating. It is this common story that youth organizers and participants struggle against. Many Youth Organizing groups are working hard to politically engage with their communities in a positive manner and create a counter image of youth in politics.

“I think that one thing I can say for certain is that parents are more receptive to the idea of young people taking a leadership role in society as a whole. We have a culture of young people voicing their opinions but that has usually come from a political arena where young people are being radicals or protesting. That’s usually where people have drawn that memory of what young people stirring up trouble looks like. Now, I feel that parents are more receptive to the ideas of young people taking a stand for the good of their community” — YOUTH ORGANIZER

Not only is the image of youth who have “problems with the system” changing, but the idea that youth can learn from other youth is also developing and taking root in communities. Communities and parents are beginning to recognize the value of youth participation and are supporting this alternative understanding of the role that young people have in our societies:

“The other change that I actually notice is that the parents of kids that have no issues with the system are asking that their kids be a part of the program because they just want their kids to understand, to get the life skills workshops. Parents are asking that their kids volunteer with us to do their 40 community hours that are needed for high school. That’s a big change for us. You would think that as a diversion program, parents would sort of say, ‘no, I don’t want my kid to be in the same room as someone who’s a criminal,’ but it is the opposite”

— YOUTH ORGANIZER

CHANGES IN PERCEPTIONS OF YOUTH-LED PROGRAMS

Not only is the image of youth themselves changing but the concept of Youth Organizing as a “legitimate” community support group is growing. Youth Organizing is moving beyond the perception of “rowdy” troublemakers and is gaining recognition for its hard work that is shaping our living spaces.

“At first parents were worried that maybe the organization would be taking young people away from what’s important in life, like school and economic development and things like that. But now they see it as central to personal growth and success, personal success and community success working interchangeably. This attitude change has been really promising” — YOUTH ORGANIZER

CHANGES IN PERCEPTIONS OF COMMUNITIES

Just as youth themselves must fight against negative stereotype, so too do many communities. Often communities gain reputations for violence, poverty, or crime and are solely portrayed in media as unsafe environments. This stigma can create a self-actuating cycle in which communities can only be seen through the lens of violence or crime. However, Youth Organizing has helped generate counter images in these communities that are slowly taking root in the communities themselves as well as in larger media:

“Many neighbourhoods get written off as being almost lost causes, that there isn’t much going on in them. That’s not the case in [any of] the different communities that we work in, whether it’s Scarborough or St. James Town. There is always a lot of passion from various levels like youth and the elderly to really get involved and make change. It’s just giving them that forum to come together” — YOUTH ORGANIZER

FILLING A VOID

Although many Youth Organizing programs are developed to address a specific need, the organic nature of their organizing structure often lends itself to growth and the ability to take on new projects and address additional community needs as they become apparent. A youth participant reflects on the adaptive nature of Youth Organizing:

“The Your Road To Success program wasn’t so much of a program in the beginning. It was more of a project running a basketball program for the younger kids. We noticed that a lot of the younger kids were getting into conflict with the law, anything ranging from a small thing such as loitering to trespassing. Because they live in one block of the neighbourhood yet they can’t get to the other block because security won’t allow them, they get charged with trespassing. We realized that a lot of these young kids were young kids who normally wouldn’t have gotten into trouble. So we decided that we had to help those young individuals on a personal level. It continued and turned into this project” — YOUTH PARTICIPANT

INVESTMENTS IN THE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OF COMMUNITIES

Since Youth Organizing is often based in specific communities, much of the work generated by an organization supports and connects to the community itself. There is a reciprocal investment not only in the work of Youth Organizing but also into businesses in the community.

“When we look at actually how much money we put back in our community that we get from funders and thing like that, like how much we’re investing in our staff and in business—everything is bought local and we try never to just go to big franchises, always to people that we know. So that way I think we’ve made significant changes in the economics in our community. There is a significant amount of money going back in. That’s something that we’ve been proud of”
— YOUTH ORGANIZER

COMMUNITY ACCOUNTABILITY

Youth Organizing work is often successful due to its reciprocal nature. Communities respond well to the type of work created by youth, not only because of its grassroots community-based design but also because of the care and accountability that many organizations take with their programs. Despite the difficult nature of the work being done, many groups take time to be accountable to their communities by testing programs and getting feedback on what is working or not working within their program and larger communities. Youth reflect on the value of community accountability in Youth Organizing programs:

“Being accountable to our community in a very real way has been something we’ve always wanted to do but something that we’ve only now been able to manifest tangibly. It takes a lot of work to do that because it’s one thing to run the program and another thing to keep checking in on it. That’s a very easy thing to let go of when you get busy. I think realizing how important and necessary it is has been—not necessarily a significant change, but a growth” — YOUTH ORGANIZER

“My real belief is that the reason we’re able to support so many participants is because the community really has a sense of ownership of this space. They’re on their best behaviour here and they support each other. Countless times I’ve seen people come in who were unsure of themselves and kind of prickly or whatever and they would kind of bump up against people. Yet over a period of maybe three or four weeks they’d start to become part of the picture of Sketch and they’d choose to support the place and each other in a way that really makes it possible”

— COMMUNITY MEMBER AND STAFF

COMMUNITY SPACE

Although space was given earlier to the descriptions and values of safe space, it is also important to discuss the tangible value that safe space can have for a community.

