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Youth in Action

Profiles of Youth Leading Change Around the World



YouthActionNet
Connecting youth to create change

About YouthActionNet

A dynamic website created by and for young people, YouthActionNet spotlights the vital role that youth play in leading positive change throughout the world. Launched in 2001 by the International Youth Foundation (IYF) and Nokia, YouthActionNet serves as a virtual gathering place for young people looking to connect with each other—and with ideas for how to lead change in their communities. YouthActionNet forms a vital part of the IYF/Nokia *Make a Connection* program. For further information, visit www.youthactionnet.org.

About IYF

Currently operating in nearly 50 countries and territories, the International Youth Foundation (IYF) is one of the world's largest public foundations working to improve the conditions and prospects for young people where they live, learn, work, and play. IYF works with hundreds of companies, foundations, and civil society organizations to strengthen and "scale up" existing programs that are making a positive and lasting difference in young lives. Since its founding in 1990, IYF and its in-country partners have helped more than 26 million young people gain access to the life skills, education, job training, and opportunities critical to their success. Visit us at: www.iyfnet.org.

About the Author

Sheila Kinkade is a writer and communications consultant working to "help nonprofit organizations tell their stories." With a passion for storytelling and the documentary tradition, she communicates the essence of nonprofit organizations' work through capturing the voices of those they serve. Deeply committed to furthering multi-cultural education, Sheila is the author of two nonfiction children's books. She holds a Masters degree from the Columbia School of Journalism and has spent much of the last decade working for the International Youth Foundation, documenting programs for young people internationally and working to raise awareness of their needs.

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This publication is dedicated
to the many young people
around the world who are
leading positive change in their communities.

May these stories inspire and
motivate others toward action.

—YouthActionNet



Rick Little meets with young people in Brazil.

Foreword

This publication celebrates the power of young people to make a difference in the communities where they live. Profiled in these pages are 16 young people who were deeply touched by an issue and decided to do something about it. They have shared their stories with us—and with you—so that we may learn from and be inspired by their efforts.

These stories are especially poignant for me as I reflect back on my own journey, when as a 19-year-old I took action on an idea that burned in my heart. It was many months later—after much persistence, hard work, trial, and error—that I created my first organization to help equip young people like myself with the “life skills” so essential to navigating through life’s challenges, and seizing its opportunities.

In those days, I often felt alone in searching for the basic tools to realize my dream. What I didn’t know then is that the world is full of visionary young people who have a wealth of experience and lessons to share. This publication

is dedicated to capturing just a handful of these truly inspiring stories.

The young people profiled here are the first to receive YouthActionNet awards. Launched by the International Youth Foundation (IYF) and Nokia in 2001, YouthActionNet is a youth-led, on-line platform that works to recognize and promote the active role youth are playing in leading positive change around the world. Through a competitive peer review process, YouthActionNet awards of \$500 each are given out twice annually to young people who have demonstrated their commitment to leading change within their communities.

Here, you will read of a 22-year-old's efforts in Nepal to reach out to children hospitalized with cancer; of a young Peruvian's work to teach poor children to read; and a 24-year-old's work in Bosnia-Herzegovina to promote dialogue, reconciliation, and understanding. The young people profiled in these pages are addressing some of the most critical issues of our time—lack of educational opportunities, youth unemployment, the plight of refugees, the spread of HIV/AIDS. The list goes on.

Many of these youth work against the odds—in poor countries and under difficult circumstances—to nurture and sustain their efforts. This requires tremendous will and faith in one's self and one's abilities. Many struggle with how to be effective leaders. For some such as Swastika Shrestha, coordinator of Chiranjeevi in Nepal, solace comes with knowing you can only do your best. "Making decisions on behalf of the entire organization was scary," she recalls. "The greatest challenge for me was to overcome the sense of being too young to make the right decision." It's also important to recognize that you're not alone. Swastika and the others profiled here are quick to acknowledge the support they have received from their peers and adult mentors.

What is remarkable is how little it can take to make a big difference. Each of these projects was started with a wealth of good intention, but scant resources. Working out of their homes or modest offices, these young people rallied others to donate their time, technical expertise, materials, and financial support.

“The young people profiled in these pages are addressing some of the most critical issues of our time—lack of educational opportunities, youth unemployment, the plight of refugees, the spread of HIV/AIDS.”

“Our goal through this publication and other YouthActionNet activities is to enable these young people and others to share the tools and best practices that can help strengthen and sustain their good works.”

Equally impressive is how they have gone about mobilizing others—youth, civil society organizations, government officials, businesses, foundations, and community members—to join their efforts. It all begins with a great idea and a compelling cause; but just as important is establishing a successful track record and proven results. While there are no guarantees that the projects described here will continue over time, their efforts have already made a significant difference and motivated others around them to believe change is possible.

Our goal through this publication and other YouthActionNet activities is to enable these young people and others to share the tools and best practices that can help strengthen and sustain their good works. In the long run, our hope is that such efforts will continue to grow and impact an ever-wider circle of young people.

Toward that end, this publication contains practical information and advice from those youth profiled on how to strengthen youth-led projects. Readers will gain insights into how to raise funds, publicize their efforts, plan an event, engage other youth, network with like-minded organizations, and collaborate with the public, private, and civil society sectors.

I thank Nokia for making this publication possible and for its generous support of YouthActionNet. And especially, I thank each of these young people for sharing their stories with us—and with you. May they serve as inspiration to others and a reminder of the power of a great vision when combined with the will to make it happen.

Rick R. Little
Founder and Chief Executive Officer
International Youth Foundation

Educating Children Growing up in Pakistan's Jails

Rana Bilal Ahmad

Age 22
Lahore, Pakistan

They are among Pakistan's forgotten children. At any given time, hundreds of children inhabit the nation's jails.

The vast majority enters jail with their mothers who are serving time for various offenses. Roughly 20 percent are juvenile offenders—imprisoned for theft or other petty crimes. Some of the youngest were born in jail. While imprisoned, these children live a life of boredom, with few opportunities to learn, play, or grow in meaningful ways. When they get out, many will repeat the cycle of crime and punishment started by their parents—for this is all they know.

As Chairman of the Youth Alliance for Human Rights (YAFHR), Rana Bilal Ahmad, 22, was aware of the plight of the nation's incarcerated children. Yet it wasn't until January 2001 that he visited a local jail, at the invitation of the national Human Rights Commission, and was able to see first-hand the living situation of its youngest residents. Following his visit, Rana took steps to establish the Juvenile Prisoner's Education Program (JPEP).

these children, therefore many are bound to adopt criminal behaviors. Society is fully responsible for that.”

Since October 2001, JPEP has been engaging Pakistani citizens in efforts to assume at least some of that responsibility. JPEP's initial activities have focused on distributing books, educational games, pencils, erasers, and puzzles to 75 children, ages 5 to 15, who live in the district camp jail in Lahore. The cost of those materials distributed by JPEP averages US\$20 per child. To fund the project, YAFHR organized charity drives at local schools and colleges.

The supplies the children receive from JPEP are the only connection they have with the world outside the jail's walls. For the most part, the children inhabit a dimly lit, poorly ventilated, barren environment. While JPEP, and NGOs in general, are prohibited from holding classes in the jail, JPEP has gained approval for monthly sessions in which trained counselors provide the children with lessons on how to treat one another and care for themselves.

JPEP's work has been made easier as a result of relationships that YAFHR enjoys with local government authorities, NGO leaders, human rights advocates, and the general public. Founded in 1987, YAFHR has established an impressive track record, earning the respect of each of these groups. It is



MUBARIK ALI CHACHHA

JPEP's goal is to expand the educational opportunities open to these children so they may have greater life options upon their release. “People behave as though these children are equally responsible for the crimes their parents have committed,” says Rana. “They have no soft corner in their hearts for





(Large photo) Rana plays a popular game with children at the district camp jail in Lahore. (Inset) Rana distributes educational packets to the children.



**“People behave
as though these children are equally
responsible for the crimes their parents
have committed.”**

the largest youth NGO in the country, with more than 1,200 members, ages 18 to 35. Its activities, coordinated by two paid staff and seven volunteers, are focused on six key areas: children and youth, human rights, conflict resolution, the environment, HIV/AIDS, and poverty and hunger.

While initially its efforts were met with skepticism by the public at large, YAFHR has succeeded in changing adults' minds about what youth are capable of. “In our society youth are considered idle and immature,” Rana explains. “When I started my work with young people, I faced some opposition but I was committed to the cause which is the reason behind my success.”

Because of its reputation and relationships, YAFHR had little difficulty gaining access to the jail. Jail administrators welcomed its assistance as they had little expertise in dealing with children's welfare and education, and saw their primary role as being focused on the adult prison population. YAFHR also benefited from the advice and support of local lawyers, as well as the community at large.

Already, JPEP is having an impact beyond the educational supplies it donates to the jail. Several of its members are writing the case histories of individual children to bolster the legal argument for their release. During International Youth Week, it also organized a musical gala for 150 of the children at the jail. In the future, Rana hopes to be able to initiate regular classes within the jail and to be able to recruit and train a modest teaching staff. Ideally, he'd like to expand the project to jails throughout the country.

For Rana and the others involved in JPEP's activities, the most satisfying aspect of their work is providing children in need with the tools to pursue a basic education. Says Rana, “The happiness and joy on the faces of these children are the greatest reward.”

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Safeguarding a More Stable Future for the Families of Those with HIV/AIDS

Ndasimana Akuumba

Age 23
Oshakati, Namibia

According to UNAIDS, almost a quarter of all adults in Namibia are infected with HIV/AIDS. Rates of HIV/AIDS infection are highest in the region of Oshana,

located in northern Namibia.

