

THE DECLARATION OF INTER-DEPENDENCE



A POLICY STATEMENT from the
YOUTH LEADERS' COUNCIL & YOUTHFUL ACTION COUNCIL
of the YOUTHBUILD USA AFFILIATED NETWORK



As presented at the Youthful Action Council
of the Ford Foundation on October 12, 1995

Introduction

We believe it is our responsibility as young leaders to think through the important issues facing our communities and our nation, and make proposals for changes that will improve the conditions in both.

When we refer to our communities, we mean all low income neighborhoods in which a significant percentage of children are being raised poor. We include and care about all races and ethnic groups.

The purpose of this presentation is to share our view of what types of policy changes would diminish the need for YouthBuild and enable young people coming behind us to take a direct route to success instead of the round-about route that we have taken.

We are convinced that there is an equal balance between the responsibility and initiative that is needed from leaders and policy-makers who control the resources, and the responsibility and initiative that must be shown by the residents of low income communities who want access to greater resources and influence. We hope that we have managed to reflect that balance in this paper.

We believe that our communities and the larger society are inter-dependent. We cannot uplift our communities alone; nor can the society be healthy if our communities are left behind.

Basic Assumptions

- All people are created equal and have a natural desire to fulfill their potential and take responsibility for the well-being of themselves and the people they love.
- People are most likely to fulfill their potential and become contributing members of society if they have food and shelter, a loving family, positive peer group, opportunities for learning, an organized community, protection from violence, and something to believe in.
- Poverty, neglect, abuse, and deprivation of all kinds can prevent people from reaching their potential and enjoying life.
- Most people who have fallen off the track, suffered losses, and made mistakes can recover. If given a chance, they can learn to cope with obstacles and care effectively about themselves, their families, and communities. They can gain the skills and attitudes to become strong, successful leaders who will help others.
- We need more effective and caring leaders in our communities all over the world.
- We live in an interdependent world; all communities now affect each other.

Observations

We have each seen hundreds of YouthBuild students transform their lives. They become a positive force in place of a negative one. The key elements in that transformation are that people in YouthBuild truly care about each other. The staff open doors for us and support us in our learning. We can trust each other. We gain a positive peer group as well as adult mentors.

The opportunity to be part of a school and community in which people care about each other and teach positive values, leadership and life skills, academic and job skills, and respect young people's input should come much earlier in life; it shouldn't wait for a second chance program like YouthBuild.

YouthBuild has supported us in our determination to turn our lives around, and has provided the context for us to heal from many bad experiences. We are grateful for that. However, we would like to prevent the problem, so that fewer young people will need YouthBuild in the future.

In the meantime, it is important that YouthBuild programs are fully funded from year to year, and that young people who need this opportunity can get it. If YouthBuild programs are not funded, they are likely to fail, and then the policy-makers will say, "Nothing works. Programs like these are a waste," and will give up on us, again.

Diminishing the need for YouthBuild Programs

To diminish the need for YouthBuild programs, improvements need to be made in several arenas: the public school system; family supports; economic development in low income communities; the justice system; and the role of young people in our society. We have briefly addressed each one below.

PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM

Most incoming YouthBuild students have not completed high school. They left school for a variety of reasons. In some cases the schools failed the students; in others the students failed themselves. Sometimes it was a mixture of both the schools and the students failing. But in any case, it is necessary to change the public school system so that more youth have a successful education.

If the public schools operated the way a successful YouthBuild program does, then more students would have the experience of crossing the stage to receive their diplomas. A good YouthBuild program works because the following is true:

1. The teachers and staff really care about us; they go above and beyond the minimum. Teachers make sure we learn what we're supposed to learn.
2. YouthBuild students don't slip through the cracks, because classes are small. The teachers know us. The whole school is small enough for us to be at ease with each other.
3. The curriculum is not just academic work. It includes hands-on projects, community service, sharing with each other, learning about our heritage, and studying society. They teach us leadership skills and attitudes.

