

“Youth Talk Back” Leadership Program Promotes Social Change and Improved Community Health in Hawai‘i

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Abstract

This article describes the Youth Talk Back program in Hawai‘i, which is growing leadership for social change with relevance for community empowerment and grass-roots participation. These youth don’t subscribe to the “What do I want to be when I grow up?” mindset, but rather the “What problem can I solve right now?!” mindset. This article gives a history of the program and examples of the youth-driven work with relevance to community health and well-being.

“If you want to know what youth are wanting and needing, you must go to the source. You have to be in conversation with them.”

– Hawai‘i community organizer Causha Spellman

The Youth Talk Back program was created by Causha Spellman and Kahala Huihui in 2017 as part of a year-long women’s group that was inspired by the 2017 Women’s March. Youth Talk Back was developed within the larger organization of Ceeds of Peace. Ceeds of Peace was initiated in 2012 and is a program to empower youth to find, express, and amplify their voices, then create action in their communities to create positive impacts. Ceeds of Peace is committed to raising peacebuilding leaders who will create peaceful, just, and sustainable communities by teaching and planting 7 essential leadership skills: critical thinking, courage, communication, compassion, conflict resolution, commitment, and collaboration.

This article describes the history of the Youth Talk Back program in Hawai‘i and has been informed by talking with the founders directly about their recollections. Details are also included about some of the initiatives conceived and led by local young people with particular relevance to empowerment and community health with insights from the youth leaders.

Youth Talk Back History

The genesis of the Youth Talk Back program was a specific discussion about the importance of making sure that youth had a voice in what felt like a newly tumultuous political landscape. Members of the Women’s March felt that many members of

the legislature, mostly older men, were not likely to change their minds about critical issues. Instead, the group members concluded, if they wanted to make a positive impact in the current political climate, efforts would be better spent with youth to collectively raise “leaders for social change.”

This statement stuck with Ceeds of Peace co-founders, Dr. Maya Soetoro-Ng and Dr. Kerrie Urosevich, who were able to support Spellman’s vision by adopting Youth Talk Back as a Ceeds of Peace program. Causha Spellman reached out to a fellow community organizer, Kahala Huihui, a teacher at Waipahu High School. After subsequent discussions and planning, Youth Talk Back was born as a platform to empower youth to lead this conversation.

Youth Talk Back was specifically designed with youth as leaders as Spellman and Huihui both recognized that youth voices are often stifled by adults and that conversations about amplifying youth voice typically do not include youth themselves.

As Spellman explained: “Typically, when adults create programs for youth, they don’t take into account the fact that what [adults] think youth want and need are usually very different from what youth think and feel they want and need.” She described how important it is “to create a space where youth could unapologetically be themselves, speak their truth, and also have an opportunity to not just talk about things, but to put some action behind it... They [youth] create, build social capital, find passion and purpose, invest in their passion and purpose, advocate, and more.”

Huihui added, “Hawai‘i youth have huge interest in getting involved with their communities but lack the understanding of how to reach out and connect with others with similar interests. Historically and culturally, Hawai‘i youth think of ‘talking back’ as showing disrespect to their elders and deem it often as inappropriate or out of place. Youth Talk Back has helped to change the stigma of youth using their voices from

a dishonorable act seeking attention and personal gain, to a proactive and admirable commitment to bettering society for generations to come.”

The first Youth Talk Back cohort, which consisted of youth ages 12-17 years from across the Hawaiian Islands, finished their journey in 2018. Thanks to generous funding from The Omidyar ‘Ohana Fund at the Hawai‘i Community Foundation and Pam Omidyar, leadership from another community organizer Younghee Overly, and the persistence and sacrifice from Spellman and Huihui, Ceeds of Peace was able to expand the Youth Talk Back program beyond its pilot year into a second cohort for 2018-2019.

Youth Talk Back Framework

The Youth Talk Back efforts are in line with the United Nations Security Council’s Youth4Peace resolution, which recognizes that “young people play an important and positive role in the maintenance and promotion of international peace and security.”²¹ The resolution emphasizes the need to give youth greater voices in decision-making and establish platforms and methods that enable youth to participate meaningfully.

