



NATIONAL LEAGUE OF CITIES
Institute for Youth, Education, and Families

Youth Leadership: Transforming Youth Voice into Community Action
December 18, 2002

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Speakers:

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Branson Heinz - former member of the Youth Council, Waco, Texas

Richard Goll - President, Onsite-Insights, Hampton, Virginia

KYLE: I am John Kyle with the National League of Cities' Institute for Youth, Education, and Families. This is our 15th in a series of audioconferences. Today's topic is "Youth as Leaders," and is brought to you through support from MetLife Foundation.

What elements of leadership do we see youth developing and how can communities help that develop? How can youth leaders help communities develop? What kinds of relationships and communication challenges and opportunities are there between young people and adults in helping to exert and emphasize leadership in their communities?

We have a distinguished panel of folks to help us talk about this today. First of all, we have John Bell, who is the director of the Training and Learning Center at YouthBuild USA in Somerville, Mass., and Rich Goll, who is the president of Onsite-Insights in Hampton, Va., and Melett Harrison, who works for Neighborhood Services in the City Manager's office of Waco, Tex., and also coordinates the Youth Council there, and Branson Heinz, who is a former member of the Youth Council in Waco and currently a freshman at Texas Christian University.

I'd like to get started with what we think youth leadership is. Melett, you've been working with young people for quite a while. When you talk about youth leadership, what does it mean to you?

HARRISON: From a Youth Council standpoint or from any standpoint, youth leadership is simply allowing youth a role where they can function as leaders and truly following their lead. That takes different formats, but I think it's really allowing them to be the leaders that they can be.

KYLE: Rich, how does that jive with what you're thinking about when you discuss youth leadership?

GOLL: To me the question is: what are the qualities that a young person needs in order to

be a good leader? To me, they are very similar, if not identical, to what adults need. I think primarily we're looking at somebody who is aware of what's going on around them and has the willingness and ability to make conscious choices about how and whether to respond. Being a good leader has other elements to it, but that's the basic thing -- knowing your environment and then wanting to do something about it.

KYLE: John, chime in with some thoughts.

BELL: YouthBuild works in about 200 communities with young people 16 to 24 who have dropped out of school. Leadership has been a primary component of our programs. We use a definition of leadership that goes like this: "Good leadership is taking responsibility and making sure things go right for yourself, your family, your program, and community."

I think sometimes young people, if not all of us, get trapped in a kind of traditional idea of what leadership is: the person out front making speeches, running the groups, doing that part. But we're trying to emphasize that leadership is taking responsibility. Therefore, everybody has a role, and everybody can play a leadership role. And when we do that, it tends to have more people stepping up to that leadership responsibility role.

KYLE: Branson, you're the youth expert in this group in that you are a young person. When you think about youth leadership, and especially when you hear adults talking about youth leadership, what does it mean to you? What do you think you're doing when we say, "you're being a leader?" What's that mean?

HEINZ: A leader is not just someone who can influence people and have a group of followers. One thing I've noticed over the years is that the most effective leaders have a diversity of things that they are good at and things that they participate in.

In my opinion, a good leader is someone who is honest and who will listen to what his followers -- I use the word "followers" for lack of a better word -- have to say, and will try the best to represent those people in the way that they feel that they should be represented. I think that a leader -- youth or adult -- by all means needs to exhibit qualities of benevolence. I think over my years on the Youth Council in Waco, that all of us got along real well, and that's another important thing in being a leader -- you have to get along with everyone that you're working with.

KYLE: Let me ask Rich to start off about how these definitions differ between adults and youth. Do you think that adults think differently about youth leadership than youth think about youth leadership? Or are they similar? And what are the differences, if there are any?

GOLL: Well, three things. One is I think that young people come at it with a lot less ego investment than adults do. So they're more natural, and they're more focused on what the outcome may be as a group than as an individual. Young people are much more comfortable having group interactions, and they're much more about relationship building than many adults who are in leadership roles. I think they also have a lot less practice at being in leadership positions, so I think that there's a difference there. But I think that lack of experience also makes them less jaded. The final thing is that they have fewer skills, so you really need to apply those skills judiciously and not put them any position where they'll be embarrassed. Putting anybody

in a position that they're not prepared for is inappropriate. So I think preparation is the key ingredient.

