



FEATURE STORIES



In Baltimore, a community mural attracts a Banner Neighborhoods Community Corporation participant.

COURTESY BNCC

Tapping the Energy of Youth

Improving Communities, Creating Leaders

BY CLAUDIA ASKEW

In southeast Baltimore, children used to disrupt the community by playing football in the streets, damaging cars, and sometimes even threatening adults who complained. Today, thanks to Banner Neighborhoods Community Corporation, they have a football league with four teams, 100 players, 40 cheerleaders, dozens of volunteers, and literally thousands of fans.

At nearby **Neighborhood Housing Services of Baltimore**, 15-year-old Sherique Brown conceived, organized, and secured funding for the “Trouble Free Me” Basketball Tournament to give kids an alternative to dangerous activities and violence. The tournament was so successful it is being made an annual event.

In New Jersey, Isles Inc. of Trenton has aided more than 400 at-risk young people with its YouthBuild program. Among them is Tykira Robbins, a high school senior who had stopped attending school. This year, Robbins will earn her high school diploma; she plans to attend community college.

In Washington, D.C., participants in the EcoDesign Corps Program are forming a youth-run business, with community workshops on environmental education and sales of rain barrels to reduce storm water runoff into the polluted Anacostia River. “Project Rain” will help the city with its efforts to clean up the river.

These are but four in a range of community-based organizations across the country – both within and apart from the NeighborWorks® network – that are turning to innovative projects to tap into the powerful resource of youth in communities to reduce crime, improve communities, and create tomorrow’s leaders.

Football in Baltimore

When the Banner Neighborhoods Community Corporation (BNCC) surveyed area residents on what needed improvement in their community, the responses were clear: Too many unsupervised young people were playing football or just hanging out on the street.

“Some who never were involved before are inspired by the young people. Activism has increased, and people are taking responsibility for their community.”

BNCC reading club members visit Patterson Park [right], while basketball attracts other youth. [below]
COURTESY BNCC



Determined to improve the situation, BNCC staff organized a community conference between the youth and adults. At first, the atmosphere was very hostile. The adults were angry that kids were taking over the streets, and the young people were frustrated, saying the streets were the only place they had to play. If they went to nearby Patterson Park, they said, older kids would harass them.

Then the atmosphere changed. One of the adults agreed to accompany the youth to Patterson Park. Forty kids showed up for that first outing. The next time there were 50, then 75, and so on. More adults also began to go.

When the young people asked if they could start a real team, BNCC worked to make it happen. It secured funding from local foundations and soon had enough money to start a league. It found a supplier that provided uniforms, and rounded up 35 volunteer coaches from the community.

In order to remain in the league, players and cheerleaders must adhere to certain standards. They have to maintain good grades and bring in their report cards to prove it. And they work together to craft a “team agreement,” which is a code of conduct – no drugs, vandalism, or profanity or whatever else they may propose.

“We’re dealing with a pretty rough bunch of kids,” says John Huppert, BNCC executive director. “One had committed armed robbery at age 12.” But they’ve seen a lot of change in behavior as a result of the youth activities. “Kids who didn’t go to school are going now so they can play in the league,” Huppert says.

The success of the football league inspired a host of other youth activities, including a basketball league, a reading club, an art club, and a summer neighborhood youth employment project.

Sharing a handshake is part of every game

COURTESY BNCC





“Trouble Free Me”

Because there weren't enough activities for young people in the Greater Hillendale area of Baltimore County, many residents were working one-on-one with youth on their blocks. Eventually, they came together to pool their efforts and form some group activities.

One was a Youth Ambassador Program, which encourages young people to work together to plan and implement all types of activities such as Pitch In for Progress. This program includes planting, clearing brush and undergrowth, fixing up the library, and assisting residents with yard work.

One of the founding members of the Youth Ambassador Program is Sherique Brown, who was then a 15-year-old. Aside from the Youth Ambassador Program, Brown also had a vision to stop the violence and crime in the community. She wanted to put together a basketball tournament to provide an outlet for kids “to be loud, boisterous, silly, all the things young people can be.”

Brown's plan was to have a one-day youth basketball tournament, called “Trouble Free Me,” that also would include discussion sessions with invited speakers. She hatched the idea and worked with friends to secure funding and plan the event.

“It's been very special,” says Neighborhood Director Patricia Hull, “because we've gotten very positive feedback from some of our residents, who at first weren't very comfortable being around our young people.”

Now, parents and other adults are more involved in the organization, Hull says, taking part in improving the health and wellbeing of their neighborhood.

“Adults are stepping up and writing grants and undertaking projects,” Hull says. “Some who never were involved before are inspired by the young people. Activism has increased, and people are taking responsibility for their community.”