Ndasimana Akuumba, age 24, grew up in Oshana and is now working on the front lines to help the families of those who die of the disease. It was in October 2001 that Ndasimana learned that in addition to grieving for their loved ones, the families of those who die of AIDS are often left destitute.

This realization came following the death, from AIDS, of one of Ndasimana's neighbors. Afterward, his neighbor's family was left with nothing as a result of a time-honored tradition whereby the assets of a man who has died

revert back to his birth family.

Alarmed by the situation, Ndasimana conceived of a project in which he would instruct men dying of AIDS on how to write a will in order to protect their wives' and children's future.

"I was moved into action by compassion for the women and children who were being forced from their homes," he says, adding, "I only hope that my work will help prevent more misery and unhappiness."

Ndasimana named his project "Eengudi," an Oshiwambo term meaning "support," and began meeting with commu-

nity leaders to gain endorsement for his work.

Recognizing the importance of Ndasimana's mission, Jamie Che Leverett, a local VSO (Volunteer Service Overseas) volunteer provided

him with help in accessing the proper language to form a legally binding document.

Having gained the knowledge that he needed, along with the blessing of local elders, Ndasimana now travels on foot from village to village, teaching men with HIV/AIDS

"I was moved into action by compassion for the women and children who were being forced from their homes."



JAMES FIGETAKIS

how to write a will. He receives a small traveling allowance from the VSO. Otherwise, he is taken care of by villagers wherever he delivers his training.

While Ndasimana's message has generally been warmly received, there are those who feel his work is in defiance of a cultural tradition worth upholding. To these people, he responds, "I think our tradition is not fair so I'm prepared to fight against it." While admitting it can be tough at times, Ndasimana is encouraged by the support he has received from community leaders.

To date, Ndasimana has conducted 12 training sessions in 7 villages, attended by nearly 100 people. He is now working to publish an instruction manual in Oshiwambo that outlines the steps those with HIV/AIDS need to take to legally protect their families in the event of their death.

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Tips for Starting a Project from Scratch

- Thoroughly research the issue you seek to address. Gather facts and statistics. Read as much as you can about the topic and how others have addressed it. Find out who else in your area is also working on your issue. Talk to them about your plans.
- If you don't have one already, assemble a core group of youth who will work with you in achieving the project's aims. Be sure to delegate responsibility, building on the skills and interests of those involved.
- Organize meetings with other NGOs. Exchange experiences. Ask for advice as you move forward.
- Develop a basic "business plan" for your project that includes its mission, the need for the project, its goals, the resources (human and financial) you have available, the services you seek to provide, a timeline for what you need to accomplish by when in the first year, and expected benefits over time. Your plan will serve as a roadmap as you move forward.
- Outline a basic fundraising plan of how you expect to go about supporting your activities. Some options include: special event fundraising (e.g., auctions, school fairs), approaching local NGOs and church groups, charging a modest fee for membership among those youth involved, and seeking support from foundations, government agencies, and local businesses. (See related material on fundraising throughout this publication).
- Develop a basic budget of what you'll need and mechanisms for recording funds received and distributed. Adhering to financial accounting principles is critical. Be sure to get help in this area if you need it.
- Establish relationships with key mentors and advisors in the community who can help you plan your activities and troubleshoot as necessary. Look to also involve community members (e.g., parents groups), who can help with service delivery, fundraising, and general organizational support.
- Identify like-minded organizations and discuss how you might work together to maximize your impact.
- Start small. Demonstrate success before planning to expand.





Working children are interviewed by reporters from the Young Journalists Group (YOJO) for a story on child labor.

Using the Media to Engage Youth in Positive Social Change

Ha Thi Lan Anh

Age 18
Hanoi, Vietnam

At 7:30 on Tuesday and Thursday mornings, roughly 30 million radio listeners in Vietnam tune into the “Voice of Vietnam” to hear stories by young reporters on

issues of local and national significance. For the next half hour, audience members listen to young people, ages 12 to 20, report on topics such as child rights, street children’s needs, the environment, gender equality, and sustainable development.

The broadcasts are produced by the Young Journalists Group (YOJO), a national organization with over 300 young members. YOJO is the vision of Ha Thi Lan Anh, who, during a radio internship at the age of 13, became tired of reading articles by adults about children’s experiences. She wanted to find a way she and her peers could voice their opinions and concerns about the world around them.

Lan Anh realized early on that convincing adults of the importance of youth voices was not going to be easy, particularly in an Asian culture where young people are taught to obey and follow the rules. Still, she persevered, believing that “just because something hasn’t been done doesn’t mean it can’t be done.”

Along with a handful of her peers, Lan Anh started reporting and writing stories on local issues and events. Eventually they succeeded in getting a number of their stories broadcast via radio, or published in the print media. With a track record in place, YOJO was formally established in 1998.

Giving Youth a Voice on Critical Issues Affecting Them

Since it was created, YOJO has produced over 500 radio programs and contributed hundreds of articles to over 20 of the nation’s print publications. As a result, it has gained a reputation as a credible source of youth perspectives on topics of national concern. YOJO has organized local and national forums between youth, congressmen, social workers, and government ministers around the country. Its members were invited to represent Vietnam at the UN Special Session on Children held in New York in May 2001, and were asked by Vietnamese government officials to review and comment on the National Action Plan for Children 2001-2010. Among its recommendations was the establishment of a Youth Advisory Board to help oversee the implementation and evaluation of the Plan.

Lan Anh believes strongly in the power of young people’s voices to educate and inform the public at large. She cites many instances when YOJO reporters have pursued stories that adults might not have initially considered important “news.” For



Lan Anh interviews a government official.

example, through its reporting, YOJO has increased public awareness of the plight of the nation's street children, orphans, and other youth in need.

Currently, YOJO is engaged in efforts to train street and working youth with the skills to produce their own print and broadcast stories. With assistance from UNICEF and the involvement of some of the nation's leading adult journalists, YOJO plans to equip these young people with media and journalism skills, while educating them about their rights.

Promoting Youth Involvement in Community Affairs

Just as important as giving young people a voice, YOJO nurtures a sense of civic responsibility among its members. Through reporting on local issues, its reporters engage with community members and develop knowledge around urgent social

“Creating change requires a lot of energy, commitment, and dedication. Most important-ly, you must keep your passion for the work always alive.”

and environmental concerns. Past stories have focused on pollution within Hanoi's rivers, the importance of nurturing an environmental ethic within schools, and ways in which youth can volunteer.

In a number of cases, YOJO's reports have demonstrated a serious impact. For example, features on issues facing the nation's street children generated donations from the public to charitable organizations. The same was true for an article on a major flood which raised money to build a school within a flood-ravaged community. Another initiative resulted in high school students

being invited to visit the capital to spend time with children affected by chemical poisons resulting from the US military involvement in Vietnam.

Equally important are the relationships formed between YOJO members. Older youth in the program mentor their

younger peers, thereby allowing older teens to gain confidence in their abilities, and giving newcomers a chance to develop new skills and relationships with role models.

At the heart of YOJO's work, and Lan Anh's philosophy of life, is the notion that to create change, you must be willing to be that change. “Creating change requires a lot of energy, commitment, and dedication,” says Lan Anh. “Most importantly, you must keep your passion for the work always alive.”

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Tips on Generating Publicity for Your Work

- Develop a long-range media plan articulating the audiences you wish to reach, core messages, the vehicles available in your community (radio, TV, print, the Internet), and a concrete list of stories you seek to “pitch.”
- Create an information kit that you can share with the media. This can include fact sheets on your program or issue, news releases, and articles. This need not be expensive. Even a one page fact sheet is a great start.
- Submit press releases to local media when you have news to report. Be careful to identify a story angle that the news media will find of interest.
- Invite journalists to events, seminars, and conferences sponsored by your organization.
- Think creatively of ways to make the content of your work interesting to the media (e.g., focus on a human interest story, highlight surprising statistical findings or facts related to your target population).
- Submit an op-ed or letter to the editor of a local newspaper.
- Develop a website. Use it to share information about your work. Keep it up-to-date.
- Engage the art department of a local university in developing a logo for your organization that the public and media will identify with. Make sure that all of your external communications have a consistent look and feel (e.g., use of fonts and type placement on letterhead and business cards).



YOUNG JOURNALISTS GROUP

Creating Opportunities for Young Girls to Realize Their Potential

Shilpi Barman

Age 24
Dhaka, Bangladesh

For Shilpi Barman, age 24, helping young girls in Bangladesh realize their potential is a lifelong passion. Having completed her Masters degree in Social Welfare, Shilpi is

well aware of the opportunities she has enjoyed—opportunities that most Bengali women do not even know exist.

Today, 70 percent of adult females in the country are illiterate, making the educational attainment rate among women in Bangladesh one of the lowest in the world. While 64 percent of the nation's young girls enter primary school, only 16 percent enroll in secondary school. Poverty, early marriage, and cultural traditions concerning the role of women in society are major challenges to female education. As a result, the vast majority of women are unable to participate in the country's social and economic development and have insufficient knowledge about health care, nutrition, and family planning.

Shilpi would like to see the role of women in Bangladesh society change—and soon. “In Bangladesh, young ladies face many problems because they are not able to make decisions,” she says. “They are guided by men and have little right to education, even if they want it.”

Through her work as assistant secretary of Uttaran, a voluntary, youth led organization, Shilpi is working to empower young women and make them aware of the choices they have available.

