

THE W. CLEMENT & JESSIE V. STONE FOUNDATION

Grantee Spotlight

In this section, we feature interviews with some of our grantee organizations' directors and key staff members, who share their thoughts on their work and the particular fields they're involved in.

An Interview with Keith Hefner of Youth Communication



Since November 2002, the Stone Foundation has been funding Youth Communication, a journalism and publishing program for inner city teens in New York City to build their writing and life skills. Keith Hefner is the founder and Executive Director of Youth Communication. Among his many distinctions, Keith has been a MacArthur Fellow and a Charles H. Revson Fellow on the Future of New York City, and in 1997 was awarded the Luther P. Jackson Award for Educational Excellence. We recently talked with him about his work and his thoughts on the youth development field.

Q: Keith, could you tell us a little about your background? How did you become involved in youth development work, and how did you come to found Youth Communication?

A: In 1970, I was in 11th grade in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Our school newspaper published a story which alleged that the football coach wouldn't allow a black student to become quarterback. When the principal found out about the story, he locked the paper in the school safe. But word got out, there were protests, and eventually the paper was distributed and the student became quarterback.* It was an impressive lesson for me—that youth voices, amplified through journalism, could be very powerful.

At that time, in the early 1970s, I also ran a magazine for high school activists called *FPS*. We decided to do a special issue on gay teens. I created a board of lesbian and gay community members to review the stories. When it came time to publish the magazine, virtually everyone on the advisory board insisted on remaining anonymous. “Gay youth” was still a taboo subject. However, we published the issue as a short anthology and the response was incredible. We sold 5,000 copies in 18 months and had to print another 5,000. Teens from around the country wrote to say that they couldn't believe there were other young people like them. It made me realize just how life-changing a publication can be, especially if it speaks a truth that has previously been suppressed.

Another powerful learning experience for me was starting a children's rights organization in Ann Arbor called *Youth Liberation*. We founded the group with political concerns in mind—eliminating teen curfews, lowering the voting age, etc. But I was surprised to see that several abused, neglected, and runaway kids seemed to come out of the woodwork to join the organization. Voting and curfew were nice ideas, but what they really wanted was safety and dignity, and a voice. In hindsight, I was struck by how the political ideas of rights and power and the personal notions of dignity and safety came together. That's when I began to realize that the personal and the political were intertwined and I wanted to do work that addressed them both.

* At the time, the name of person who wrote the football discrimination story did not register with me. Twenty-five years later I reminded my wife of the incident and asked if she remembered who wrote it. “I did,” she replied.

In 1979 I moved to New York City. I met a man who had subscribed to *FPS* magazine and who also knew about a new, citywide independent teen magazine in Chicago. He asked if I would like to start a similar magazine in New York, using his youth program as a base. (He even introduced me to some funders. At the time, I didn't even know what a foundation was.) This program became Youth Communication. We published the first issue of our citywide teen magazine, *New Youth Connections* in 1980. We created a juvenile prison newsletter in 1985, which we published for 10 years. In 1993 we launched a magazine on foster care, now called *Represent*.

Q: How have you seen the youth development field change over the years?

A: In the 1960s, the field was dominated by traditional groups like the Scouts and the Boys & Girls Clubs. But in the 1970s a new kind of youth program, called "alternative youth services," emerged to meet the needs of more marginalized kids, such as runaways, gay youth, kids with drug problems or mental health problems—kids who weren't likely to be well-served by the more traditional programs. In addition to serving a different clientele, these new alternative programs were more "youth-centered." Adults were more likely to actually ask youth what kind of services they wanted. Rap groups, runaway shelters, conflict resolution programs, girls' groups, health and sexuality workshops, and other types of programming emerged out of the "alternative" youth services movement. This approach eventually transformed the entire field of youth services. Today, even the biggest programs, like Girl Scouts, serve a broader range of young people, offer a much wider array of services, and often have youth participation built into their programming model.

During the 1980s, the big change in youth development that I noticed was the change from a "deficit" or "problem-oriented" approach to a more holistic or "strengths-based" approach to working with teens. Many funders switched from funding the problem (e.g., teen pregnancy) to funding youth development (e.g., girls' programming or health programming).

From about the mid-'90s to the present, a big change has been the focus on "outcomes," and especially on easily measurable outcomes that can be reduced to a few numbers. It is problematic to think that you can know the quality of a program by looking at numbers, instead of looking closely at the work itself, which puts the numbers in context. A kind of simple-minded approach to outcomes is driving a return to a programming model from the 1950s and '60s: less responsive to individual teens and local conditions and more standardized; programs designed and evaluated by experts who "know better" rather than programs which emerge from collaboration between experts, staff, and youth themselves. One of the worst examples is in the after school field. In the past decade it somehow became a problem to run programs where kids play sports, participate in the arts, and generally have a good time together. Now, after school programs are being judged on whether they improve test scores, and there is tremendous pressure to make programming more school-like, including using after school time for test prep.

