

The Power of Young People

| By Gabrielle Ratte Smith

Several weeks ago, I attended the *Healthy Communities, Healthy Youth* conference in Rochester, NY. It is an annual event coordinated by the Search Institute of Minneapolis, Minnesota. Search Institute is known for its work in identifying developmental assets. What is so amazing about this conference is its focus on youth and adults working together to empower young people to take positive action and make healthy decisions. Over 1,700 people attended, and over 500 were under the age of 21! Local youth from different Rochester-area high schools served with adults on the conference planning committee. The youth co-presented workshops, introduced keynote speakers, and were also keynote speakers themselves.

This is my fourth time attending this conference. Each time, I am reminded that today's youth are brimming with amazing talents, energy, and potential. Here is an example: A young man of 16, Ryan, decided ten years ago to raise money to dig a well for children in Africa who needed clean water. With the support of his parents, he raised over \$2,000. When he was nine, his parents flew with him to a village in Africa to see the well that had been dug with the funds he raised (Ryan continues to raise money and speak throughout the world - for more information on his story and his foundation, visit www.ryanswell.org).

Ryan was scheduled to be the keynote speaker for one of the plenary sessions. He was delayed crossing to the US from Canada, and we were told that he would not be able to speak (fortunately, at the last minute, Ryan was able to clear US Customs and give his speech). The conference planners improvised. They brought up a man and his teenage son to share their story. Two years ago, the man went to the Healthy Communities, Health Youth Conference in Dallas, TX, where he heard an inspirational story of a young man who was raising money to help children. The dad bought the young man's book about his work and charitable foundation and gave it to his son. The son was so inspired that he took the initiative to explore the foundation website and decided that he wanted to raise money to build a school in a developing country. After some convincing, his parents got behind him and together they raised the funds needed to build a school – over \$6,000. The construction of the school is now underway. This middle school student got up in front of 1,700 people and told his story without any rehearsing.

Here in Essex, we have so many of these kinds of stories! You may have heard the story of our skate park, currently under construction at Essex Junction Recreation and Parks. According to an article in the Burlington Free Press on October 9, 2007, Patrick Carton, then a fifth grader at Fleming Elementary School, wrote a school essay advocating for a local skate park. His parents supported him, and together with community donations (including Town and Village funding), his dream will be a reality in 2008, when the first phase of the skate park is scheduled to open (for more information on the skate park, go to www.ejrp.org). How many more of these stories about our youth do you know? Share those stories with your friends, your neighbors, with other young people.

All of these stories relate to developmental assets, which are positive experiences and personal qualities that young people need to mature into healthy, caring, and

responsible adults. The Search Institute has been conducting extensive research and evaluation of developmental assets for 15 years. Forty assets have been identified so far (for more information on the Search Institute and development assets, go to www.search-institute.org). The 40 assets are grouped into eight main groups: Support, Empowerment, Boundaries and Expectations, Constructive Use of Time, Commitment to Learning, Positive Values, Social Competencies, and Positive Identity. The assets are being used throughout the United States and in many countries overseas as a framework for interacting with young people, creating effective youth programs, and engaging youth in their communities.

In Essex, we are fortunate to have a terrific local organization, Essex CHIPS (Communities Helping to Inspire People to Succeed) that promotes the 40 developmental assets in everything they do (for more information, go to www.essexchips.org). CHIPS is supported in many ways by many local agencies, including the Village of Essex Junction, Town of Essex, Westford, Essex Police, and Chittenden Central Supervisory Union.

So how can you be involved in asset building in our community? Peter Benson, President of Search Institute, often reminds people that building assets is not a program. It doesn't require taking a workshop or class, buying a book, or being a youth development expert. Assets are built through interaction with one another. At the conference, as an asset-building activity, the participants were given blue ribbons and asked to put them on the nametags of others who have touched them through their actions, words or examples. More importantly, we were reminded that we don't need a ribbon to take a minute to acknowledge someone who has affected us by a kind word or taking the extra time to be thoughtful or responsible.

Take that minute to tell a neighbor, friend, family member-especially a young person-that you noticed what they've done and appreciate it. It matters.