Both indoor and outdoor activities [above] attract reading clubbers. Below, summer youth employment participants work at cleaning an alley.

COURTESY BNCC



“Our program is one of the few YouthBuild programs in the country to offer trainees the opportunity to earn a high school diploma or GED.”



[top] Isles' Tykira Robbins (right) with Isles' COO Liz Johnson. COURTESY ISLES INC.

[bottom] Cleaning the boat lake at Patterson Park engages BNCC summer youth employment participants.

COURTESY BNCC

YouthBuild

Recognized by YouthBuild USA as one of the top programs in the country, Isles' YouthBuild provides high-quality academic, vocational, leadership, financial management, and life-skills training to at-risk youth, ages 16 to 24.

Tykira Robbins learned about YouthBuild from her brother, who was a YouthBuild trainee and felt it would be a good program for her. Robbins says her friends at school were not a good influence on her, and she credits YouthBuild with keeping her out of trouble.

Robbins is just one of YouthBuild's many success stories. Clete Davis, director of the Career Center at Isles Inc., credits a strong, dedicated staff, organizational collaborations, experience, effective recruiting techniques, and a desire on the part of the youth to improve their lives for the program's success.

“Our program is one of the few YouthBuild programs in the country to offer trainees the opportunity to earn a high school diploma or GED,” Davis says.

It also offers access to full-time, on-site counseling services with a certified guidance counselor. Collaboration with the New Jersey Juvenile Justice Commission successfully integrates youth offenders into the program. In addition, partnerships with local employers offer internships and job placement.

The relationship doesn't end when a young person graduates from the program. Isles YouthBuild maintains an open-door policy, providing educational and professional guidance and support to program alumni as needed.

Designs on the Future

The Shaw EcoVillage, a community partner of NeighborWorks® organization Manna CDC, engages youth in hands-on community-based projects that create sustainable economic, environmental and social change in Washington.

The group's EcoDesign Corps encourages students to learn about building and design, and engages them in community activism that incorporates design principles. Students research problems and propose ideas to solve them. Then they compose an action plan and implement it to help solve the problem. At the end of the semester, they give a presentation to residents and city officials.



The program has six focus areas: clean air, land and water; community pride and identity; equitable development; health and wellness; public space; and transportation.

This year's focus is on three projects, including Project Rain and its rain barrels. In one project, students transformed an empty lot into a flourishing garden, and they will take cooking classes to learn how to prepare nutritional meals with the vegetables they have grown. They also will distribute produce from the garden to low-income residents of the Shaw neighborhood. In another project, a team of youth is raising community awareness about how people become homeless and learning about policies that affect people who are homeless. The team is working to put together an informational fair to inform low-income and homeless people about services available to them.

As one measure of success, Project Director Josh Burch tells the story of Lynnard, a former student who completed the program, graduated from high school, and will be hired by the EcoDesign Corps to work with young people in the program. Eventually, Leonard will become the environmental educator

for the program.

“A lot of people use the term ‘leader,’” says Burch, “but he has definitely stepped up to the plate to come back to his community and contribute. I like looking over my shoulder and seeing which students are going to take over my job in a couple of years.” ■

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Jacqueline explains the EchoDesign Corps' rain barrel project to another DC high school student.

COURTESY ECODESIGN CORPS

TIPS FOR STARTING A YOUTH PROGRAM

Having enough money is crucial. Don't assume you can do it on a shoestring. Develop a realistic budget, including such things as staff, supplies and insurance. Plan for unanticipated expenses.

Make sure you have enough personnel. Whether you use paid staff, volunteers or both, a youth program must be adequately staffed. Consider grooming a few good volunteers to recruit other volunteers.

Prepare your volunteers. Even the most energetic volunteers may not be prepared for the challenges of working with at-risk youth. You may need to

have staff on hand at first, while volunteers and program participants become accustomed to one another.

Include youth in the planning stage. The youth themselves are a key ingredient to the program's success. Actively involve them and their ideas in all stages of planning.

Listen to the young people. Take time to listen to their problems. Youth will not always tell you their thoughts and opinions verbally, but rather through an expressive face, a pattern of behavior, or something else that will tell you how they feel.

Create a clear mission and stick to it. Too many people want youth groups to do everything for everybody. With limited time and resources, youth programs need to stick to their mission.

Have lots of patience. Often, youth programs are run by people much more excited about the program and the projects than the youth. Young people who work in youth programs don't live in a vacuum. When they come in the door, they bring hunger, lack of sleep, too much caffeine, problems at home, and all the other extremes we all go through in our own lives.