Her work is focused in the Barisal district of the country, a rural area, where the

problems facing young women are compounded by extreme poverty and lack of opportunity. Here, she and other Uttaran staff reach out to approximately 1,500 girls, ages 14 to 20, providing them with basic

education, understanding of their rights, and vocational training in such areas as computer literacy, sewing, and fish and poultry farming.

Shilpi devotes four to five hours a day to her work with Uttaran. In addition to working with young girls, Shilpi helps train volun-

teers with the skills to assist during emergencies, such as natural disasters. Uttaran also provides non-formal education to children, ages 5 to 14.

While the challenges facing such communities in Bangladesh are great, Uttaran stresses a self-reliance approach. It works to mobilize landless men and women into cooperative groups that plan, initiate, manage, and control collective activities. Through focusing on the “whole” community and people's perceptions of their own development needs, Shilpi believes long-term change is possible.

For further information, email: Shilpi@youthactionnet.org

“In Bangladesh, young ladies face many problems because they are not able to make decisions. They are guided by men and have little right to education...”

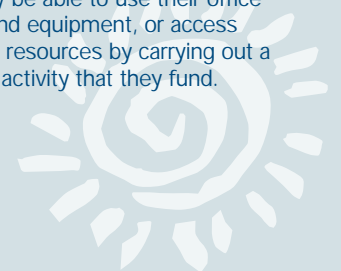


ELAINE LITTLE



Tips on Network-Building with Nongovernmental Organizations (NGOs)

- Research and create a list of other local organizations that are working on your issue or a related issue. Set up informal meetings with these organizations to brief them on your activities and obtain information on their work
- Take advantage of networking opportunities (e.g., seminars, workshops, conferences) to meet new people and introduce them to your work.
- Be clear before you meet with local NGO representatives what you have to offer them (e.g., a legitimate voice on youth issues, the ability to mobilize youth to carry out a specific task, the ability to poll or survey youth on issues of importance to that NGO).
- Join an email list serve being sponsored by a like-minded organization or start one of your own.
- Make sure you have the basic communication tools to network with (e.g., a business card, email address, a pamphlet or flier about your work).
- Invite representatives of local NGOs to your events and put them on your mailing list to receive announcements/publications.
- Where appropriate, explore ways in which a related NGO might help further your work—with staff serving as mentors, through publicizing your work on their website or through publications, joint events, and press conferences.
- In some cases, when you're just launching an initiative, it can be easier to work through an established NGO. You may be able to use their office space and equipment, or access financial resources by carrying out a specific activity that they fund.



Teaching Women and Children About Their Rights

Ameen Charles

Age 24
Balaghat, India

Children growing up in the Balaghat district of Madhya Pradesh, a rural area in central India, face a host of challenges, among them pervasive poverty, lack of educational resources, exploitation by adults, and natural disasters such as flooding and droughts. Life is hard here; yet despite the hardship there are people like Ameen Charles, age 24, who are working against the odds to make a difference.

Ameen is director of Wainganga Samudayik Vikas Kendra (WSVK), a youth-run, voluntary organization serving the region's poor. WSVK's goal is to empower local citizens to take an active role in the development of their community, while advocating for improved policies concerning education, health care, and the promotion of children's rights. WSVK places particular emphasis on better meeting the needs of the area's women and children.

For Ameen, who holds a Masters degree in Sociology and Economics, helping those less fortunate is a life calling. Yet fulfilling that calling is fraught with difficulties. The modest office that WSVK occupies has neither a phone nor a computer. While the town of Balaghat where WSVK is located got access to the Internet just a year ago, to send an email Ameen must go to a local cyber-cafe using money he can't afford to spend. At times, he and his peers travel to local communities on foot to conduct WSVK outreach activities due to lack of transportation.

Compounding these difficulties is the stark reality that there are few places WSVK can turn for financial support. As a result, Ameen and the other seven youth who make up its staff contribute what little money of their own they can to help support its activities. At times, they've missed proposal deadlines due to lack of office supplies such as paper, and basic services like printing and photocopying.

While Ameen spends up to 14 hours a day carrying out his work for WSVK and paid work as a trainer, his commitment to community

empowerment, and especially to improving the life prospects of women and children, remains steadfast. Recognizing that the government is unable to solve many community problems, Ameen believes in the power of voluntary organizations to stimulate greater community involvement in meeting local needs.

For Ameen, educating women and children holds a vital key to promoting and sustaining development efforts. To promote their needs, WSVK conducts awareness-raising activities to demonstrate to parents and community members the importance of education. Citing a drop out rate of between 60 and 70 percent for local girls, Ameen knows that improving their educational status must begin with overcoming cultural beliefs about what women are capable of.

"Women don't have any rights. They don't own property. They earn income but they can't spend it," he points out.

To begin to change the status of young girls and women, WSVK staff meets with groups of women two to three times a month to discuss their needs. Such needs are then articulated in meetings of local officials who decide whether the demands of such women are worth advocating at the regional level. While some of their entreaties have been rejected, there are signs of progress. For example, whereas in the past pregnant women had to wait one or two years after their child was born to receive a government stipend, now such funding is being made available during pregnancy and can be used for the care of both mother and child.

“Women don't have any rights. They don't own property. They earn income but they can't spend it.”



AP PHOTO/PRAKESH HATVALNE

A young girl works while caring for her sibling in India, where an estimated 36 million girls are out of school. A key goal of Ameen's work is providing such children with non-formal educational opportunities.

When it comes to providing increased educational opportunities for out-of-school children, WSVK holds basic education classes in the evening for children who must work during the day. The classes are held in homes within the local community. Currently more than 120 children attend such classes for one to two hours each night.

While recognizing that such efforts reach only a handful of those children in need, for Ameen it's a start. Why does he work so hard to help these children and others? "It is our moral duty and responsibility to give back to society," he says.

For further information, email: Ameen@youthactionnet.org

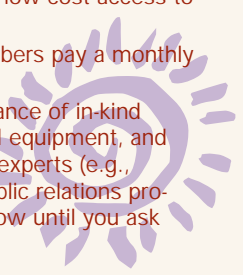
Some Tips on Fundraising in General

- Hold fundraising special events (e.g., raffles, lotteries, donation drives, concerts, sports activities/tournaments).
- Engage local celebrities and musicians in donating their time to perform at a special event.
- Brainstorm possible income generating activities or products that can be sold (e.g., selling home-made greeting cards with drawings by children/youth, crafts, books, CD-ROMs).
- Use your office space, equipment, and staff skills to offer services to the public

(e.g., a computer course, low cost access to the Internet).

- Request that your members pay a monthly fee.

- Don't forget the importance of in-kind donations of supplies and equipment, and the pro bono services of experts (e.g., accountants, lawyers, public relations professionals). You never know until you ask what you might get.



Promoting Dialogue Around Conflict in the Middle East

Sarah Davidson
& Shana Kirsch

Ages 21
San Francisco, USA

While the violence and bloodshed associated with the Israeli/Palestinian conflict in the Middle East dominates headlines around the world, less attention is paid to its affect on young people, many living far away. Debate over recent events in the Middle East is particularly heated on college campuses, where diverse student bodies are voicing their opinions—and often their anger.

Concerned about the situation on their own campuses following the outbreak of the second Palestinian Intifada in 2000, two American college students decided to do something about it.

Sarah Davidson and Shana Kirsch, now both 21, were long-time friends. Yet it wasn't until they were sophomores in college—Sarah at the University of California in Santa Cruz and Shana at New York University (NYU)—that they joined together in pursuit of a common cause: encouraging respectful dialogue about the conflict. They named their work “Conversation Peace” and set out to engage their peers in efforts to promote greater understanding and respect for differences.

“We wanted to create a safe place on campus to develop a better understanding of what’s going on in the Middle East, while eliminating the violence and polarization happening here in the U.S.,” says Sarah. “If we can’t discuss things calmly here, how can we expect people to there?”

Creating Safe Places

Central to Sarah and Shana’s work is the creation of “safe places” where youth can express their feelings and opinions without fear of being alienated on campus. To create those safe spaces, they set up a modest website, an email list serve, and started planning special events

aimed at encouraging respectful dialogue. Their aim was to establish a network of students across the country who shared similar goals and could serve as peace ambassadors on their respective campuses.

At the beginning, news of what they were doing spread by email and word of mouth. Soon students at different campuses around the

“We wanted to create a safe place on campus to develop a better understanding of what’s going in the Middle East, while eliminating the violence and polarization happening here in the U.S.”

country were actively participating in the list serve. Yet most of the girls’ public outreach took far longer than they expected. For Sarah and Shana to organize their first events on the UC-Santa Cruz and NYU campuses, first they had to get up-to-speed on how to gain appropriate



“Conversation Peace” seeks to promote respectful dialogue as an alternative to anger and divisiveness on college campuses.



approvals from campus authorities, acquire funding, reserve a space, and publicize the event.

During Sarah’s first event, audience members viewed a film, “Peace of Mind.” Shana held a similar event at her university. The film documents the attitudes and experiences of seven young people, both Israeli and Palestinian, who took part in a summer camp in Maine. Following the camp, each was given a video camera that they then took home with them. The remainder of the film traces their efforts to maintain the friendships they started while navigating the harsh realities they experienced back home.

After the film was shown, Sarah and Shana initiated a dialogue by inviting audience members to share their feelings about what they saw. First, the groups agreed on several ground rules to follow based on respectful and compassionate listening:

- Don’t interrupt
- Respect differences
- Suspend judgment when listening and speaking
- Recognize that people are coming from their own places, based on their own personal experiences.

The goal was to get those gathered in the room to respond to one another as individuals, not as stereotypes. Says Sarah, “Through dialogue and listening, we can start to ‘humanize’ people, especially those who are considered enemies.”