Although safe space can reference the mental space and openness that groups provide to allow for individual thought and growth, safe space also references physical space. This safe physical space can allow for the safe mental space, but it also provides a safe place for the body. Neighbourhood parks, schools, and shopping centres can all be physically unsafe for young persons. Many Youth Organizing groups have spaces that also act as a place where youth can be present without threats to their physical well-being.

“There are always kids just dropping in whether or not there is a program. It has become their space. It’s understated how valuable that space is to them”

— VOLUNTEER

“I remember at the beginning the main open studio space was where all programming happened and now it kind of happens throughout the entire 5,000 square feet. I remember being in a staff meeting and responding to the fact that people were no longer only using the area that was designated as program-specific. It was really empowering to see that rather than perceiving that as a threat, the organization reaffirmed that the bottom line was its participants and that this space is for them. They found ways to share the space better. They weren’t always perfect or linear but eventually we found kind of a way” — COMMUNITY ORGANIZER

IMPACTS ON YOUTH ORGANIZERS

When discussing the impacts of Youth Organizing we often focus on the effects of engagement from a youth participant perspective. Yet many youth organizers live in the same communities as their youth participants and come from similar socio-economic and racialized backgrounds. Often, youth organizers are experiencing personal growth and learning along with their participants:

“I feel like I’ve grown alongside everyone else here in understanding my own self better, getting a sense of my capacities... I had this... I lived here. So I feel like I went through the same kind of changes that people who were engaged in the process went through” — COMMUNITY MEMBER

Youth Organizing can also have life-changing outcomes for youth organizers and open up possibilities to them that they may not have thought previously possible:

“[Performing] makes my heart smile and that’s an impact that I walk with every day. An impact is seeing my life now in a way that I never imagined when I was in high school as a little girl, being able to talk to kids and letting them know that I was able to make a life from hip hop and I’m not an MC” – YOUTH ORGANIZER

FOSTERING LEADERSHIP

Youth Organizing can create a cycle of leadership development within communities. This cycle of leadership does not stop in Youth Organizing itself but spreads between the partnerships of youth participants and youth organizers as well as throughout the community. Leadership skills move beyond one form of social activism and can be used in much of daily life, spilling over to the workforce and community participation in general. As two youth organizers reflect:

“Running a group like this has helped me to understand what it takes to be a leader. Now, transitioning into the workforce, I can identify qualities of a leader and maybe qualities that are not so leadership-like. It has really given me this insight, the difference between management and leadership”
— YOUTH ORGANIZER

“This is a lifelong thing and we’ll develop different roles and represent different things. It’s changed my whole life plan. It has challenged me to take up roles in spaces that I never wanted or thought I was going to, necessarily. It has forced me to learn things. I never wanted to do administrative stuff but I have to if I want this dream to become a reality”
— YOUTH ORGANIZER

PERSONAL REFLECTION AND LEARNING

Working in Youth Organizing also challenges many youth organizers to personally reflect on their own work—be it in art, in business, or within their communities. This can lead to an extended understanding of citizenship and also an increased understanding of ways in which one can be an engaged citizen. Youth organizers reflect on their personal and professional growth while working in Youth Organizing:

“I think that working with Young Diplomats has taught me a lot about my role in Canadian society and perhaps has helped me tap into some areas of civil society that I didn’t think were open to me”
— COMMUNITY MEMBER

“The youth that I work with made me realize this: that everyone’s story is different, therefore everyone’s situation is different, and therefore we can’t treat everyone the same way. I had to drop all ignorance, all naïveté, all stereotypes, and all stigmas towards people and then I had to approach situations”
— YOUTH ORGANIZER AND STAFF

“Seeing our kids take that courage to do the things that they do and take up that space has totally changed me. They called me up and said, ‘How can you be teaching us hip hop when you don’t ever come and do anything yourself?’ I feel like that was part of why I started doing my own stuff”
— YOUTH ORGANIZER

BECOMING AN UNINTENTIONAL ROLE MODEL

Taking on leadership roles has had many unintentional impacts on the lifestyle choices and personal actions of youth organizers. Many leaders reflected that they had not intended to become role models when they started their work, and yet they soon realized the impacts that their actions had on their very observant youth participants:

“One of the biggest things was becoming a role model at the age of 19, without realizing that I was a role model. It was me trying to navigate through society and life and being like, ‘oh my god, these young people are watching me.’ They’re always watching me, whether I’m in this role or on the street. What I’m wearing, who I’m with, is all going to be taken in by the young people” — YOUTH ORGANIZER

Additionally, becoming a role model creates an accountability that cannot be ignored by organizers. Organizers in these leadership roles soon realize that they are no longer only accountable to themselves or their families, but they are also accountable for their actions to their participants. Youth organizers are often the main, if not only, support for many of the participants:

“It made me challenge how I think. It is more challenging to service them because there are more trust issues. You always have to build trust in anything but with them you have to build that trust more. You have to show them more by showing up every week because if there is a week that you don’t show up, they don’t sit there and say, ‘maybe she is sick’ or maybe she was whatever. They sit there and say, ‘how could she do this to me?’ They have no one else and they depend on you for that human contact” — YOUTH ORGANIZER

FINANCIAL INSTABILITY

As mentioned earlier, youth organizers frequently come from the communities that they work in and face many of the same socio-economic challenges and systematic discrimination that are prevalent in the daily lives of their participants. Often the ability to find funding can provide social stability to do impactful work that would otherwise be impossible. As one participant voiced:

“Being coordinator, I’m able to get paid for the work that I do. It doesn’t cover all of it but I am able to get paid. I’m able to buy food and pay my rent and so that lingering idea of being homeless again is not there. I wouldn’t say it’s stable but I’m not unstable”

— YOUTH ORGANIZER

Youth organizers find themselves having to find time to run an organization full time and also find time to earn enough money to eat and simply pay rent. Funding can provide financial stability for youth organizers to meet their base economic needs. Providing financial support can also provide a level of confidence for youth organizers. Providing funding for paid positions within an organization assures organizers that their work is important in their communities and is valued by others.

“I know that I like teaching but I didn’t want to be a teacher in the TDSB or in a formal educational system. I know that I like working with the community but I don’t necessarily want to be labelled an activist for the rest of my life, even though I’ll always be an active part of my community. Lost Lyrics has enabled me to see my future, see what I want to do, be the woman I want to be, have the profession I want to have. I have realized that I have skill sets and am now focusing more on these skill sets. I’ve made Lost Lyrics my only/main source of income” — YOUTH ORGANIZER

CREATING BOUNDARIES

Youth Organizing projects often have personal connections for youth organizers. They are projects that take place in their communities and are designed to meet a current need. Because these projects are often rooted in personal passion, along with a deep communal need, many organizers have trouble separating their work from their own personal lives. Youth organizers struggle to find the ability to say “no” to additional work when it is something they are so deeply connected to. Two organizers discuss their struggles with setting personal boundaries and creating personal time in their busy, work-driven lives:

“We were able to work with the People Project and we were able to get the policy and infrastructure part of ourselves figured out and to realize that Lost Lyrics is not personal; we have to look at it as an organization and work the policy, [we have to ask] how does an organization policy work. So we have a problem, it’s not about how Natasha and Amanda deal with it, it’s how does Lost Lyrics deal with it, and creating files for that and creating structure and writing and documenting all of these things, and it’s the first time that all of us together as a team really set a team vision and dream about Lost Lyrics. And I think that from there the ideas were so beautiful that we were just like, people are really believing in this and people are really interested in this, and we had more of a solid idea of Lost Lyrics than we thought”

— YOUTH ORGANIZER

“[We are] trying to figure out how we identify our personal boundaries both legally and also emotionally, which means, when do we have to say no? We haven’t necessarily gotten the answers but we do have an amazing mentor who really specializes in that kind of stuff. She does a lot of equity-based consultation and conflict resolution and has herself worked in communities in various capacities. That was one of the reasons that we were like, ‘we would love to be able to sit with you and talk about how to identify when to say no and how do we negotiate the guilt that we feel’” — YOUTH ORGANIZER

LEARNING THE SYSTEM

Although Youth Organizing may work to create alternative systems of operation and social work, these organizations must still work within current governmental systems. Youth organizers must not only create a clear system for how they want their organization to operate but they must meet employment standards and understand current laws and systems. Youth organizers often must pick up new skills and be active learners, pushing themselves outside their comfort zone of knowledge.

