

gardner perspectives

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THE YOUNG LEADERS OF NOW



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"Many young people wonder whether they have any place in this vast and complicated society of ours. They feel anonymous and rootless and alienated...In my judgment there isn't any quicker cure for that ailment than evidence that their society needs them." John W. Gardner

John W. Gardner believed we must invest in youth: not just in anticipation of the adults that they will become, but also as essential contributors to their current world. He believed youth are needed within the movements and decisions of the time and places in which they live—and that our communities benefit from their voices, energies, and perspectives. He also knew that the skills and tendencies to engage civically require support, cultivation and shared purpose, and if you want to train leaders you have to start early. These beliefs guide the Gardner Center's work alongside and on behalf of young people, and have inspired my work with the Center for over a decade. Like John Gardner, we believe that when the assets of our young people are under-valued and under-tapped, it comes at a tremendous cost to society. Working with youth as full partners in change efforts recognizes youth as leaders of today, prepares them as leaders of tomorrow, and enriches our communities along the way.

Youth leadership has deep roots at the Gardner Center. In 2000, the newly established Gardner Center's inaugural project was Youth Engaged in Leadership and Learning (YELL)—an afterschool project that provided 15 eighth grade students with training as community researchers, advisors, and socially conscious leaders. Over the next six years, we expanded YELL to engage hundreds of Bay Area middle- and high-school students in the use of research techniques to study issues of concern to them, and in the analysis of their findings to formulate policy recommendations and action plans. Making formal presentations to relevant stakeholders including school faculty, city council members, and journalists, YELL-trained youth heard their opinions valued. They also experienced how youth and adults can work together on shared community concerns including bullying awareness and prevention, public art, family health center development, stereotype and bias awareness, transportation access, and more. These are experiences that provided youth with, in our namesake's words, "evidence that their society needs them."

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While we no longer run the program, the YELL handbook is available at no cost on the Gardner Center website, and its philosophy is deeply embedded in many of our community-based projects. Youth leadership and partnership remain at the core of the work I do every day at the Gardner Center. Over the past four years, I've worked with coalitions of youth and adult partners in the creation of a new Youth Arts and Music Center in East Palo Alto, and in the founding of the North Fair Oaks Youth Initiative in unincorporated San Mateo County. Both projects engage youth as visible change agents and leaders in their immediate communities, and position them as present and future leaders within the program and policy areas designed to serve them. Through these projects and many like them run by organizations and individuals throughout the world, the underpinnings and structures of YELL continue to thrive.

YELL is the most visited page on the Gardner Center website; thousands of visitors from over 70 countries have downloaded the handbook. We receive inquiries about YELL from a variety of settings—schools, foundations, nonprofits, and government agencies—and for a range of purposes, from youth philanthropy to mentoring to English language development to leadership to violence prevention. I talk with many of those who inquire and what most excites me about our conversations is learning how YELL is used to involve youth in new ways, and to shift the basic constructs of how adults think about the power of young people and the facilitation of youth leadership. For many, thinking about youth as full partners in the development of their schools, programs and communities is an exciting shift. I learn something new from each of these conversations, which helps me grow my own capacity to work effectively in the community.

The Gardner Center also supports the growth and leadership experience of another group of young people: Stanford undergraduates. Over the years we've had the opportunity to work with many dedicated students who care deeply about community issues and want to participate as reciprocal partners in projects beyond the Farm. We've had students mentor youth in public speaking and community mapping, conduct community based research alongside youth, provide trainings in urban planning and design, lead arts workshops and, all along the way, learn from and with the youth they are there to serve. Seeing this positive connection between Stanford students and local youth has been a powerful reminder of our ability to transcend institutional barriers and learn from one another.

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Every time a young person says “I had no idea adults cared what I thought,” or “I am working for a better future for my younger siblings,” or when I participate in a community event that youth have imagined, developed and led, I am reminded of the importance of this work and the power of youth-adult partnerships. After all, just as the world needs youth, youth need adults who know how to listen, support, and help them navigate and connect the dots to new opportunities. They need adult partners to model what it means to take risks, occasionally fail, and move forward. As long as we can do these things, we can continue to support the vision and legacy of John Gardner—for and *with* the youth of today and tomorrow.

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[Youth Engaged in Leadership & Learning Curriculum, 2nd Edition](#)