4. We feel safe to ask questions in front of each other, and to help each other; we become a community committed to each other's success.
5. The academic curriculum is connected to a vocational curriculum, so for those of us who are eager to prepare for a good-paying job and are not planning to go to college, the path is there.
6. If we want to go to college, we are encouraged to do so, and to succeed.
7. We participate in making the policies governing the program, so the policies match our needs.
8. The staff teach us self-transformation, life skills, conflict resolution, how to deal with real world problems.

We tried to select one key issue that would make the difference, but decided the above elements are interconnected. They all need attention.

To achieve the above in the public schools in our communities, we believe the inequalities in funding of the public schools in low income communities compared to suburban and wealthy communities would have to be corrected. If education is the key to escaping the culture of poverty, as we believe it is, then our nation needs to invest in the education of low income children. But money alone will not do it without a caring community in the schools, good teachers, and interesting curriculum.

FAMILY SUPPORTS

Young people are unable to focus on our education or our future when our families are struggling or even failing to provide the basics due to a lack of resources in the community or a lack of knowledge among our parents about how to access the resources that do exist.

1. Parents need information about how to access decent jobs, food and shelter, and health care for themselves and their children.
2. Parents need good child care programs that are affordable.
3. Parents need support groups and training for parenting.
Knowing how to be a good parent is not automatic. Developing an awareness that our children learn from what we do more than what we say is important.
4. Foster parents should be well screened and trained.
5. Teenagers should be encouraged to delay having children until they are mature enough to provide a stable family.
6. Prevention of drug and alcohol abuse among parents is necessary for good parenting. If drug and alcohol abuse could be prevented the conditions in our communities and families would be drastically improved. Rehabilitation can sometimes help and should be available, but prevention is primary.
7. More collective responsibility from the whole community is needed.

COMMUNITY ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Living in a low income community usually means that not only do our families lack the information and resources they need, but the community itself lacks resources that could support our families. Our society should develop strategies for community economic development that would insure the following:

- 1) Jobs and careers for all. We believe the only sure way to prevent violence and crime is through education and employment. Police and gun control play a role; but jobs and education are ultimately the most critical factors.
- 2) Transportation to jobs must be available.
- 3) Enough decent affordable housing must be built.
- 4) People should have the chance to start businesses to become self-sufficient.
- 5) Access to low interest loans for home ownership and small businesses is important.
- 6) In cities, stores should be nearby for people to buy food, clothing, furniture, and books; in addition, parks, child care centers, hospitals, banks, libraries, and places of worship should be reasonably close by. In rural areas, better transportation systems are needed.
- 7) Police and teachers should have cultural diversity training.
- 8) People coming out of prison need work and education.
- 9) Prejudice and discrimination based on race, class, gender, and sexual orientation still need to be eliminated.
- 10) There should be opportunities for young people to participate and take leadership in their communities.

As members of any community, regardless of age, race, class, and gender, it is everyone's responsibility to rebuild our dilapidated communities and improve the quality of life within them. Mobilizing residents to get involved, to fix things themselves, is part of any good revitalization strategy. As they say where we come from, "The quickest way to get on your feet is to get off your ____."

THE JUSTICE SYSTEM

Crime and violence fill our communities with fear. We have said in other sections of this presentation that education and employment, good parenting and child care, collective community responsibility, and the prevention of drug and alcohol abuse are the keys to crime prevention.

We also believe that people who have committed crimes should have a second chance for education, training, and employment. Having large numbers of ex-convicts return to their communities with no access to education and employment is a recipe for more crime.

Convicted felons who have demonstrated a commitment to a positive life style should get back the right to vote. Information about how to do this should be widely available.

The huge investment in prisons that our nation has made is frightening to us, especially coupled with the failure of our public schools and the absence of a plan to invest fully in education and training.