KYLE: John, do you want to add to this?

BELL: Yes, I like a lot of what he said. In YouthBuild, we made the assumption that young people come with lots of leadership experience. A lot of young people in YouthBuild have raised their younger brothers and sisters. They've been parents sometimes and had a family of their own. They have been members of other organizations, like gangs. They have security systems and market systems and protection systems on the illegitimate side because of poverty and racism that forces them into that role.

We invite them to bring those skills they've already come to in their life experience into the program on behalf of the community. We find that it's a shift we try to make with our staff. Rather than view young people, at least in the YouthBuild context, as clients or people needing services or having deficits, we view them as leaders or potential leaders. This really begins to shift how you talk to them and how you include them and the program that you design with them.

GOLL: I think that's a key point that John is making. Adults, in order to allow young people leadership roles, have to shift their focus away from "I'm doing this to help that individual" to seeing them as resources where that young person can then be able to help the community. That changes the whole thing -- it's a whole paradigm shift.

KYLE: How does this play out in your experience, Melett, working with young people over the past few years at least in Waco?

HARRISON: I would say briefly -- just about qualities of leadership that John touched on before -- we do have a very specific honor code/role model issue that the Youth Council drafted themselves. We expect them, and they expect themselves, to be role models in the community.

As far as what makes it happen and how do they view themselves differently than an adult might, I think it boils down possibly to being aware of style differences and keeping time in the context of older adults and young people. I know in our particular case we have to be very aware that a year is an entire world change in the life of many youth, particularly if you're talking about a senior in high school who may be going off to college. A year may be no amount of time for a city council or a school board or a community organization to discuss an issue and plan and work out details.

It's a matter of trying to make sure you keep in mind that youth are typically very savvy, very quick to come upon a solution, and very quick to get it implemented. They want to get it implemented and see something done in a timely fashion. Balancing the act of well thought out plans and getting something going is a trick, but it certainly can be done, and it certainly needs to be kept in mind.

KYLE: Branson, in terms of how adults have received input, advice, leadership from you and other youth that you've worked with over the past few years -- because I know you've been carrying out activities for a number of years -- how do you think the adults have been able to receive youth as leaders?

HEINZ: I can say that the City Council of Waco was very, very good in listening to us and taking our opinions. Overall though I kind of get the impression that a lot of the adults that I've worked with whenever youth try to be leaders, kind of give that, "Oh, isn't that cute?" statement and don't really take it seriously. That's one thing that kind of got to me. However, our City Council worked really well with us. They took us seriously, and they valued our opinions. I think that's one thing that's important. I think I can speak for a lot of youth when I say that we want our opinions to be valued, and we think our opinions are valid. But overall, I would say a lot of adults don't think that.

KYLE: Let me ask a follow up to Branson. Branson, why do you think the Waco City Council was able to listen? What do you think made it work for them to be able to listen and respect the leadership from youth?

HEINZ: I guess a lot of it has to do with our selection in a process that they approved of. We were the embodiment of what they wanted to be on the Youth Council. A lot of people don't have that luxury.

BELL: I just want to support Branson. In the general context that we're working in, the adult world generally dismisses the young people as fairly irrelevant to the affairs of the world. And sometimes we pay lip service.

I was the president of my school in high school. I don't know about the listeners here, but I know that we got to debate important topics like whether we had a Coke machine versus a Pepsi machine in the cafeteria and to plan the prom. But never were we invited to evaluate teachers or interview prospective staff or look at the curriculum or review textbooks or think about the policies of the school, which were substantive issues.

The leadership opportunities that the adult world creates for young people oftentimes are kind of secondary and not too important. I think young people come to internalize that "We're not really included." I did a workshop with people just two weeks ago, where I asked people just to yell out all the things -- these were adults -- that were essentially insulting that were said to them when they were young people. And it was hilarious and sad at the same time -- all the ways that young people are demeaned in their intelligence, their capability, their experience, their love relationships, etc.