Q: What do you think are the biggest challenges facing kids today, both in school and out of school?

A: I think one of the biggest challenges facing kids now is to resist commodification. It's considered normal for one's identity to be tied to brands and labels. This includes everything from clothes to college. When one decides how to dress primarily based on an advertiser's message, or which college to apply to based on its "brand" reputation rather than on whether it meets one's needs as a learner—and when more and more choices are based on those kinds of external factors—I think it becomes increasingly difficult to develop an authentic sense of self or know what you believe or hold precious.

Q: Do you see any promising new initiatives being undertaken in the youth development field?

A: Perhaps a silver lining in the “evaluation” cloud is that some evaluation can really help programs improve. People in the field are being asked much more often, “What are you doing with young people? Why are you doing it? What impact do you want to have? What’s the connection between what you’re doing and that impact?” Good intentions are not presumed to have good outcomes. And the fact is a lot of youth work, in our field of youth media, in after school programming, and in many other areas, could be much better. So, I think that to the extent that the evaluation fad can be turned into a reflective tool, it can be promising.

I think there is also a growing recognition that “youth development” means helping young people work to strengthen their social and emotional skills—everything from conflict resolution and anti-bullying programs to programs that simply help young people explore their relationships with each other and adults in their lives and find ways to make those relationships more satisfying. That’s one of the great strengths of the youth development field—that it recognizes that there are domains in addition to the 3Rs that we need to master to be effective citizens, employees, and family members.

Q: Who do you see as the key leaders in the field, and what makes them noteworthy?

A: The youth development field is so decentralized that it’s hard to identify key leaders. In the area of out-of-school youth services, Dorothy Stoneman at Youth Build is a significant leader. Youth Build is a perfect example of working with kids based on their strengths rather than their problems. Kids in Youth Build face significant obstacles, but what do they do? They create new housing for their communities as they learn new skills, get diplomas, etc. Another youth development model is the geographic approach, trying to mobilize a whole community from top to bottom to bring about better outcomes for kids. Geoff Canada at the Harlem Children’s Zone (formerly Rheedlen) is a leader in that domain. Peter Benson at the Search Institute has done interesting work developing the notion of 40 “developmental assets.” They’ve codified a lot of the individual and community “assets” that contribute to healthy development. The assets lists can help people identify the gaps and start a focused community conversation about how to close them. In the media, Connect for Kids covers the youth development and education field quite comprehensively. And the most knowledgeable individual in the field of youth development is Bill Treanor, the publisher of *Youth Today*, which is one of the few publications that regularly offers constructive criticism to practitioners, politicians, and private funders alike.

Q: How has Youth Communication changed over the years? What are a couple of its accomplishments and challenges in the past few years?

A: Reaching more readers with the teens’ stories has been our biggest change and challenge in the past several years. Our premise—supported by information from surveys and talking with users—is that reading the stories has a positive impact on teens’ attitudes and behaviors, and has an impact on how adults provide services to teens. Though we’ve always had a large circulation for our two magazines (about 90,000 combined), we also knew that magazines have a short shelf life. But most of our stories are “evergreen”—teachers, in particular, would often request copies of stories many years after they first appeared. To reach more readers we’ve worked recently to get our stories reprinted in textbooks, anthologies, newsletters, and on websites. We’ve published more than 60 short anthologies of the teens’ stories on themes from immigration to surviving sexual abuse. Basically, we’ve become much more intentional about re-publishing stories and marketing them. At this point we probably reach more readers through publications and websites of *other* organizations than we reach through our own publications. However, we’re still not nearly as successful as we’d like to be. It is an enormous marketing challenge to identify the people who are interested in reprinting our stories or using our books in their classes and programs.

At the same time, because we're investing so much in finding readers for our stories, we want to publish the best possible stories. We've spent a lot of time developing manuals and procedures to help our own staff, and new staff in particular, learn the philosophy and methods we use to help teens learn to write high-quality stories. We're also thinking about different ways of looking at teen stories, such as performing them. We have streaming video on our website of actors performing some of our teens' stories. It's different, and very powerful. We're now thinking about how we can combine the use of audio, video, and performance in ways that also reinforce reading and writing, provide information, and help young people wrestle with important issues.

Q: How can foundation dollars make the most impact in the youth development field?