Youth Talk Back embraces this United Nations resolution, and then takes it a step further. Not only does the program challenge youth to “play an important and positive role” in peacebuilding but also challenges them to design and lead peacebuilding initiatives.

The youth leadership program framework is based on Kouzes and Posner’s (2012) research on leadership development and peacebuilding, which identified five practices of exemplary leadership: (1) Model the way through words and action; (2) inspire a shared vision to reach consensus on goals and get people excited enough to commit to that vision; (3) challenge the process to change the status quo when necessary; (4) enable others to act as part of viable teams; (5) encourage the heart by recognizing people for good work and celebrating successes.²

In addition, Youth Talk Back has a goal towards building sustainable communities, defined as “those that come together to protect their most vulnerable members, while designing and adapting socioeconomic systems to reflect the unique needs of their people and land.”²³

Youth Talk Back Model

Youth Talk Back has developed into a youth-driven program dedicated to help youth of Hawai‘i to find, express, and act on their voices and choices. It does so by focusing on: (1) Providing youth with a safe space to discuss peace-related issues that resonate with them, (2) equipping youth with necessary peacebuilding and community organizing tools and skills to

empower themselves, (3) connecting them with community resources and partners, and (4) supporting them throughout their action planning processes.

A staff of adult facilitators help to convene the youth and amplify these youth voices. Adult facilitators serve to challenge youth to dismantle the idea that they’re too young or that they lack the skills or connections to make profound change. They teach peacebuilding, community organizing, social engagement, design thinking, and strengths-based and solution-focused idea generation, all while keeping youth voices and choices at the center of the movement toward peace.

Specifically, the Youth Talk Back program consists of 4, in-person, 4-hour convenings and two 2-hour zoom conferences, bringing together 25-30 youth from across the Hawaiian Islands. Each convening builds on the last one, teaching a progression of skills and facilitating the sharpening of action plans. The fourth and final convening is a share-out session, giving the youth an opportunity to present their action plans to an audience of more than 100 teachers, community members, and families.

Youth Talk Back Impact

Over the past 2 years, Youth Talk Back has steadily developed into a program with profound impact. Here are 3 program success stories.

March For Our Lives and Vote 16

In the inaugural year of Youth Talk Back, 2 students organized and led a cross-school team to plan the March For Our Lives event in Honolulu in March 2018, followed by a concerted effort to push lawmakers for tougher gun control measures. The March For Our Lives event was held on March 23, 2018. This effort gained coverage in Honolulu Civil Beat and inspired youth all over the state to mobilize and launch similar movements.⁴ One year later, the same 2 students launched the Vote 16 initiative to lower the legal voting age to 16. This movement resulted in Senate Bill 4, introduced by Senators Stanley Chang and Karl Rhoads, thanks to the fierce advocacy from these high school students.

Kaua‘i High School Students for Change

Students from Kaua‘i High School organized “Kaua‘i High School Students for Change,” a club designed to take action on issues that impact youth in their community. Their youth-led club held its first youth peace summit to mentor and motivate middle school students to create community change through action planning. The project’s impact will live on beyond these students’ time at Kaua‘i High School, as they have mentored and motivated a new generation of peacebuilders in their community to continue the work they’ve started.

Co-organizer Bryden Ka‘auwai said that Youth Talk Back inspired him to start a change club at his high school. “As I watched young leaders from across the state gather and discuss about issues they wanted to take action on, I instantly knew that they were passionate leaders,” he said. The change club allows students to speak up on important initiatives such as bullying prevention. So far, the student leaders have worked to coordinate school events encourage more student participation.

Puha Stream Restoration

A team of Youth Talk Back students from Mālama Honua Public Charter School decided to restore Puha Stream in their hometown of Waimānalo. The students gathered 50-100 community members as well as various community partners to lend a hand in clearing trash, removing invasive species, and replacing them with native species.

Co-organizer Kaila‘i Vickery explains: “At first when we started thinking about our action plans we started looking at issues in the community. We then decided that our Waimānalo beaches have trash and are dirty and wanted to do a beach clean-up. While researching beach clean-ups we found out that a source of pollution comes from the streams. We then decided to do a stream clean-up to try minimize the amount of trash and pollution going on our beaches and into our oceans.”