We are aware that young people of color receive relatively heavy penalties for certain crimes. We believe that inconsistencies that are associated with racial or class background in the severity of punishment for comparable crimes should be corrected.

We are also aware that during our lifetimes the gap between rich and poor has widened, despite our national prosperity, and the concentration of wealth among the richest people has increased. These are the wrong directions for a nation committed to justice and opportunity for all.

Our experience with the justice system is extensive. It would require a separate paper and much additional discussion among us to address it. Our emphasis here is on education, family, employment, community economic development, youth involvement, and personal and collective responsibility as the central building blocks of an approach to change our communities. This approach would probably also shrink the resources absorbed by courts, prisons, probation systems, private security, and police.

RESPECT FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

Everyone relating to young people should show respect for our intelligence and our ability to contribute. Young people want to feel ownership, and that our ideas and input can make a difference. We want to participate in making important decisions that affect all aspects of our lives.

Young people also want opportunities to give back. One of the reasons students like YouthBuild is because we make a difference by building permanent housing for homeless people. We also enjoy tutoring and mentoring younger children, and helping other people of all ages: for example, by sponsoring activities for the elderly, providing food for people who need it, helping victims of cancer, AIDS, or other illnesses.

YouthBuild teaches us that leadership is taking responsibility for making things go right in our lives, our families, and our communities. Being invited to take a leadership role is a high level of respect, that gives us a high level of responsibility. It allows us to feel pride in giving back to our communities.

Making Sure that the Gains of YouthBuild are not Lost

As current trainees and graduates, we know that after graduation from YouthBuild we have to work even harder to succeed. We graduate with positive attitudes and a vision. We have the beginning of a positive track record. We even have a new sense of security based on our connection with YouthBuild. But in reality we have little or no economic cushion of security—no savings beyond our AmeriCorps college grants and almost no financial support from our families.

Many of us face peer pressure and temptations to return to previous patterns of behavior. This is why we are systematically organizing YouthBuild alumni clubs—to maintain a positive peer group, access to opportunities, and a commitment to our communities.

To help us keep our focus and move to higher levels of achievement and responsibility, certain additional opportunities will make a big difference in supporting YouthBuild graduates and others like us:

- 1) We need access to higher education and post-secondary vocational education. The AmeriCorps grants we earn through YouthBuild are valuable. Scholarship assistance of all kinds, and information about how to tap into it, is one of the most important things to us.
- 2) Careers. Entry level jobs are necessary starting points, but we are interested in careers. We seek employers who will continue to train, educate, and promote us, and generally recognize our abilities. We need jobs with health insurance and a future. While

some of us will enter the construction trades, some of us want to become counselors, teachers, and directors of community programs, and others have entirely different goals.

- 3) Really good child care programs are necessary for us to work and raise a family.
- 4) Affirmative action should not be eliminated.
- 5) We aim to own our own homes. Low interest loans and grants for affordable housing is essential. Habitat for Humanity has already helped some of us obtain our own homes.
- 6) Access to information and money to help us start our own businesses is vital.
- 7) Access to the internet and information about how to use it is necessary. Libraries and community centers that have this are helpful.

Our Action Plan

People listening to this presentation may say, "This is all well and good. The question is how is it going to be achieved? What's your plan?"

It will take people working at many different levels and in many different positions. We hope you will use your influence to move a broad agenda for diminishing poverty and despair. We will do our part at our level.

Community development begins with personal development. We are committed to continuing to improve ourselves.

We are also organizing YouthBuild alumni to stay involved: as block captains, mentors, coaches of sports teams for younger children, members of the local PTA's, liaisons with the police, candidates for local office, volunteers in hospices for parents handling serious illnesses of their children, foster parents, etc. Tomorrow morning 1000 YouthBuild students and alumni will gather at Riverside Church to hear this message and commit themselves to giving back.

Further, as our alumni clubs develop, we imagine each club organizing other residents to define the community's problems, devise solutions, and implement those solutions as a group. For change to occur, there must be initiative and responsibility at the grassroots.