A: If I were in a position to fund programs that demonstrate success through supposedly scientific evaluation, versus programs that are successful because they are run by very talented staff, I would lean toward betting on people rather than statistics. I think that even funders who say they are driven by the numbers are often deceiving themselves. I read a story about how developing sophisticated management systems at the Harlem Children's Zone has prepared them to replicate their program in other cities. My reaction was: Let's not kid ourselves—the success of HCZ is based at least as much on Geoff Canada's charisma and talent as it is on any particular management structure or youth development strategy. And you can't replicate Geoff. The educator Deborah Meier once said that all great schools share one quality: they are unique. That is true of youth programs too. The best ones emerge from organic relationships that develop among youth needs and desires, community needs, and committed and talented adult staff. And, unfortunately, that makes them hard to evaluate, because the "outcomes" are often related to the quality of the relationships that develop. Of course we should try to measure our work and test our assumptions, but we should be creative and humble about those efforts. If I were funding youth development, I'd put more money into trying to identify the people like Geoff and Dorothy—and in supporting their programs—than in identifying strong program models, or even strong "outcomes," because it's often just not that clear what the significant outcomes really are. Talented people will adapt and develop their own program models to meet evolving needs.

Q: For someone interested in the field, what would you recommend reading?

A: First, anyone serious about the field should at least skim *Youth Today*. It's the only publication that covers the entire field and is not afraid to point out where rhetoric does not match reality. There are many other good publications and websites, but none with the independent, journalistic spirit of *Youth Today*. As for books, there are several that I return to from time to time. One is *Lives on the Boundary* by UCLA's Mike Rose. His main point is that as a teacher (or youth worker) you can never *assume* what's going on with a young person. To meet their deepest needs—especially the needs of the most troubled youth—you must get to know them deeply. There is no shortcut to paying attention. Adults make assumptions about kids all the time without bothering to find out what's really going on with them. Then they design programs that fail to reach those kids.

The second book is *Teaching the New Basic Skills: Principles for Educating Children to Thrive in a Changing Economy*, by MIT's Richard Murnane and Frank Levy. It's based on research about skills employers need. They found that for most jobs there's a threshold of testable skills that people need to have—basically eighth grade math and English skills. But there are other skills—soft skills—that also are necessary. Employers want employees who possess the ability to solve "indeterminate problems"—problems that don't have an obvious solution. To solve "indeterminate problems" at work usually requires other skills, such as the ability to work in a team, flexibility, persistence, etc. Youth development programs, especially ones that are built around project-based learning, are made to teach this kind of problem solving. Think of the range of skills one must employ to put on a play, make a video, create a newspaper, or complete a

community service project.

The third book is *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by Paulo Freire, a book published in 1970. Freire was a Brazilian educator and philosopher who spent a good deal of time working with the poor. It's similar to the Mike Rose book in that a central theme is that the learner must be actively engaged in the learning process in order for an experience to be meaningful. In the learning process, the teacher doesn't just impart knowledge to the learner; rather, the learner and the teacher together construct new knowledge and the learner becomes more of an active participant. For example, at Youth Communication, the adult possesses greater knowledge about writing, but the teen has greater knowledge about the subject matter of her story. The teen must improve her ability to use words to create an effect, and the editor must come to understand the teen's experience. Writing an essay is the ultimate "indeterminate problem" because at the outset neither the teacher nor the learner know exactly where it is going to go, or how to get there. Only through persistence and many drafts is the "solution" to the problem discovered.

Q: Could you tell us about one young person's story that particularly inspires you?

A: There is a young woman who is now 27 years old who came to Youth Communication when she was 15 and in foster care. She was originally from Trinidad-Tobago and had been sexually abused by both her father and her stepfather. Her mother sent her to live with a family friend in New York when she was 14, but she quickly went into foster care. Over the years, this girl went back and forth between stability and serious eating disorders, cutting, suicide attempts, and the like. She was hospitalized a couple times. At the time, we didn't know the details of her circumstances because she wasn't writing personal stories. Instead, she was extremely interested in writing about advocacy and system-wide problems. She was very articulate—the kind of kid we loved to send to be on panels. But just when we thought she was doing so well, she would have a crisis. This went on for about four years between the ages of 15-19. She was on this roller coaster. But each time she stabilized she would become a little stronger, and the next time she plummeted, she wouldn't fall quite so low. She kept coming back to Youth Communication, and then worked with an advocacy group associated with us called Voices for Youth. She got into college, and despite some rocky times, she began to make steady progress toward her degree.

At some point, this young woman heard about a television show which aired in Tobago about sexual abuse. This was very intriguing to her because that topic was not openly discussed there. She contacted the television station and eventually flew down to tell her own story on TV. Afterwards, she went on a speaking tour at schools, including her old school, to talk with girls and convey the message that sexual abuse is wrong and that they could help put a stop to it by bringing it out of the closet. The response was sensational and her story had an important impact on breaking the taboo of discussing sexual abuse in Tobago.

In 2005, this young woman graduated from college. She still works in youth advocacy. A few years earlier, when she aged out of foster care, she brought her sister to New York to protect her, and gave her the stability she needed to graduate from high school. She's even worked to rebuild her relationship with her mother. Her courage and resilience are breathtaking to me, and I deeply admire her passion to help other vulnerable young people.

Visit Youth Communication on the web at <http://www.youthcomm.org>.