“Everyone has that insecurity of not knowing if we’re qualified to do this stuff because we’re run by passion. This is important, so I’m doing it, but you don’t know—you’re not an HR specialist; you don’t know the technicalities of things; you hire somebody but you don’t know that they’re an independent contractor; you don’t give them vacation pay. It’s little technicalities that you learn as you go along. You feel a little guilty or you feel that you are not qualified. I don’t know if that will ever go away but it’s an interesting place to be in. You go outside of yourself. Everyone’s doing that and to know that we’re kind of at the same place is interesting to see”

— COMMUNITY MEMBER

LEADERSHIP VERSUS "BOSS"

While creating an organizational structure with alternative governance models, many youth-led organizations are challenged with the role that power will have in their organization. Groups describe this struggle and the way that they questioned power structures within their organizations:

“We’ve tried to work non-hierarchically but to also acknowledge the reality that I’m still the leader. How do I extricate myself from that role? It’s a delicate balance because sometimes leadership is really required. Sometimes I’ve tried to pull back from that role too soon and I’ve been told that. How do you balance being a leader but not being a boss? That’s been a very interesting journey for all of us. We talk about that, so I can openly say—not just to the team but to the Stewardship Group—that I’ve changed. I’m more open to say, ‘I don’t know the difference between the leader and a boss sometimes but I’m struggling. Help me,’ and then people understand that I don’t have the answers a lot of the time”

— YOUTH ORGANIZER

“We had to check our egos through being employers. That was a huge learning curve for us because we were kind of a lefty organization. We were a collective but we weren’t a collective—we hired people. To me there is a power dynamic there. We actually had to get called out on that. People telling us that we needed to have their cheques on time. So when we hired our friends it was very challenging because we didn’t want to take on this idea of a power dynamic. We didn’t want to address it. It created a lot of problems and issues that we had to go back and recognize. There was no policy because we didn’t realize the necessity of policy. We thought of it as being bureaucratic but it’s very necessary to protect everybody involved, to create processes and practices”

— YOUTH ORGANIZER

“You’re developing future leaders. You’re developing confident young people who can navigate society a lot better; who feel empowered; who feel that they can demand or take up space in a specific way. I’ve learned how to take up space in a way that I really don’t know where I would have learned that”

— YOUTH ORGANIZER

KEY FINDINGS

Youth Organizing is an empowering form of social work that strives to bring the individual and the community together. It challenges our current systems of engagement and works to create active leaders in our communities; however, it is messy. Youth Organizing both works within current institutional frameworks and works to challenge these same existing operational systems. In doing so, Youth Organizing groups face difficult leaning around oppression, power, equity, and healing. The following are several key findings around the impacts of Youth Organizing that this paper explores:

- ◆ Youth Organizing is a type of advocacy that supports youth as active participants in their communities, and is an alternative form of work that focuses on individual and communal needs with an awareness of global issues.
- ◆ Safe spaces provide a comfortable place in which to explore the difficult and uncomfortable issues facing our communities today.
- ◆ Power, privilege, trauma, and pain are some of the tough realities facing youth organizers, and it is through the naming of these oppressions and a willingness to embrace and learn from failings that Youth Organizing gains its strength as a new form of social change.
- ◆ There is no perfect formula for creating a safe space. Not all safe spaces look the same, and yet their purpose and value should not be underestimated.
- ◆ Youth need to be seen not as stagnant agents of good or bad, but as developing, learning beings that have the power of change.
- ◆ Change is rarely easy and challenges are often met with resistance. As alternative youth organizers try to move within the very systems they wish to change, they are often met with strong resistance.
- ◆ Youth Organizing places great value on innovation of organizational strategies and challenging structural norms.

- ◆ Funding is difficult to find and is often found in complex and complicated application processes that can seem overwhelming.
- ◆ It is often the very institutions that youth groups are trying to instil change in that control the finances of that group. Additionally, when funding from one source dries up, often organizations end up disbanding.
- ◆ With media images of youth as delinquents or as the “problem” with society, many youth are not only disconnected from their larger communities but also struggle with a feeling of rejection from the world around them.
- ◆ Youth Organizing groups provide many youth with opportunities to create and take pride in their work.
- ◆ Making connections between local and global communities creates space for youth to understand their identities both individually and socially.
- ◆ Culturally specific youth organizations can help connect youth from specific communities and also preserve culturally specific knowledge.
- ◆ Youth Organizing provides many participants with the opportunity to actively engage in the organizational structure and development strategy of community programming.
- ◆ The confidence gained from community engagement supports positive risk-taking, as youth are willing to strive for more challenging jobs, push their artistic development, and seek out more opportunities.
- ◆ Although many Youth Organizing programs are developed to address a specific need, the organic nature of their organizing structure often lends itself to growth and the ability to take on new projects and address additional community needs as they become apparent.
- ◆ Providing funding for paid positions within an organization assures organizers that their work is important in their communities and is valued by others.
- ◆ The power of love and care should not be underestimated.

A NOTE ABOUT THE DESIGN

What is youth-led community organizing, and what does it look like? As this series of Laidlaw Learning reports asserts, it begins with youth but its impact extends beyond them, more broadly and deeply into their communities. The design envisions youth-led community organizing as a complex and kinetic force — a power that communities can tap into, support, and cultivate for lasting and meaningful change.

— UNA LEE, DESIGNER



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