In Closing

We have learned to love ourselves and each other. We care about the young people coming behind us. We want to help prevent them from having to go through what we went through before YouthBuild. We care about our children, the ones that are already here and the ones that are yet to come. We see no reason why this wealthy country can't find the means to make sure that every child and every parent get the opportunities they need to fulfill their potential and accomplish their goals in life. That should be our goal for the new millennium.

We have watched some of our parents and grandparents play by the rules, work too hard, and still end up financially unable to help their families in trouble. We don't want this to happen to us. If we work hard, maintain a positive attitude, and give back to our communities, we have the right to share in America's prosperity.

We want to belong to a great movement to make sure that America offers real opportunity for all its people, in every community. At the same time, we want to help our communities get organized to take responsibility for their own future well-being.

As future community leaders, in the spirit of inter-dependence, we hope to work hand in hand with government, business, non-profits, religious organizations, unions, and local residents to transform our communities as we have transformed our own lives.



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Community Counts



HOW YOUTH
ORGANIZATIONS
MATTER FOR YOUTH
DEVELOPMENT

PUBLIC
EDUCATION
NETWORK

BY AMELIA BREYER AND MARGARET LUTHE



Recommendations for Community, Youth Organizations, Schools, Funders, and Policymakers

How can communities count for youth development?⁹ Support for effective youth organizations will require a coordinated effort across sectors and interests. City councils need to get involved. Schools need to act, as do diverse community groups, funders, and youth. The

following is an attempt to translate the previous arguments and findings into action steps. The long-term strategies indicate the support youth organizations need to make community count for youth. The short-term strategies suggest beginnings.

You can download this publication at
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MEANINGFUL MEASURES OF YOUTH OUTCOMES

	LONG TERM	SHORT TERM
COMMUNITY	› Develop local capacity to assess the needs of youth on a regular basis. › Develop a local database of resources for youth development and concrete evidence of consequences for youth competencies and attitudes. › Make information on youth needs and community resources for their development a central element of deliberations on budgets and policies affecting youth.	› Involve youth and community in identifying, documenting, and assessing opportunities for youth and supports for youth development.
YOUTH ORGANIZATIONS	› Document and share what you do specifically as it relates to learning outcomes. This does not only mean expanding the academic supports you provide, but studying and understanding how the work you already do with youth contributes to their performance in school.	› Document your successes with youth in terms that are meaningful to you as well as funders, schools, and other potential collaborative partners. › Conduct an inventory of opportunities to record work with youth as part of the regular day-to-day operation of the organization.
SCHOOLS	› Include the role of youth organizations in your assessments of what contributes to the performance of certain youth in school. › Recognize/reward youth for their participation in youth organizations. For example, consider awarding community service credit for community service performed through youth organizations.	› Help youth organizations access the public information you have on the school performance of the youth with which they work. This will help them document outcomes for the youth they serve.
FUNDERS AND POLICYMAKERS	› In evaluations and other reporting requirements for youth organizations that you fund, give credit for process as well as outcomes. Ensure the outcomes that you measure are meaningful measures of the performance of youth organizations, and ask for strengths-based outcomes. › Establish channels for ongoing dialogue with your youth organizations and other grantees about what outcomes you should reasonably expect a youth organization to achieve after certain periods of time.	› Fund the development of evaluations and evaluators who can work in youth organizations. › Help grantees negotiate evaluations and outcome measures that are perceived to be useful to the organization. › Conduct an inventory of data already available at youth organizations and other organizations that serve your neighborhood youth. Consider these sources of available information first when choosing evaluation and reporting requirements. › Support collaboration between communities and universities to develop local capacity to document and assess youth needs and the outcomes of CBOs.