Shana and Sarah were both encouraged by the open dialogue and respectful sharing of opinions that took place during these first events. “Students were really open to points of view they hadn’t heard before,” Shana recalls.

Through these and subsequent events, Sarah and Shana estimate that their activities have reached over 200 students. While both were studying abroad during the tragic events of September 11, 2001, they have returned to their work with a renewed sense of urgency, feeling that now, more than ever, the time is ripe for their message of increased understanding through respectful dialogue.

For further information, email:
Sarah@youthactionnet.org or
Shana@youthactionnet.org.

Promoting Your Cause Through Special Events

- Plan far ahead and be prepared for logistical challenges such as reserving a space, confirming speakers, and arranging for necessary audio/visual supplies.
- Don’t try to do everything by yourself. Collaborate with organizations that support your goals. Seek assistance from peers. Carefully delegate responsibilities to those who are best qualified to carry out a given task.
- To cut down on costs, explore organizations or individuals who may be willing to donate space or materials. These include university departments and local businesses.
- Make sure that individuals representing many different backgrounds and viewpoints are involved in the planning and executing process. This will help to prevent the marginalization of participants.
- Invite local authorities and the media to your event as appropriate.
- Consider using tools such as documentary films at events focused on promoting dialogue around sensitive issues. When hosting a dialogue or discussion, make sure the ground rules are agreed upon first. Also make sure there is a neutral moderator/facilitator who can help guide the dialogue toward a productive, rather than an argumentative, outcome.
- If hosting a fundraising event, consider having local groups or businesses sponsor tables or donate items for a silent auction.
- Provide a list of resources for participants in the event they seek additional information.

Empowering Refugee Women and Youth

Kalpana Sharma Dhakal

Age 24
Jhapa, Nepal

Stretched along the eastern border of Nepal are seven sprawling camps, home to more than 100,000 refugees. Most are ethnic Nepalis who fled their homes in Bhutan as a result of persecution and government intolerance of their lifestyle and beliefs. At the camps, opportunities are few, especially for young people who have little to occupy their free time. Young girls, in particular, are vulnerable to sexual exploitation by men and boys from neighboring communities. Many of the girls become pregnant as teenagers. Others are promised lucrative opportunities away from the camps, only to be lured into prostitution.

Kalpana Sharma Dhakal, age 24, knows what it's like to be uprooted from one's home. She grew up in Bhutan and fled as a young girl with her family. Her father spent more than a year in a Bhutanese prison for being an outspoken leader in their village. "The (Bhutanese) government wants people to be one people, one nation," Kalpana explains. "Everyone needs to look the same, act the same. Our community had a different culture from the ruling community." While ethnic Nepalis constitute the majority of Bhutan's population, they are slowly being forced to give up their ways or leave the country, says Kalpana.

After earning a Bachelor's degree in Sociology, Kalpana set out to help improve the opportunities available to young people and women growing up in the camps. In mid-2001, she founded the Bhutanese Women and Youth Empowerment Programme (BWYEP). With a staff of four, BWYEP provides computer training, reproductive health awareness, and human rights education programs to women and youth living in the refugee areas near Jhapa, Nepal.

Every week, Kalpana visits the seven refugee camps dotting the border. The majority of refugees live under harsh conditions. There is no electricity in the camps, and most people live in bamboo huts with plastic roofs. While education is provided, many girls drop out, either due to lack of encouragement from their families or early pregnancy or marriage. For many youth, the future can appear hopeless, unless they are able to pursue opportunities outside the camps.

To help train youth in marketable skills, BWYEP offers computer literacy classes. Participants are trained in MS Word, Excel, and

other basic software packages, and learn how to use email and the Internet. Classes, which take place once each week for an hour and a half, are held at BWYEP's modest office in Jhapa. To date, 90 youth have 'graduated' from the program. To the extent that these youth eventually leave the camp to search for work in nearby towns, they will be far better prepared, says Kalpana.

Focus on Young Women

Much of BWYEP's work focuses on improving opportunities for young women and girls, who are traditionally afforded fewer rights and opportunities within Nepali culture than their male counterparts. Empowering girls to postpone sexual activity and "say no" to unwanted advances from men and boys plays a big part in BWYEP's approach.

"Our society is very male dominated," says Kalpana. "We're giving them (young women) the knowledge that they shouldn't be dominated by males." Girls are generally given fewer chances to complete their educations than boys, she adds, with a premium placed in Nepali society on ensuring girls are married at an early age. Most girls are then relegated to staying in the house and cooking, Kalpana says, while men enjoy greater freedoms. Kalpana relates easily to the girls having grown up under similar circumstances; yet she credits her family—which greatly valued education—and her schooling at a convent for enabling her to maximize her potential.

In response to growing rates of HIV/AIDS within the camps, BWYEP devotes considerable attention to educating youth about the dangers of the disease and preventative measures. Many of





the camp's youth engage in sexual activity at an early age. Others are lured into prostitution and travel as far away as India, only to eventually return infected with the disease. In weekly classes and counseling sessions, Kalpana teaches young women about safe sex, while emphasizing their power to set positive goals and make healthy, long-term decisions.

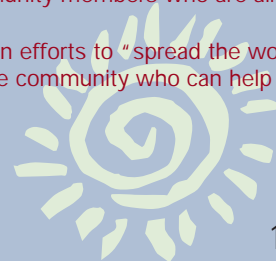
Recognizing that true change can only occur when long-held belief systems are challenged, Kalpana also works to educate parents, teachers, school administrators, and community members about women's rights and what young girls can accomplish. Part of BWYEP's outreach takes the form of an annual magazine featuring stories about local events and young people's perspectives on a range of issues.

Two years into her work, Kalpana is proud to see that what was just an idea—an organization dedicated to the empowerment of women and youth—has become a reality. "Helping women and youth become better informed, making them aware, and encouraging them in their life choices is more than satisfying," she says.

For further information, email:
Kalpana@youthactionnet.org

Engaging the Community in Efforts to Promote Change

- Think through concrete ways in which community members can help bolster your efforts—organizing fundraising events, mentoring project staff in areas where they need help (e.g., accounting, media relations), volunteering their time to work side by side with youth in implementing a project. Be sure to delegate specific tasks.
- Plan regular meetings with local officials, school administrators, parents, and/or teachers to educate them about your issue.
- Publish a newspaper or magazine that highlights those issues you seek to address. Distribute it to people you want to target with your message. Publicize your work on school and college bulletin boards.
- Involve local students and parents through school gatherings.
- Hold awareness raising events at schools and other venues where parents are likely to attend. Explain what you're doing, why, and how they can help.
- Work with media outlets to foster greater exposure for your cause and your organization's efforts. Focus stories on community members who are already involved and why.
- Engage your board of directors or advisors in efforts to "spread the word" about your work to influential members of the community who can help mobilize the support of others.



Reaching out to Refugee Children

Emmanuel Dolo

Age 22
Accra, Ghana

From 1989 to 1996, a brutal civil war in Liberia resulted in the deaths of more than 150,000 people, with many families forced to flee their homes, and seek refuge in the nearby countries of Sierra Leone, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Nigeria, and Ghana. Even now, more than 15,000 Liberians live in refugee camps in Ghana. The majority lives in makeshift shelters, often lacking access to proper food, medicine, and clean drinking water. Harsh living conditions within the camps make life especially difficult for children, who have few educational or recreational opportunities.

Emmanuel Dolo, now 22, knows well the plight of these children. He grew up in Liberia during the height of the civil war, during which his father was killed and his mother forced to flee the country out of fear for her life. At one point, Emmanuel spent more than six months living on the streets. As he describes it: “We had no means of going to school, and could not get food to eat... At times, we begged from house to house. We would get involved in child labor by carrying heavy loads for little or nothing. At the end of the day, we’d sleep under market stalls or make simple shelters.”

It was while he was living on the street that Emmanuel was approached by Children Better Way (CBW), a voluntary, humanitarian organization providing a range of services to child victims of natural and man-made disasters. Through CBW’s “Let the Children Play” program, Emmanuel received daily meals and academic tutoring. Before long, he was engaged by CBW to teach first grade classes to refugee children. When fighting renewed, Emmanuel fled the country and now works with CBW to help refugee children living in the Buduburam Refugee Camp.

Located about an hour’s drive from Accra, Ghana, the Buduburam Camp covers about 75 acres of near desert. It was created in 1990 to accommodate the flood of refugees entering Ghana from Liberia. The camp is comprised of rows and rows of mud brick dwellings. According to Emmanuel, up to 20 people can live in a single two-room shelter. As a result of

overcrowding and unsanitary conditions, outbreaks of diseases such as cholera are common.

Established in 1996, Children Better Way tackles the problems facing refugee youth by empowering them to be part of the solution. Over time, it has developed a range of services to meet the educational, health, nutritional, recreational, and housing needs of refugee children and youth. Its programs include:

- The Kids Back to School Project—Provides basic tutoring, meals, and counseling services to young

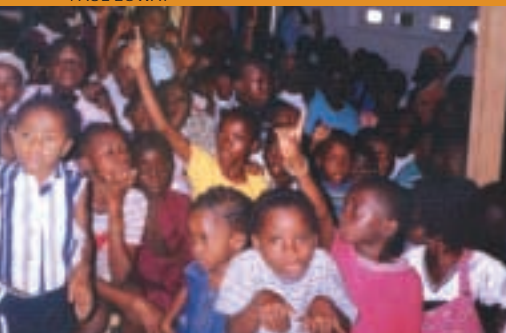
people, ages 5 to 16, living in the Buduburam Camp. Many of the children are orphans. A majority have spent time living on the streets, with many having experienced physical or sexual abuse.