So one of the things I think we're up against, all of us -- this is not a blame thing -- is that we have to really examine our own internalized attitudes toward young people. Because we all went through it ourselves, we internalize when we get older. We kind of pass those same attitudes back down the line inadvertently and perpetuate the situation of keeping young people excluded and not thought of as full participants in a process.

GOLL: A lot of that begins at the college level, where in our instruction of people who are going to be working with young people, they're continuously taught that their job is to provide, fix, or help, as opposed to partner, resource, etc. New people coming into this field almost always come in with the attitude of "I'm here to help or fix or provide, not to partner with." That carries over for years and years and years. Without that changing, it's very difficult for young people to break into the system because they don't have the power or the voice.

KYLE: How do you effect that kind of change, Rich? What will help adults be better able to accept partnering, cooperation, and collaboration with youth and help emphasize the leadership styles and skills that they have gotten?

GOLL: I think it's two problems. One, you have to begin by looking at the attitudes and respectfully helping them shift their view of young people from recipients or even objects to that of a resource. The second thing is we've got to give them the skills to be able to work effectively with young people. At the same time, you have to be giving the young people the same skills, because too many young people have never had the opportunity to be a leader or serve in that role, or come from families or situations that haven't encouraged that. They need to have the confidence built within them to be able to step up to the plate and make a mistake, and have the opportunity to try the things and get the skills to work favorably and effectively with adults.

So it's not "Oh, let's have a council and it's going to work great." It's a lot of work that is involved in it, as I'm sure people in Waco and all the other communities I've worked with know. The ones that have really worked out in long-term successes are those that have put the training component in it.

KYLE: John, give me some examples of skills that you think adults need. I think we maybe have a better handle on what skills we think young people need. But what do we think adults need and what are some ways of getting those skills out to them?

BELL: Well, one of the things we begin with is having adults look at their own youth. What were the obstacles? What was it like for them to be young? Where did they feel empowered and where did they feel disrespected and mistreated just because they were young? And they begin to realize, "Gee, I've just collected a lot of this information and I'm running it back out."

For instance, what's the second question after a person's name -- what's the next question we ask a young person? "How old are you?" because then we can categorize them. I try to say, "Never ask a young person his/her age unless there is some relevancy for a legal issue." Because if I know you're a seventh grader, I put you in a seventh grade box, or a seven year-old, and I forget, gee, Mozart was creating great pieces of music at age four and five. Or if you say you're 16, then I have a sort of set on you as a 16-year old and you have these issues and you're probably here. I forget that most of the great scientific discoveries of the Western world, at least, were made by people under age 20.

So partly it's being careful with our language. And secondly, it's listening, like Rich was saying. And thirdly, it's really trying as much as possible to reverse the power relationships, to not make the decision when it might take a little longer with young people. But to step out of the way, with guidance and training, and let it work so the people can exercise the muscle of leadership.

KYLE: Melett, Branson was telling us earlier that the Waco City Council seemed to be able to listen. Do you think these skills and issues that Rich and John have been talking about are ones that you've seen come up in Waco and got addressed in Waco? Or are there other aspects that you think have made a group of adults be more receptive to young people exerting leadership?

HARRISON: I think there is a combination of things. We were lucky to have a group of city councilmembers who were actually committed to the idea, not just in word, but in complete action. We had a few successes I would say right off the bat. They asked Youth Council to review some issues that were city related -- one being juvenile curfew, one being a park plan. The Youth Council came back with recommendations that the council embraced. That built an extremely solid relationship from the beginning that has continued to be more and more positive. It wasn't just take the youth recommendation at all costs. It was they knew that the presentations had been made, the discussions had been gone through and the sincerity with which the Youth Council recommendations were brought about. And it made for a trust in a relationship that was just critical in the beginning, I believe.

GOLL: Let me add. One of the things that I do with Onsite-Insights is every training is done in partnership with a young person. We co-facilitate together, and the young person isn't there just to say, "This is what I think." They're there as co-facilitators and trainers. In that process, the participants begin to see the real value and power of young people when given the authority and skill base to do a credible job. That helps them change their mindset, just as in Waco some successes that the Youth Council had helped the adult council go further. "Okay, this works. What's next?" And keep doing those opportunities so that young people can be put in those positions to succeed. And then when they succeed, they'll get more and more opportunities.