SMARTER FUNDING AND POLICY STRATEGIES

	LONG TERM	SHORT TERM
COMMUNITY	› Offer a diverse "menu" of organizations and programs for youth. › Provide a web of reinforcing supports for youth that includes all the institutions that affect youth development. › Develop a local action-base for youth. › <i>Make youth a line item in the community budget.</i>	› Identify assets for youth within the community in terms of caring adults, spaces for programs, and expertise that can assist youth organizations.
YOUTH ORGANIZATIONS	› Develop environments that are youth, knowledge, and assessment-centered. › Establish systems within the organization to document and share promising work. Important documentation includes day-to-day practices, outcomes for youth, and actual program budgets.	› Access resources needed to provide high-quality programming. This may include formal professional training, visits to other youth organizations, and joining professional associations. › Familiarize funders and schools with the organization's work. Invite them to open houses, tours, and performances by youth. › Conduct an internal assessment of points in the day-to-day operation of the organization where work with youth can and should be documented. › <i>Expand board membership to include youth, school principals, school district personnel, foundation program officers, and representatives of city/county government.</i> › Begin to establish relationships with the schools your youth attend and other eligible recipients of state and federal after-school funds.
SCHOOLS	› Include youth organizations as integral parts of strategies to improve learning. › Provide incentives for teachers to learn about their students' work in youth organizations. For example, support professional development time and stipends or credits to visit youth organizations and other non-school settings where youth learn. › Develop curricula that integrates community resources for learning and teaching.	› Include youth organizations and other community organizations in assessments of resources for learning. › Establish a dialogue with youth organizations in the neighborhood. › Participate in community meetings. › See schools as providers of last resort for after-school programming. › Encourage students to share their work in youth organizations during the school day. Publicize the work of students in youth organizations. Consider devoting a regular portion of your newsletter and school bulletin boards to news of local youth organizations. › Offer space to youth organizations for performances, art shows, sports, and other activities.

SMARTER FUNDING AND POLICY STRATEGIES

FUNDERS AND POLICYMAKERS

LONG TERM

- › Fund people, not just programs. This may mean restructuring funding streams around fellowships for youth workers and directors, and/or making funding more discretionary.
- › Fund intra- and inter-city networks of youth workers and youth organizations.
- › Support development of alternative pathways of training and credentialling for youth workers.
- › Reframe policy debates around after-school programming. This may include making community-based organizations eligible for federal and state after-school dollars typically reserved for schools.
- › Ensure that community-based organizations are aware of and applying for available after-school funds.
- › Fund ongoing operations, not just start-up costs. This may involve educating youth organizations and other CBOs about how they can access existing funding streams in education and other areas.
- › Work with funders of similar programs to streamline or otherwise coordinate grant application procedures and eligibility requirements. Pursue the feasibility and usefulness to applicants of releasing joint requests for funding.
- › Create a local education fund to advocate for school and community improvements at the public policy level.

SHORT TERM

- › Make a pool of private funds available as grants or loans to draw down public funding.
- › Learn about youth organizations in the community/jurisdiction. Participate in community meetings.
- › Identify intermediary organizations and other potential convenors of youth workers.
- › Set broad goals for after-school programs and policies. For example, be flexible on the number of youth served, hours of operation, and type of activities provided. The main criterion for funding should be that applicants demonstrate that their approach to after-school programming matches the needs, resources, and contexts of the youth they intend to serve.
- › In grant applications, ask youth organizations and their partners to conduct an assessment of their community needs and strengths related to these goals. Ask the youth organizations, schools, and other community agencies how they will build on these strengths and address some of these challenges.
- › Make planning grants or other funds available to schools and youth organizations to conduct community assessments.
- › Actively collect information on what youth organizations do to support learning.
- › Put representatives of youth organizations on your advisory boards for your programs in education, as well as community development and youth development.
- › Research and make connections to other grantmakers and policymakers with similar goals and applicants.