- Clean up Committee—Mobilizes young people in the camp to take action to improve their community. The committee undertakes weekly cleanups. An additional team of 21 youth disseminates health information to local residents focused on proper hygiene.

- Child Rights Advocacy Department—Identifies at-risk young people for participation

“We had no means of going to school, and could not get food to eat... At times, we begged from house to house.”

PAUL ZOWAY





Once a month, Children Better Way volunteers organize a clean up of the Buduburam refugee market.



PAUL ZOWAY

in CBW programs. Carried out by a team of 15 refugee girls and six boys, CBW's child rights activities include determining whether individual children have legal guardians, and educating those adults about their children's rights.

- Let the Children Play Program—Provides academic tutoring, food, and counseling services to refugee children.
- Reproductive Health Education Program—Distributes reproductive health information to camp residents.

CBW's services currently reach more than 180 young people in the Buduburam Camp, but securing funding for its activities remains a constant challenge. Currently, its work is supported by a variety of international relief organizations, including: the Care Bag Foundation, which provides toys for the children; Action Without Borders, which contributes health information materials; the World Food Program; Lutheran World Services; and the Special Emergency Life Food Program.

Emmanuel credits Semeh Roberts, CBW's founder, with helping him overcome the obstacles of his past and taking control of his future. "He's like a father to me," says Emmanuel of Roberts. While Roberts helped Emmanuel finish his high school education, much of Emmanuel's ability to work with the children can be attributed to his ability to relate their plight to his own. "Because I experienced this before, I use my own experience," he says, adding that the most rewarding aspect of his work is seeing the children "being cared for and the affect of CBW's work on their well-being and behavior."

For further information, email:
Emmanuel@youthactionnet.org



Children displaying toys and books they received through SIDAREC.

Ideas for Starting a Website

- Network with information technology departments at local universities. Students looking to establish a portfolio of their work may agree to help you at little to no cost.
- Negotiate with a local service provider to get lower prices. Think through services your organization might offer them (e.g., free marketing).
- Look into acquiring web space on another organization's website. Research associations you might join who will post a description of your organization on their site, until you have the funds available to create your own.
- Use all available resources within your organization (e.g., web savvy staff, those with good writing skills).
- There are quite a few free website hosts on the web (e.g., Geocities, Crosswinds.net, the-freesite.com). Consider them as a platform for your work until you can find space elsewhere.
- Utilize all of the free resources on the web concerning how to write a website in HTML, etc. (e.g., webmonkey.com).





Through producing its own television program, Citizen Association Bona Fides engages youth and adults in a critical dialogue on issues ranging from ethnic tolerance to human rights.

Promoting Tolerance and Understanding of Differences

Jasmina Ivosevic

Age 24

Bijeljina, Bosnia-Herzegovina

Twice each month, thousands of television viewers throughout Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, and F.R. Yugoslavia tune into an hour-long youth talk show. During the show, young people, journalists, lawyers, and others express their views on topics ranging from ethnic tolerance to human rights to how to promote democratic principles. The show wasn't developed by TV executives; rather it was conceived of and is paid for by a youth-run, nongovernmental organization: Citizen Association Bona Fides.

Translated from Latin, *bona fides* means “good will toward helping others.” Established in 2001, the mission of Citizen Association Bona Fides is to help young people overcome the region’s legacy of war, hatred, and intolerance. As alternatives, it encourages open dialogue, the peaceful resolution of conflict, and active democratic participation.

Bona Fides is the brainchild of Jasmina Ivosevic, age 24, who founded the organization with the support of friends and family. As its executive director, she and two staff coordinate its activities from a small office in Bijeljina, a town situated in the northeast corner of Bosnia-Herzegovina. More than 30 youth, ages 18 to 25, are members of the Association, with many others participating in its activities.

Central to Bona Fides’ work is awakening young people to their role as social change agents, capable of building a more positive future. Yet current statistics might discourage even the most optimistic among the region’s youth from believing in a better tomorrow. High unemployment, widespread poverty, and a pervasive lack of

opportunity have resulted in growing alienation among young people. According to a recent survey, 63 percent of youth in Bosnia-Herzegovina seek to emigrate.

Such disturbing trends have not deterred Jasmina and her colleagues, who believe that true change starts small—in the minds and hearts of individuals. “The only way to begin is to start with the individual,” says Jasmina. “When you establish personal ties it’s much easier to make wider connections.”

Letting Go of the Past

Central to Bona Fides’ efforts is breaking the grip that years of isolation and government propaganda holds on young people’s minds. “A large number of young people have formed their views based on the negative ideals of extreme nationalistic policies,” Jasmina explains. “They have had no opportunities to see further, to communicate with youth from other countries, or to educate themselves. Such young people are unable to

accept others who have different cultures, religions, and customs.”

Through sponsoring local workshops and conferences, Bona Fides convenes diverse groups of youth and fosters lasting connections among them. In 2001, Jasmina and her colleagues organized six conferences, each attended by thirty youth.

During the three to four day events, participants talked about such issues as the reconciliation process, human rights, ethnic tolerance, and the role of the media in the post-war period. “While in all three countries, the situation is quite different, when they [conference participants] are together they start seeing similarities among them,” Jasmina points out.

During a summer school hosted by Bona Fides, two youth—one Serbian and the other Muslim—talked candidly about the war in Bosnia. In the course of their conversation they came to realize that they had fought against one another. Now, seven years later, they’ve developed a friendship through the Association’s activities. According to Jasmina, such changes in attitudes and preconceptions happen frequently in Bona Fides’ work.

Despite Bona Fides’ success at mobilizing diverse groups of youth, Jasmina was frustrated at not being able to reach young people outside of major cities. Having worked as an intern at a local TV station, she conceived of the idea of a youth-focused show. When a national station responded favorably, she successfully secured funding for the program from the Council of Europe.

To foster greater youth participation in the building of sustainable democracies, Bona Fides has joined with a coalition of NGOs to encourage more young people to vote. Through brochures, posters, and announcements aired on local radio and TV

stations, Bona Fides motivates youth to get involved in the political process. While it’s still too early to tell if its efforts are succeeding, signs are that more youth are thinking about the importance of exercising their democratic rights.

Encouraging Youth Involvement

One of Jasmina’s biggest challenges has been motivating youth—many of whom have lost hope that their situation will improve—to participate in the Association’s activities. Historically, little emphasis has been placed within the region on encouraging active youth participation in civic life. “Young people are very passive in social life,” she explains, “without a clear vision for how to manage their situation.”

To encourage young people’s interest in its activities, Bona Fides started by creating a compelling “hook” in the form of sports competitions held among diverse youth from the region. Another key to encouraging more active participation has been the Association’s television program. A call-in portion of the show invites viewers to comment on what’s been said.

One of the most critical lessons Jasmina has learned is the importance of self-reliance, hard work, and maintaining a positive attitude. “Young people have to be brave to realize what they think is necessary for them and their future,” she says. “They must not let politicians, teachers, parents, or anybody else discourage them from building a better, more peaceful society.”

For further information, email: Jasmina@youthactionnet.org

“A large number of young people have formed their views based on the negative ideals of extreme nationalistic policies. They have had no opportunities to see further, to communicate with youth from other countries, or to educate themselves.”

Engaging Active Youth Participation in Your Activities

- Organize activities of interest to youth (e.g., English language or computer courses) or offer services to youth such as Internet access.
- Make the content of your work interesting to youth (e.g., distribute creative posters, hold informational parties related to your work, encourage local musicians to donate a free concert to highlight your activities).
- Engage youth in voluntary activities (e.g., building playgrounds, conducting environmental clean up efforts).
- Hold a special prayer gathering. Organize an event through a local religious institution.
- Think of creative activities for encouraging youth involvement (e.g., a poster or logo contest).

A participant in one of Bona Fides’ training sessions.



Connecting Young People to Their Past and Their Future

Juan Marcos
Isuiza Shuna

Age 23
Iquitos, Peru

Situated on the banks of the Amazon River in the heart of the Peruvian jungle, the city of Iquitos is home to more than 300,000 people. Known as a bustling commercial center, Iquitos is also a place of growing poverty as more and more people move to the city from rural areas in search of a better life.

To get to Iquitos, you must travel by boat or plane. There are no roads leading out. For many of the city's young people there are equally few roads leading to opportunity. Many drop out of school, either because their parents can't afford the necessary books and supplies, or because they must work to supplement their families' income. With few role models or recreational outlets, many of these young people end up 'hanging out,' engaging in petty crimes, or falling victim to a pervasive drug culture.

For more than 300 of the city's children and youth, Juan Marcos Isuiza Shuna, 23, has emerged as a strong force for positive change. Born eighth in a family of ten, Juan Marcos knows well the challenges these young people face. Yet through the support of his family and church, he finished high school and began looking for ways to help educate poor children who could not attend school.

What makes Juan Marcos an effective leader is not just that he cares about other young people, but that he relates so well to them. Even some of the toughest kids in his community have joined him in creating better opportunities for local children.

"He's a very good, natural leader, especially with the more difficult youth," says Brother Paul McAuley, a member of the Christian Brothers and a mentor to Juan Marcos. As testimony to Juan Marcos' appeal to local youth, he was elected by his peers in the summer of 2002 to represent Iquitos at the World Youth Day events hosted by the Pope in Toronto, Canada. Juan Marcos used the opportunity as a springboard to educate local

youth about what their peers in other countries were accomplishing.