HARRISON: I think one thing I would add is that we try very hard to make sure the Youth Council feels comfortable in those positions. Some of them are very comfortable speaking in public. Some of them are not. We practice. We write it out. We make sure they know what they're going to say. And we keep it short and simple, which the City Council loves. And it makes everybody much more comfortable.

GOLL: I wish the adults would do that sometimes.

HARRISON: Yes, they often say that publicly.

BELL: What Melett says about the happy coincidence of open city council people and a process of substantive debate on the part of the young people's presentation really works well. We've done that in YouthBuild quite a bit.

For instance, we have a policy committee. Each individual YouthBuild program has a policy committee that's not the "Youth Policy Committee." Because if you name it the "Youth Policy Committee," it gets marginalized. It's the program policy committee that includes the director and staff representative and six to eight young people -- there are about 30 to 50 in a typical program. They meet weekly with the director. It's a balance of powers. For instance, they are involved in the hiring of future staff. They're involved in sorting out some personnel issues. They're trained to look at the budget because they say, "We'd like a new van to get to the construction site." The director will say, "Well, okay, that's an interesting idea. Let's look at the budget and see where it might come from. We have funders --." They're taught how to chair meetings, how to form an agenda -- not necessarily Robert's Rules, but ways to go for group consensus because you want to teach them a deeper process than just "majority rules" because that sets up polarities. But all of that does take a lot of time, as Rich was saying earlier

and as Melett was indicating, too.

I want to say one more thing -- young people think about a lot more than just youth issues. They're thinking about the range of issues that all human beings think about. So let's not pigeonhole them. They want to be partners in community development. They think about criminal justice issues. They think about public health and public welfare. Our National Alumni Council put together something called "The Declaration of Interdependence," saying, "we want an interdependent relationship with the adult world. We have a lot to give. You have a lot to give. Let's make a partnership and use our respective strengths and experiences and energies to solve the problems that we're facing in our communities and our country."

What we call "adultism" is the adult view of young people being pigeonholed into just youth issues. I think that's a miss for everybody.

KYLE: The experience that we have at the National League of Cities annual conferences is right on with that, John. The youth are talking about and apt to go to workshops on the whole range of topics that are being covered in the conference. In fact, I've heard from several people who attended our conference a couple weeks ago in Salt Lake City that some of the most articulate questioning in one of the general sessions that was focused on the nation's economy came from young people. They walked up to the microphones just like all the other delegates are able to do, ask questions. Frankly, one of the adults that was reporting this said, "I was scared. I was biased. I thought here's a kid coming to the microphone. What's he going to be able to ask?" And sat back with his jaw dropping open thinking "That's one of the best questions I've heard in any of these kinds of sessions. And it was not about a youth issue. It was about an issue. And this was a human being that had questions about it and was able to articulate them.

The second point in terms of this conference is that we try to describe it not as a youth conference, but as a conference at which youth delegates are able to attend just like other community delegates are able to attend. They were able to go to any of the sessions and so forth. What we've heard from adults is they have seen these youth in action and then gone home and said, "I need a youth council at home" or "I need to work more on youth leadership." That they had kind of marginalized it, put it aside because they thought of young people as either "their kids" or "their neighbor's kids" or "the kids who are in trouble." And none of that made sense to them in terms of developing a youth leadership program or creating opportunities for service.

We hope that our conference provides opportunities not only for young people themselves, but also for adults to get to know them a little bit, see them in action and say, "You know, I had an 'Aha!' feeling." I know in one case, the adults from a city in one state flew in youth from another city in another state to help train and get them going because they realized that this was a process, that it was important that this go on. But they got modeling from other young people. So there's a lot of value there.

GOLL: Milwaukee did that with us in Hampton. I think we're really going to know a community has arrived when they stop being surprised at the quality and quantity of youth participation. That's when a community can say they've made it.

KYLE: There is one thing I want to ask John about specifically, and then ask Branson about in terms of the peers that he's worked with through the years. There's a conception that I think is a misconception that the leaders are going to come from the "A" students, they're going to come from the two-parent families, they're going to be already exerting leadership. You're

going to know a leader because they're captains of the sports teams and they're on the student council and so forth. Tell me more about, as you mentioned earlier, leaders who are coming from other places and who are not necessarily part of a youth council, student council, or any group, even.