Co-organizer Kamali‘i Akiona adds, “This brings peace within me when I work and get the job done, peace with others because I can work with them to get it done, and peace in our community because we can get to know about each other when working.”

The Role of Ceeds of Peace

Ceeds of Peace is the umbrella organization in which Youth Talk Back is embedded. It is one of many programs, which include teaching peacebuilding skills to parents, teachers, community members, and youth. Ceeds of Peace’s goal is to create movements in communities, both those designed by Ceeds of Peace and also movements to inspire others to design and launch on their own initiatives. We hope to create a generation of peacebuilding leaders who will usher us into a more compassionate, courageous, collaborative era for our community and beyond.

Ceeds of Peace aims to take a proactive approach to peacebuilding and community health, focusing on preventing the underlying issues that threaten peace and community health. For instance, violence “threatens the lives and physical and mental health of millions of people, overburdens health systems, undermines the development of human capital, and slows economic and social development.”⁵ Instead of designing responses to issues like bullying and violence, Ceeds of Peace focuses on developing youth and adults who are compassionate and engage in kindness instead of bullying and violence, and are courageous enough to be upstanders when they recognize bullying and violence.

This proactive approach is evidence-based and stems from the World Health Organization’s (WHO) series of briefings on violence prevention programs. The briefings showed how programs that address underlying causes and risk factors can reduce the frequency of violence-related outcomes by up to 50%.⁶ According to author Rachel Davis, “violence and trauma are linked to the onset of chronic diseases and mental health problems, and caring for chronic diseases represents the costliest and fastest-growing portion of healthcare costs for individuals, businesses, and government. Yet violence is preventable, and prevention is of great value by any criteria.”⁷

There are a number of methods to prevent violence. Ceeds of Peace does not necessarily prescribe or prefer a single one as the sole solution. Rather, as explained by Urosevich and Soetoro-Ng, “Ceeds of Peace helps local communities and educational institutions raise future peacebuilders by encouraging cultural values such as dialogue, collaboration, mindfulness, and courageous action. [Ceeds of Peace] emphasizes action because it is never enough to state commitments to change. People must move on their commitments. Leadership for a sustainable future is not a matter of acquiring a particular political mindset; it is about crafting a daily practice of action and service.”³ Through this focus on action planning, organizers are able to bring out the best ideas from their communities which are culturally-relevant to the specific needs of each community.

Building Health in Hawai‘i Communities

Along with reducing violence, Youth Talk Back and other programs that promote both individual and community empowerment are also likely to lead to better individual and community health. The protection of vulnerable community members and designing and adapting activities to address and reflect unique community needs are not only peacebuilding priorities, but community health priorities as well. Youth Talk Back allows the young people who know these issues well to address their communities’ unique needs. Such youth-led action can bring about important, meaningful, grassroots-driven community change immediately with the additional hope to be sustainable over time. Empowerment itself can promote health for youth and hopefully their communities as well.⁸

Conclusion

“What do you want to be when you grow up?”

As a child, this was the foundational question shaping my education, goals, and priorities. I was waiting until I was a grown-up to be something. Even in high school as I developed strong views on community and global issues, including environmental and social justice, I did not take any direct action. I believed that I was just a kid, too young, too immature, or too ignorant to play a part in changing any of the wrongs I noticed in the world. Instead, I aimed to succeed academically with the intention of being accepted into college, and to study enough to someday

make a difference in my community. I believed that change and peace had to be led by adults. After all, adults elect our government, have the money, and occupy positions of power.

While it is too late for me to be a child again, the Youth Talk Back participants in Hawai‘i don’t subscribe to the “*What do I want to be when I grow up?*” mindset. Instead, they have adopted the “*What problem can I solve right now?!*” mindset. They trust that they possess the keys to open dialogue and solutions to some of our most pressing issues. Not only do they believe that some of these movements for change and peace *can* be youth-led – they believe that they *must* be youth-led.

Will you join us? Please reach out to Scott Nishimoto at scott.nishimoto@ceedsofpeace.org or visit www.ceedsofpeace.org for more information.

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