

# Want to Transform Community Development? Tap into the Energy of Youth.

by Khepe-Ra Maat

*Khepe-Ra Maat facilitated the NeighborWorks® Training Institute's "Youth Matters" symposium in Atlanta in February (see page 16) and here shares her views on tapping into the energy of youth.*

Young people have been some of the most vital leaders of our time. They were the organizers of the civil rights movement and at the forefront of the campaign to end the Vietnam War. If there is a community service movement getting ready to launch right now, young people are the life's blood of that endeavor.

In addition, the amazing innovations youth have contributed through music, performing and visual arts, dance, fashion, language, and other various forms of cultural impact have been astonishing.

Young people have a natural inclination toward creating positive social change in many arenas. They boast a vitality and enthusiasm that is unparalleled. It is the adult community that is slow to recognize this boundless flow of conscious intelligence and spirit that could potentially inform and transform community development efforts.

While we desperately need the unique qualities that only a new generation can express, we also have an obligation to create ways for young people to be heard. They are citizens of our society and global community endowed with the same inalienable rights as any human being. Many community leaders as well as average citizens look at the ways young people "act out" with disbelief and lack of understanding. What is so difficult to recognize?

Young people are arguably one of the most disenfranchised, voiceless, oppressed groups in the country. And yet, we cannot seem to comprehend why in the world they are acting out in violence, rebellion and distrust.

They live in a world that in no way reflects them. They deal with schools and organizations that do not take into account their desires or their needs. Traditional parenting ideas do not reflect human justice issues. Children and youth still live in an age where they are not recognized for the fullness of

their being. They are not respected.

If you felt "dissed" (disrespected) and discounted everyday at home, in the learning environment, in the workplace, how would you act? Be honest. All you have to do is think back a few years.

## *Connecting Youth and Community*

Now imagine if we, as community development workers, could be responsible for shifting this worldwide problem. The benefits would be astronomical. Our societies would evolve to include all of their people in formulating solutions to social justice issues.



Photo by Séan Bennett

Multiply the number of solutions that currently exist a billion-fold. Then you begin to get an inkling of the potential. Also, young people from all walks of life would feel connected to their communities, which ultimately would lead to a more peaceful and just existence. Isn't that why we got into this work?

The only way to make a better world is to include young people in leadership positions. But you don't have to take my word for it; go home and ask your own children, see what they say. See what impact we can have if we just start talking to young people.

Imagine if we could utilize their boundless energy to change our homes, our schools, and our countries. The possibilities are endless.

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