BELL: That's an important question. We work with young people who have been down a hard road, who have dropped out of school, who are all poor. Many have been in jail and been in the drug trade and all kinds of stuff like that. Yet, they are so similar to any young people who care a lot about things, but haven't had the chance to really do it in a positive context because of the conditions that they're faced with. It's what I keep coming back to -- it's mainly in our heads. The obstacles are mainly in our conceptualization of young people, and especially marginalized young people -- vulnerable, at-risk young people. We have to really change it and see them as tremendous resources for our communities. They have energy. They have ideas.

YouthBuild began in 1978 when we asked a bunch of young people in East Harlem, where we used to work, "What would you like to do to improve the community if you had some adult backup and some money?" Young people always have good ideas. The problem is the adult world doesn't usually listen because of the things we've been talking about. These youth had lots of ideas. We went away, and Dorothy Stoneman, the head of YouthBuild now and the former director of the Youth Action program, which this first program was, wrote a grant. And we came back, and we had seven organizing projects, all youth-driven with an adult sort of mentor backup to access some money, open some doors, and provide some experience they didn't have. But they really led it. And they had lots of good ideas. And the whole building construction thing that YouthBuild became was the idea of a young person who said, "Let's fix up these buildings so people can live in them."

If you have adults around who can really listen and take seriously the ideas and help them shape them into proposals and projects, they're going to take off. This is what I think we have to re-train ourselves to do. These are young people who are not your class presidents and "A" students. But they have tremendous capability, and they need confidence, backing, and an improved concept of themselves.

Just one more thing -- I used to do a lot of the staff training in the early YouthBuild programs. Early on in the program, I'd ask, "How many of you think of yourselves as leaders?" And maybe three or four out of 30 would raise their hands because they've had some leadership thing behind them. I would encourage the program to use leadership language and talk about taking responsibility and say, "Jose, thanks for cleaning up after the class today. That's a leadership responsibility -- that helps make this class go better." I would come back six months later, and I'd ask, "how many of you think of yourselves as leaders?" This time, maybe three-quarters of them would think of themselves as leaders. They're responding to our conception of them. They will rise to the level of expectation.

KYLE: Branson, tell me a little bit about the other young people that you've been with in high school and earlier, and now in college. Who do you think are the leaders and what is your view of the folks who were not the class president and the "A" students? Do you see examples of leadership too among other young people, or even young people that have dropped out of school in your neighborhood or your community?

HEINZ: I don't remember who said it, but you don't have to be a class president or the

captain of the baseball team or be on a youth council to be a leader. A leader, as I said earlier, is someone who is honest and takes responsibility and who can get along with other people.

I had a friend in high school that had twins and had to drop out of high school. The father of the twins had vanished and she was working three jobs to try and support her twins so they could have a decent home to grow up in and that they could have a parent to look up to. And I think that is an example of someone who is a leader -- someone who decides "there is something that has to be done and I have to do something about it." Someone who can take initiative and do something selfless like that in my opinion is a leader.

There is a guy in my Political Science class here whose opinions are very, very unpopular, not only with the teacher but also among the people in the class. He's a very liberal individual. He expresses his opinions, and he's not afraid to do so. Even though I don't agree with him, I admire that because he really believes in it, and he is willing to say what he believes in without having to have someone back him up. He's in it all by himself, and he is still willing to do that. That is an example of someone who is a leader. You don't have to be a proclaimed leader. Someone doesn't have to call you a leader to be a leader.

KYLE: Those are the points I was going for. Branson stated earlier, and now has repeated, some qualities of what he thinks we ought to be going for in a leader. He's mentioned honesty, responsibility, and the ability to get along. Can some of the others of you add to what you think the important qualities are? And then I want to get at how a community can encourage these qualities to exist. But first, are there other things that you think are the top three or four items on your list of what qualities a leader is going to have?