Juan Marcos founded "Iglesia Joven," or the Young Church, in 1999. Today, it has roughly 20 members, ages 16 to 23. Since they started

working together, the group has set up a library space where young people of all ages can access books, out-of-school children are taught to read, students are provided with after-school tutoring, and all have a safe,

nurturing place where they can play games and make friends. Iglesia Joven also conducts outreach in neighboring communities—mobilizing clean up efforts, hosting sports tournaments, sponsoring musical performances, and producing plays aimed at reinforcing a sense of pride

"It's important for the community to help itself."





among local youth in their community and culture.

Many of the city's young people come from indigenous backgrounds and face a clash of cultures in trying to adapt to life in an increasingly commercial environment. Connecting young people to their past and their cultural identity is critical to helping them envision a better future, according to Juan Marcos. Rather than feel ashamed of their life circumstances, these young people can then start building a more positive outlook based on pride in their cultural heritage.

Central to Iglesia Joven's work is shifting the mindset of local youth from one of passive acceptance of their living conditions to active participation in building a more positive society. "It's part of the values I hold

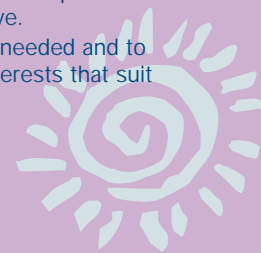
to be able to help the community access the resources it is lacking," says Juan Marcos. "It's important for the community to help itself."

Just as important as the community empowerment projects it undertakes is the impact which Iglesia Joven's activities have on local attitudes about what's possible. "These sorts of projects are important symbolically because many of these young people have few chances for further education and stable employment," says Brother Paul, a U.K. native who has lived in Iquitos for 12 years. "There's a great danger they'll become bored and depressed. The fact that these young people are saying, 'yes, we can do it,' is important."

For further information, email: JuanMarcos@youthactionnet.org

Tips on Being a More Effective Leader

- Learn from other leaders—famous and not famous. Read books about leadership and the biographies of leaders you admire.
- Be open and frank. Create a friendly atmosphere in your organization, but also be clear about your responsibilities and the responsibilities of others.
- Maintain a positive attitude. It's contagious.
- Research and participate in training workshops.
- Provide frequent and positive acknowledgement to staff and/or volunteers. Thank them for their contributions. Encourage them to take initiative and grow in new ways.
- Plan ahead. Try as much as possible to be proactive, not reactive.
- Delegate authority as needed and to those with skills and interests that suit the job to be done.



Helping Young People Envision a Better

George Onyango

Age 24
Nairobi, Kenya

For young people growing up in Pumwani, a sprawling slum community on the outskirts of Nairobi, Kenya, the future can seem hopeless. With most parents unable to pay for their children's education, many young people are forced to drop out of school. The majority ends up on the streets—begging, stealing, or buying and selling drugs.

George Onyango, age 24, knows well the challenges these children face. He grew up in Pumwani as the second oldest in a family of seven. Unlike many of his peers, however, George was able to finish high school through hard work and the support of his family.



MARIA OPONDO

“In the slums where I was born and raised live some of the poorest people on earth,” he says. “It’s like your fate has been sealed before you were born.”

To help change the odds for other youth, George has been involved in voluntary activities since the age of 16—first as founder of the Chemi Chemi Youth Association, and now as project administrator of the Slums Information Development and Resources Centres (SIDAREC), an organization he founded together with other youths and Lucy Mathai, SIDAREC’s present project coordinator.

A big part of George’s commitment to youth work is being able to nurture young people’s expectations of what they’re capable of. “As one of the young people who made it from the slums, I’ve become a role model to many other youth,” he reflects. “I’ve taken it upon myself to mentor youth who seek my advice in how to go about life. I teach them that life is like a blank check. You can write any amount you want on it. It’s the same way with life. You can either ruin yourself or build yourself.”

As SIDAREC’s project administrator, George oversees a range of programs, all of which evolved to meet urgent local needs. Founded in 1996, SIDAREC bases its approach on the premise that local problems are best solved through empowering community members to be part of the solution.

Currently, SIDAREC provides services to 150 children and youth in Pumwani, and an additional 200 children in Mukuru Kwa Njenga, a neighboring slum community. Among its activities, SIDAREC provides children with early childhood development and recreational activities, trains youth in computer skills, equips young girls with job skills, and conducts HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention programs. In 1999, SIDAREC started providing small loans to young people looking to start their own micro-enterprises, but who couldn’t gain access to credit. Says George, “You have to give people access to resources. How else can you help young people escape the cycle of poverty?”





MARIA OPONDO

SIDAREC also produces *Slum News*, a youth-run newspaper. Young people report on issues and events, write articles, produce layouts, publish the paper, and distribute 3,000 copies locally and within neighboring slum communities. Past issues have focused on corruption, civic education, youth activism, the environment, security, shelter, employment, and politics.

While SIDAREC struggled in its early days to raise funds to sustain its activities, its programs have captured the interest of international donors, including the Ford and the Bernard van Leer Foundations. SIDAREC has also received support from the Kenyan government, which donated land for its Community Resource Centres in Pumwani. In 2000, the government provided SIDAREC with another parcel of land so that it could replicate its approach in the Mukuru Kwa Njenga slums, a community with one of the highest HIV/AIDS prevalence rates in the country.

Now, six years after SIDAREC was founded, George looks back with pride at what it has achieved. Among those achievements has been changing adult attitudes about what young people are capable of. "Many people did not take us seriously," he emphasizes. "They'd say, 'What can these young people from the slums do anyway? We give them three months before they fold.'" Now George says these are the same people who are coming to SIDAREC for support.

For further information, email: George@youthactionnet.org



MARIA OPONDO

Advice on Collaborating with Government

- Be sure to advise local and national government authorities before you start a project. Seek their approval when needed or appropriate.
- Regularly inform government officials of your work, recent successes, and the number of youth involved in your activities.
- Invite government representatives to your events (e.g., seminars, conferences, training courses).
- Request meetings with local authorities to brief them on your work. Be able to clearly demonstrate the impact of your work and success stories. Avoid being sentimental or emotional in your approach.
- Be sure you are able to deliver on all promises. Be accountable and able to share with government officials your financial accounts.
- Make sure you keep relevant government officials on your mailing list to receive press releases and announcements. Explore how you might disseminate news of your activities through government publications.
- Get involved in local development initiatives through the municipal government or local administration.
- Acquaint yourself with newly posted government officials by calling their offices to brief them on what you do.





IGOR CHIRONDA

With support from the Future Business Leaders Association, a young person's dream of starting a window blind shop was made a reality.

Equipping Youth with Entrepreneurial and Leadership skills

Valeriu Popovici

Age 22
Balti, Moldova

If you're a teenager growing up in Moldova, there's a good chance you've thought about leaving. With unemployment hovering at 20 percent, young people have less and

less hope they'll be able to secure a decent livelihood, let alone find the job of their dreams. For a handful of these youth, however, the Future Business Leaders Association has made it possible to pursue their dream of starting their own—very small—business.

Created in 1998 by Valeriu Popovici, then 18, the Association links college students studying business management with aspiring young entrepreneurs. The benefits of the program flow both ways. College students are able to apply what they're learning in school to "real life" situations. Young entrepreneurs are given a chance to pursue the dream of launching their own businesses.

Today, the Association has spawned over 25 youth-run micro-enterprises. Examples range from a 22-year-old who makes and sells window blinds to several youth who have banded together to launch their own laundry business. Both ventures are now operating successfully, with the latter slated to expand. While Valeriu admits launching 25 small businesses will not solve the nation's economic problems, it is a start. He and his peers remain committed to ensuring the quality of the businesses they help create, as opposed to the quantity.

Valeriu's brand of big-hearted capitalism is deeply rooted in the changes his country has undergone and his concern about its future. "Because of the high unemployment rate, many people have tried to leave the country legally or illegally to go to America or Europe," he says. "This creates a brain drain. We need to help people find employment in Moldova instead of going and leaving no future for the country."

How It Works

The Association's work started to gain momentum in 2000 as a result of two unrelated events. One was a series of economic reform measures adopted by the Moldovan government to stimulate small business development. As a result, the Association was given government assistance and office space through the Chamber of Commerce and Industry's "Business Incubator" Project. Also in 2000, Valeriu was introduced to Making Cents, Inc., a US-based consulting firm specializing in developing entrepreneurial training programs. Making Cents provided the Association with access to its training curricula and technical support as it worked to stimulate small business creation.

Young people interested in pursuing a small business idea with the help of Valeriu and his peers are first provided with training based on the Making Cents curriculum. The curriculum walks them through the basics—from researching an idea to developing a busi-

ness plan to budgeting and marketing. Association members then provide technical support to aspiring entrepreneurs—troubleshooting and teaching them about proper bookkeeping, the sourcing of low-cost materials, and how to plan for and sustain growth.

In 2001, the Association received funding from the U.S. Department of State to launch the Youth Employment Center, an e-business development program. Through the program, young people receive funds to start Internet-based businesses, a very new concept in Moldova. Says Valeriu, “For those who have limited resources with which to start a business, why not start your own website and sell your services?”

To date, ten e-businesses have been created with the Association’s help. Among them are a travel business whereby young people have developed a website encouraging tourists to visit holiday spots in northern Moldova, and a music business created by youth through which they create and market music electronically.

A Model for Other Countries?

In light of growing youth unemployment in many parts of the world, Valeriu gets excited about the potential for replicating parts of the Association’s approach elsewhere. “You can take practices from around the world and adapt them to your environment,” he says. “You can change the ingredients but the general formula is there.”