INSIGHT
THE
INDEPENDENCE
STRUGGLE
RELATIONSHIPS
TO BE
INITIATIVE
STRONG
CREATIVITY

True stories by Teens About
Overcoming Tough Times

HUMOR

Edited by

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MORALITY

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INTRODUCTION

A Way Out of "No Way Out"

by Veronica Chambers

Where does it come from—the ability to be strong? How do you struggle to survive when it feels like you've been born in the wrong skin, the wrong body, the wrong family, the wrong neighborhood, or on the wrong side of the tracks? How do you make your way when grown-ups, who are supposed to take care of you, fail miserably at their jobs? How do you try to move forward with your life when your parents, friends, or the kids at school don't know where you're coming from or what you have to deal with every day?

The teenage authors of *The Struggle to Be Strong* don't have all the answers, but they do a hell of a job wrestling with the questions. The wisdom they've gained is what makes this book so powerful, and what can help you face tough issues as you move toward adulthood. These thirty stories offer many lessons learned, from Yunique Symone's painful reckoning with her drug-addicted mother in "I Don't Know What the Word Mommy Means" to Artiqua S. Steed's exploration of interracial dating in "I'm Black, He's Puerto Rican . . . So What?" to Tamara Ballard's story of becoming tight with a girl she never thought she'd be proud to call sister in "She's My Sister (Not Foster)."

These stories first appeared in two youth magazines in New York City called *New Youth Connections* and *Foster Care Youth United*. The young writers wrote their stories to help teens like you with similar problems and stresses. No matter what your life is like, the stories can help you realize your own strengths so you can face the future with greater confidence.

As you read these stories, don't think these kids are different from you—that because they're published in a book, they're somehow more special or together than you are. They've dealt with many of the same difficulties and challenges you've dealt with, and there's no shame in having problems. When you find ways to

struggle through your challenges, you're already more remarkable than you may realize. The very things that seem to be ruining your life right now—having trouble controlling your anger, having an alcoholic parent, being too shy to make friends, living in a foster home—may be the very things that will give you the strength to face and deal with future obstacles as they come your way.

A person who keeps going despite hardships and setbacks, who learns positive, powerful lessons from these experiences, is a person with resilience. Resilience means inner strength. Since this is a book about resilience, in a way it's a book for everyone, because we all have the ability to bounce back from setbacks, disappointments, and loss. But this book will be especially valuable to young people who have had more than their share of troubles.

I know, because when I was sixteen, it seemed like there was nowhere for me to go but straight down the gutter. I had moved out of my mother's house because I didn't get along with my stepfather. Then when I moved in with my father and stepmother, the abuse just hit a whole new level. I spent many nights at the homes of friends, working in restaurants as a bus girl so I could get something to eat, or just walking the streets, hoping nobody would see me or hurt me.

I used to look at reruns of old TV shows like *The Brady Bunch* and think, "I bet every one of those cabinets in that TV kitchen has food in it. I bet those kids are never hungry." I liked school, but it's hard to study when you're afraid to go home. By the time my junior year rolled around, I was just trying to make it through each day. I had always dreamed of going to college, and I carefully avoided both sex and drugs because I didn't want an unplanned pregnancy or an addiction to derail me as they had some of my friends. But the question I had to wrestle with was: If I couldn't finish high school, if there was no safe place for me to live while I finished high school, how was I ever going to make it to college?

If you have a dream for your life, and if you try hard enough and you knock on enough doors, eventually you'll find what you need. With the help of my guidance counselor, Mrs. Chatmon, I applied to and was accepted at Simon's Rock, a college for kids who want to go to college early. I just knew that if I didn't find a way out of my situation, I wouldn't survive. My dream was to go to college,

THE STRUGGLE TO BE STRONG

but the longer I stayed in my abusive household, the more I felt the dream slipping away from me.

So I went to college early, and it saved my life. Without really being fully aware of it, I was taking initiative, forming relationships, and trying to become independent. That's what the authors in this book, who are no different from you or me, have done in their lives. They haven't always succeeded and their problems haven't completely disappeared, but they have gained strength and grown through their efforts.