With the donor community seeking ways to address mounting youth employment concerns, the Association has captured the attention of several international donors, among them the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the Soros (Moldova) Foundation, and Community Aid Abroad-Oxfam Australia.

Asked why he doesn’t just focus on his own career, Valeriu responds, “There’s no impact from just one person, whereas when you combine people’s energy and knowledge you can really achieve something. My goal was to help others grow and build a whole chain of action.”

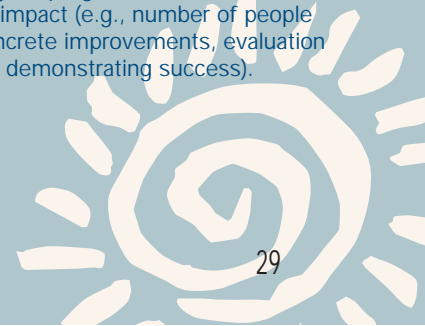
For further information, email: Valeriu@youthactionnet.org



“ We need to help people find employment in Moldova instead of going and leaving no future for the country. ”

Tips on Raising Funds from Foundations

- Search the Internet and local and regional directories for foundations with an interest in your issue.
- Research the priority funding areas of those foundations you plan to approach. Follow their guidelines closely, especially proposal deadlines.
- Offer recommendations from previous donors, partners, or well-respected authorities in the field.
- Always be honest about your work. Don’t exaggerate.
- Be professional. Present yourself in a way that communicates respectability and success.
- Submit well-researched and written proposals. Be sure to proofread for errors.
- Carefully document the needs for your program (e.g., with statistical data), the specifics of your program and activities, and evidence of impact (e.g., number of people reached, concrete improvements, evaluation data, stories demonstrating success).



Educating Poor Urban Children

Atiar Rahman

Age 21
Dhaka, Bangladesh

Atiar Rahman is the kind of person who has trouble walking by someone in need without trying to do something about it. On the rare occasion when he buys an ice cream cone on the streets of Dhaka, he usually can't finish it because so many children gather to watch. "When I see their faces and their eyes, I cannot eat," he says.

It was the same when Atiar would think about the thousands of children in Dhaka who are out of school. According to recent estimates up to 35 percent of the city's youngest citizens lack a basic education. Concerned about the situation, Atiar and several of his friends created the Youth Coaching Academy in 2001.

Located on the first floor of a modest apartment building, the Academy consists of a makeshift schoolroom where 45 children, ages 4 to 10, from the Shamoly area of Dhaka City, come from 3:00 to 7:00 p.m. to learn to read, write, do math, and use a computer. Its teaching staff of five is all college students, ages 19 to 25, who, like Atiar, volunteer their time to reach out to poor children. While he and his peers are able to help only a handful of those children in need, says Atiar, "It is a passion to give children our love."

While primary education within government schools is provided free to children in Bangladesh, children from poor families often drop out to help supplement their family's

income. Children often work in shops or automotive centers, are hired to do housework, or help their parents at home or with small family businesses.

Shanaj, age 9, was one of those children. A year ago, she could neither read nor write and spent her days helping care for her younger brother or working as a maid with her mother. But then Shanaj was approached by one of the Academy's instructors who worked to convince her parents that she would benefit from at least some education. Now, she's learning at the second grade level and has developed a fondness for computer games. Her parents, having seen the difference the Academy has made, have now enrolled Shanaj in the government school and have agreed to let her brother attend the Academy's afternoon classes with her.

Shanaj's story is a common one, says Atiar, who wishes the Academy could help more children in need of a basic education. Currently the program is funded through the youths' personal

"It is a passion to give children our love."



Classes at the Youth Coaching Academy take place from 3:00 to 7:00 on weekday afternoons.

ATIAR RAHMAN



Nine-year-old Shanaj could neither read nor write when she first came to the Academy. Now, she's learning at the second grade level.

ATIAR RAHMAN

savings, and through money they raise by charging a modest fee of \$10 a month to tutor students who can afford it. Still, raising the money necessary to keep the program going is difficult. Its annual expenses are roughly US\$1,200. As most of the children arrive hungry, the Academy also provides late afternoon snacks.

Local residents find out about the Academy through posters placed in public places, and through word of mouth. Unfortunately, far more children apply for its services than the Academy can accept. These children are put on a waiting list and notified when openings are available.

In the future, Atiar hopes to expand its services so that children living on the streets can have access to shelter, meals, education, and skills training so that they might have “a bright future and become an instrument of change in their communities.”

The Academy has moved one step closer to realizing that dream through a recent alliance with Youth Action for Social Advancement (YASA), a national, nonprofit, voluntary youth and student organization based in Dhaka. As a project of YASA, the Academy hopes to expand its reach and visibility, while benefiting from a broader base of youth volunteers.

For further information, email:
Atiar@youthactionnet.org

Advice on Measuring the Impact of Your Work

- Be sure to document the situation you seek to address before commencing your activities (e.g., research statistics on the extent of the problem, define the size of your target group, obtain quotes from local officials concerning the extent of the needs you seek to meet.)
- Consider engaging a university class in helping you develop an evaluation plan as part of their coursework.
- Develop a plan for evaluating your progress every three to six months. Plan to obtain specific information related to a) how many people are being impacted by your work—directly and indirectly, b) how they are being impacted, including specific outcomes (e.g., better health choices, higher educational attainment rate), and c) lessons you have learned about what is working in your approach and what may not be working.
- Gather information from your beneficiaries, parents, and the community at large about the impact of your work and results achieved. Be sure to pay attention to any unintended results, positive or negative.
- In assessing your work also look at factors that may be hindering the program's implementation and activities that should be modified and why.
- Be careful to look for opportunities that have arisen and how you might take advantage of them.



IEVA NOVICKA

Medical students measure blood pressure at a public event sponsored by the Latvian Medical Students Association.

Increasing Public Health Awareness

Aksels Ribenis

Age 22
Riga, Latvia

In Latvia, as in many countries, heart disease and cancer are the two leading causes of death; yet far too few Latvians take the steps they could to prevent disease or diagnose it

early enough for successful treatment. According to recent statistics, 40 percent of Latvian cancer patients turn to a doctor only after the disease has progressed beyond the point at which it can be successfully treated.

Recognizing the urgent need for public health education, Aksels Ribenis, age 22, and two other medical students took matters into their own hands. In 2000, they founded the Latvian Medical Students Association (LMSA) to promote good health and teach people about the risks and early prevention of various diseases.

LMSA is part of the International Federation of Medical Students Associations, with local chapters in 89 countries. As President of the Latvian chapter, Aksels coordinates the activities of its nearly 50 members and outside volunteers. With a demanding academic schedule and the financial pressures of being in school, why does he spend up to 15 hours a week organizing LMSA's public outreach activities?

"Studies are studies," he says. "Everybody does it. There's nothing special. This is practical. It's real work."

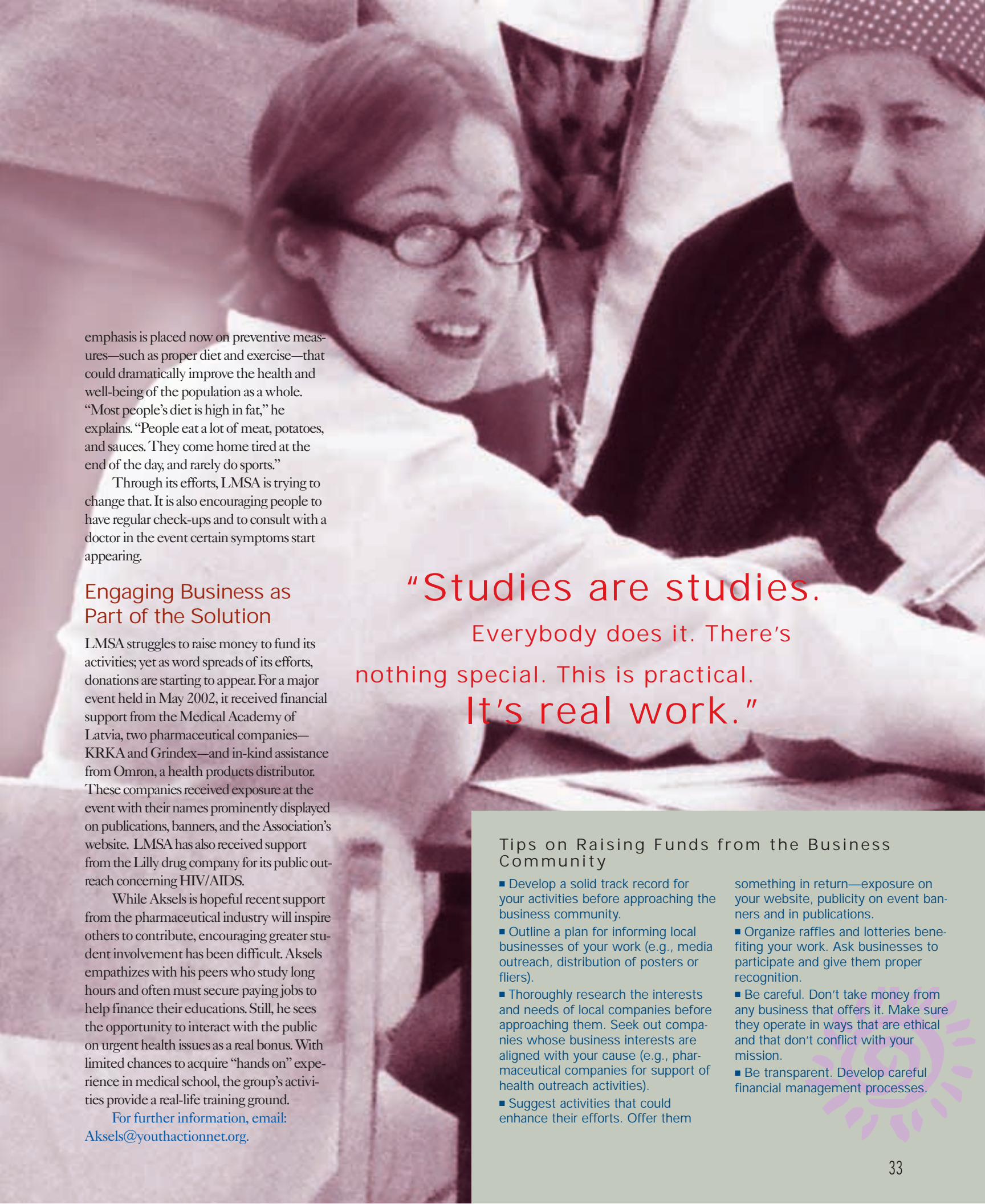
Taking Their Message to the Streets

Since it began in May 2000, LMSA has held over 12 public events and seminars, reaching an estimated 6,000 Latvians. Working from a cramped office donated by his university, Aksels and his fellow association members plan and coordinate their activities, develop materials, initiate fundraising, and conduct media outreach.