I once read something I've never forgotten. Angela Davis, scholar and activist, was talking about the Black Power movement of the 1960s. Here's the gist of what she said: "The thing we didn't understand back then is that freedom is an inside job."

I believe that with all my heart: "Freedom is an inside job." It may take you years to change your outside world and realize your dreams, but it's within your power to change your heart and mind. You might not think you have the power to change whatever in your life is causing you pain. But these teenage writers provide some valuable clues about how to begin tapping into that power.

Resilience isn't one specific magical quality that you're either born with or not. There are many kinds of resilience, and all of them can become part of you. This book is about seven kinds of resilience identified by Sybil Wolin, coeditor of *The Struggle to Be Strong*, and Steven Wolin. Together, the Wolins founded Project Resilience to conduct research and provide training in resilience. Learning about these resiliencies can help you think about ways you struggle to be strong. Each suggests actions you can take to survive, grow, and learn from the difficulties in your life. The seven resiliencies the Wolins identified are:

- Insight, or Asking Tough Questions
- Independence, or Being Your Own Person
- Relationships, or Connecting with People Who Matter
- Initiative, or Taking Charge
- Creativity, or Using Imagination
- Humor, or Finding What's Funny
- Morality, or Doing the Right Thing

INTRODUCTION

You may feel you already have many of these resiliencies. Or you may feel you have none of them—or only one or two, in the tiniest portions.

Don't worry. It's not how often you act in these ways that counts—rather, it's your willingness to *build on what you've got*. You can learn to recognize what your strengths are and use them for all they're worth.

This book isn't called *Triumphant Stories of Teenagers with Unbelievable Will and Might*. It's called *The Struggle to Be Strong*, and the key word here is *struggle*. Struggle means making the effort to be strong. You have the power to "walk out" your anger, as Tamara Ballard did. You have the power to step in and be an example to your brothers and sisters when your parents are behaving irresponsibly, as Charlene Johnson did. You have the power to befriend someone living with AIDS, as Max Morán did.

If every day you do one little thing to make your life better, then guess what? You win. Because if you make that effort every day, your life will change. As teen writer Lenny Jones puts it, "If I told you half the things I was able to bounce back from, you'd be mortified." Still, Lenny insists, "But you know what? Things always get better."

That's what the stories in this book are about. By reading them, thinking about them, and trying to see how they relate to your life you can, as Lenny says, find "a way out of 'no way out.'"

Veronica Chambers is the author of several books, including the young adult novel *Marisol and Magdalena* and *Mama's Girl*, a memoir. She has worked as an editor for *Premiere* and *The New York Times Magazine*, and is presently an editor at *Newsweek*. She is a graduate of the Youth Communication writing program.

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Subject: article of interest related to teen conference

In case you didn't see this, just thought this might be of interest:

Washington Post
March 17, 2000

Tactics for Raising Teenagers
Scared by Columbine, Parents Flock to Workshops, Forums

By Emily Wax

With her paper name-tag slapped on her fuzzy pink sweater, Mary Ann Moran stood in front of a group of concerned-looking parents. She read off a series of questions: "What assumptions do we make about our teenagers? Are they competent members of the community or are they aliens?"

Silence filled the room.

Some parents looked down. Others still dressed in their work clothes sighed and rubbed their eyes. She posed another question to the Arlington group: "Are we the people who can make a difference with our teenagers? Yes or no?"

Another moment of silence. Some more folks rubbed their eyes, until the awkward stillness was broken with a resounding chorus: "YES!"

Parents across the Washington suburbs are gathering in record numbers for evening workshops like this one, according to counselors, community groups and school officials. The programs center on an age-old question: How do parents communicate with teenagers and become a part of their lives? Although the problem is a familiar one, the hunger for answers has grown noticeably since the Columbine High School shootings last spring, parenting experts say.

"We don't know what our kids are doing," said Jeysi Aguilar, explaining why she came to the recent forum in Arlington with her 12-year-old daughter, Nancy. "I don't want her to push me away and live in a world I don't know about. Maybe I can learn something here."

The getting-to-know-your-teen workshop dates to the 1980s in concept, but the sessions have become more common in the last year, said Rob

Guttenberg, director of parenting education for the Bethesda-Chevy Chase YMCA, which is sponsoring several forums on parenting teenagers and preteens.

This month, for example, a worried parent could choose among a seminar on "Talking With Your Teen to Build Self-Esteem" at the Jewish Community Center of Northern Virginia; a session called "Talking About the Tough Topics With Your Adolescent" in Tysons Corner; and a workshop on adolescent issues called "When All Hell Breaks Loose . . . or Does It?" in Rockville.

"I've been speaking around the country and I can't even count how many forums I have given speeches to," said Patricia Hersch, author of the book "A Tribe Apart: A Journey Into the Heart of American Adolescence."

"The question is," she said, "are they helping?"

Discussions at the meetings usually cover things parents have heard before. But several of the parents in attendance said they need to be reminded of the basics, because they get frazzled from long hours at work and stressful schedules. Some expect the workshops will provide a solution. Others are more dubious but feel that by going, they are at least doing something to try to understand their teenager.

"You feel happy that there is this type of help," said Trinidad Ayque, who attended a recent workshop with her 11-year-old son, Frank. "You don't want to be scared of your own child and just give up."

The workshops, sponsored by schools, libraries, churches and various private organizations, run as long as two hours and typically draw at least 100 parents, although the audience often breaks up into smaller groups. One program usually involves several sessions.

Forums at the Bethesda-Chevy Chase YMCA encourage parents to praise their teenager for a job well done, even for a small effort.

During one session, Guttenberg made a parent crawl under the table, and the rest of the group had to persuade the parent to come out. They tried rewards, fear, guilt and punishment. Nothing worked. Eventually, one parent had an idea: They went under the table, too. That worked.

The exercise taught parents to try to see things from their teenager's point of view, something that many parents admitted they had never thought of trying.

"I think everyone is learning that the 'Do what I say' method does not work anymore," said Diane John, who has a 16-year-old daughter at Montgomery County's Walt Whitman High. "We don't live in an autocratic society. We need to find other ways to talk to our kids."

Pam Mintz, also the mother of a 16-year-old at Whitman, said the sessions helped her realize that her daughter wants to be treated like an adult, with respect.

"My daughter's biggest complaint is that I am condescending," Mintz said. "I guess I am just struggling to keep up with the person she has become."

At the recent session in Arlington, organized by the County Council of PTAs, parents broke up into small groups and discussed how to connect with teenagers.

John Word, the principal at Kenmore Middle School, offered this basic advice: "Smile at your teenager. Look them in the eye." A group leader wrote that and other ideas down on sheets of paper, as parents shouted out various suggestions.

A concern among some experts is that teenagers rarely come to the sessions, even though organizers usually encourage them to attend.

"What is missing are the students. What is missing is the acceptance that they have brains and thoughts on how to do this," Hersch said. "The workshops have to do more to include them."

The few teenagers who do come sometimes giggle and roll their eyes over the ideas being discussed. Some found it lame when a parent at the Arlington meeting suggested creating after-school programs with checkers and chess games.

"It's not like you can have an infomercial and hold up a book that says: 'How to Get Along With Your Teenager,' " said Lauren Cochard, an energetic and articulate 16-year-old who spoke at the session. "Trust, respect, you can't get that overnight."

She thought the advice was all well-meaning, and she was happy that parents were attending. But she also said the content of the workshops would be better if more teenagers were there.

Frank Ayque, 12, said he chuckled at some of the advice because it seemed so obvious. "We just want parents to respect and love us," he said. "That doesn't seem hard."