LMSA's first project, "Medical Students for Heart Health," focused on educating the public about the risks of heart disease. At events held in the central squares of four Latvian cities, LMSA members measured more than 3,000 people's blood pressure and body weight index, and asked them to fill out questionnaires about their general health, lifestyle, and eating habits.

Members have also tackled other pressing health issues—producing posters and hosting seminars on the dangers of cigarette smoking, and administering body fat and blood pressure tests to diabetes sufferers. LMSA's Reproductive Health Working Group addresses the problem of HIV/AIDS in the country, with more than 5,000 Latvians estimated to be infected with the virus. In addition to hosting HIV/AIDS awareness seminars for medical students, members have conducted outreach in nightclubs and bars.

Aksels sees LMSA's work as critical to changing attitudes in a country where little



emphasis is placed now on preventive measures—such as proper diet and exercise—that could dramatically improve the health and well-being of the population as a whole. “Most people’s diet is high in fat,” he explains. “People eat a lot of meat, potatoes, and sauces. They come home tired at the end of the day, and rarely do sports.”

Through its efforts, LMSA is trying to change that. It is also encouraging people to have regular check-ups and to consult with a doctor in the event certain symptoms start appearing.

Engaging Business as Part of the Solution

LMSA struggles to raise money to fund its activities; yet as word spreads of its efforts, donations are starting to appear. For a major event held in May 2002, it received financial support from the Medical Academy of Latvia, two pharmaceutical companies—KRKA and Grindex—and in-kind assistance from Omron, a health products distributor. These companies received exposure at the event with their names prominently displayed on publications, banners, and the Association’s website. LMSA has also received support from the Lilly drug company for its public outreach concerning HIV/AIDS.

While Aksels is hopeful recent support from the pharmaceutical industry will inspire others to contribute, encouraging greater student involvement has been difficult. Aksels empathizes with his peers who study long hours and often must secure paying jobs to help finance their educations. Still, he sees the opportunity to interact with the public on urgent health issues as a real bonus. With limited chances to acquire “hands on” experience in medical school, the group’s activities provide a real-life training ground.

For further information, email: Aksels@youthactionnet.org.

“Studies are studies.
Everybody does it. There’s
nothing special. This is practical.
It’s real work.”

Tips on Raising Funds from the Business Community

- Develop a solid track record for your activities before approaching the business community.
- Outline a plan for informing local businesses of your work (e.g., media outreach, distribution of posters or fliers).
- Thoroughly research the interests and needs of local companies before approaching them. Seek out companies whose business interests are aligned with your cause (e.g., pharmaceutical companies for support of health outreach activities).
- Suggest activities that could enhance their efforts. Offer them

something in return—exposure on your website, publicity on event banners and in publications.

- Organize raffles and lotteries benefiting your work. Ask businesses to participate and give them proper recognition.
- Be careful. Don’t take money from any business that offers it. Make sure they operate in ways that are ethical and that don’t conflict with your mission.
- Be transparent. Develop careful financial management processes.



MADHUP SHRESTHA

Swastika reaches out to a young patient at the Kanti Bal Hospital in Kathmandu.

Helping Children with Cancer Cope

Swastika Shrestha

Age 22
Kathmandu, Nepal

In the oncology unit of the Kanti Bal Hospital in Kathmandu is a modest room with eight beds reserved for children who come to the hospital for cancer treatment. Two years ago the walls of the children's ward were nearly bare, its young residents left with little to do to get their minds off their illness and its treatment. Now, that's changed.

Today, the walls are covered with brightly colored drawings created by the children themselves. Every day, four to five young volunteers, ages 13 to 24, spend an hour or two with the children—playing, drawing, or simply talking and listening. The youth bring toys and art supplies, which they and other volunteers collect from donation boxes placed in libraries and schools around the city.

Their work is coordinated through Chiranjeevi, a local, youth-led voluntary organization started in 1999 by Melodie Gage, an American adult cancer survivor, and four other volunteers.

The youngest of those volunteers was Swastika Shrestha, who now serves as the program's coordinator. Swastika points out that the name "Chiranjeevi" was chosen for its message of hope. It's a Nepali blessing used by elderly people to wish the young a long and healthy life.

Although she had volunteered for various groups for years, Swastika never dreamed she would one day

manage a nonprofit organization addressing the needs of children with cancer. It was three years ago that she started volunteering with Chiranjeevi in response to an advertisement asking for people to help work with child cancer patients.

"It was a set of circumstances rather than passion for a cause that took me to this place," she reflects, "but today Chiranjeevi is part of my identity. I feel like a mother to it... [It] has become my ultimate passion."

Nurturing a Positive Spirit

Chiranjeevi's mission is to provide children hospitalized for cancer treatment with enjoyable activities to help buoy their spirits, while bolstering their immune systems. Kanti Bal Hospital was chosen as the focus of Chiranjeevi's activities as it is the only pediatric hospital in the city where major cancer cases are treated.

Volunteers each select a particular day of the week to visit the hospital and spend two to three hours playing and talking with the children and their parents. In addition to those youth who visit the hospital, others volunteer their time to assist in fundraising efforts, and in collecting stationary and toys for the children within their schools and colleges. Recently, Chiranjeevi started distributing hygiene kits to the children. It also published a brochure containing information for parents on how to cope with the stress and uncertainties they face.

An Emotionally Demanding Role

One of Chiranjeevi's greatest challenges is retaining its youth volunteers, many of whom experience great difficulty coping with the situation of the children, and the loss of many they become close to. On several occasions, Swastika herself considered resigning due to the emotional demands of the program. Near the beginning of her work with Chiranjeevi, she spent time with a 12-year-old patient named Kavita and the girl's mother, who was a single parent. "I felt I had so much in common with Kavita and one day she was no more," recalls Swastika. The experience changed Swastika's life. "It was the first time I saw someone slowly moving into death."

Fortunately, Swastika and the others eventually found people they could turn to

for help. One of those was a psychiatrist from Norway who gave the youth advice on cop-

ing with situations involving children with life-threatening illnesses. "She reminded us that we can only do what we can within our limitations," says Swastika. "All we could do was go there [to the hospital], spend time with the kids, and give them a happy day."

On a personal level, Swastika has grappled with taking on responsibilities she felt unpre-

pared for, and with having others look to her for advice on matters in which she didn't feel adequately trained.

Swastika attributes her ability to persevere to the support of friends, family, and mentors; the earlier training she received through involvement in youth organizations such as the Girl Scouts; and through accepting the fact that while she may make mistakes, the 'right' decision eventually becomes clear.

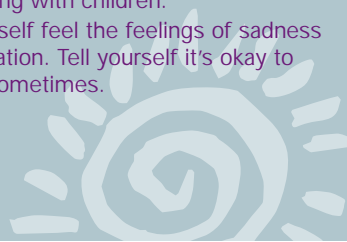
While admitting that the work is difficult, she emphasizes that in that difficulty lie the rewards. "We have to fight our own fears," she says. "The most important challenge is to keep walking the path we have chosen. We get tempted to quit but at the end we realize that in giving, we receive the most valuable gift: an understanding and appreciation for life."

For further information, email: Swastika@youthactionnet.org.

“Making decisions on behalf of the entire organization was scary. The greatest challenge for me was to overcome the sense of being too young to make the right decision for the organization and to overcome my own fears.”

Tips for Coping with Burnout

- Share responsibilities with other members of your organization.
- Cooperate with other NGOs as partners.
- Seek support from close friends who know you.
- Take breaks when possible to exercise or pursue hobbies, like painting, travel, and dance.
- Remember that every human being has his or her limitations.
- Maintain your spiritual practice if you have one.
- Create a nice environment to work in. Buy fresh flowers.
- Spend time with family members, especially playing with children.
- Let yourself feel the feelings of sadness and frustration. Tell yourself it's okay to feel bad sometimes.



“Indeed, I wish to be
the drop that creates the
ripples of change.”

—Aliakhbar Jumrani,
the Philippines



About Make a Connection

Make a Connection is a global, multi-year initiative of the International Youth Foundation (IYF) and Nokia to promote positive youth development by giving young people an opportunity to "make a connection" to their communities, to their families and peers, and to themselves. In addition to country-by-country programs focused on teaching life skills to young people, *Make a Connection* supports YouthActionNet, an online platform promoting the vital role youth are playing in leading positive change around the world. For further information, see www.makeaconnection.org.

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