GOLL: I think if you're going to aspire to be in a leadership role, I agree with Branson. You can be a leader without aspiring to that role. But if you're aspiring to that role, you have to have that willingness. I see a lot of communities trying to pick kids to be leaders instead of allowing them to aspire to it naturally. I think that's a big mistake for a lot of communities. So I think the willingness to want to be a leader has to be one of the qualities that you look for.

I think also somebody that's willing to make mistakes and take risks and make mistakes along the way. And that's not everybody. There are a lot people who aren't willing to do that, and I don't think you can be a really good leader if you're not willing to do that. So those are two things that we try to train in our local community.

KYLE: John or Melett, would you like to add to this list?

HARRISON: Well, I think honesty and responsibility and the ability to get along with others, as well as a willingness to take the role, are all very good. I believe that there also needs to be some sort of inherent faith by the individual that what they are doing is the right thing to do -- a faith that they are doing the right thing and that other people will begin to believe if they just get out there and do a little something in the right direction. I think these go not just for youth, but for everyone.

KYLE: John, do you want to add to this list?

BELL: Yes, I frame it as "what does a good leader do?" And I think a good leader elicits the best thinking of the group. I think a good leader is absolutely reliable. She does what she

says she's going to do so people can count on her. I think a good leader builds unity in the group. That's part of getting along that Branson was talking about. I think a good leader offers proposals rather than complaints. This is a key thing a leader does. "Oh, yeah, we can do that. Let's think together." I think a good leader uses good process, listens well, gets people to take part in creating the unity and synthesizing with others. I think a good leader helps develop other leaders so it's not all dependent on him or her and knows their strengths -- the old idea that "too many cooks spoil the broth." I always say, "that means the broth is not complex enough." There is always room for more people to take leadership.

I think a good leader also opposes corruption, is known for integrity -- what other people are calling honesty. And I think a good leader also furnishes confidence to other people. "We can do this. Go ahead. Try it. Sure. Let's pick ourselves up and do it again."

KYLE: This is a two-part question. That's an impressive list of things that we think leaders should have. How do we go about encouraging that in our communities, in our local organizations, in our municipal government? How do we get to encourage this both among adults and among young people? We've talked about training a little bit. Is it just training? What do we mean by training? Are there other avenues that encourage and help to foster leadership? Rich, you're working with lots of communities around the country. What do you think about this?

GOLL: I think the biggest barrier that I face, again, gets back to the attitudes and the mindset of the adults. It begins with focusing on that. And unless you do that, I think the rest of it is not going to be very effective. I think once you have that group of leaders that are willing to shift that paradigm or that attitude, then you can go forward.

Another thing, especially in regard to municipalities, is that the officials are not trained to work with young people. So I think one of the ways that communities can be more successful is to find a partner within the community who has the knowledge, skills, and ability to effectively value young people and to work with them in developing the skills. Then, an assistant city manager isn't being asked to train these kids when that may not be his or her expertise. I think that's an important ingredient is finding partners that can do the things that you can't. I think it's real important to create opportunities where young people can give and receive. Youth councils are certainly one of them, but there are hundreds of other opportunities that have to be in place for those young people who feel youth councils aren't exciting to them or it's not what they want to aspire to.

KYLE: Who are the kinds of partners you've seen communities use to help do this?

GOLL: I think there are lots of groups out there getting involved in youth engagement. YouthBuild is certainly one of them. The 4-H has a major initiative. The YMCAs are now taking that on. But I also think there are a lot of the smaller non-profits. Hampton, Va., partners with a local youth-serving organization, and it does all the training -- its called Alternatives, Incorporated. That's a wonderful partnership that has really, I think, made Hampton a model community because they are willing to work in partnership. The city does what it does best, and this program does what it does best. So everybody benefits from that.

KYLE: Rich gives you a lead-in, John, about YouthBuild being a partner. You said

earlier that you're in 200 communities around the country. Can you give a profile of what kinds of communities you're in? And also talk about the kinds of partners you think might be effective. If I'm in a community, and I'd like to really do some encouragement of youth leadership, and I think I'm not particularly skillful yet, but there might be a partner, where should I look? Who should I look for?

BELL: Good question. I agree with Rich that the primary place to work with adults is on our attitudes, really shifting what our ideas of what young people are all about. We work in all kinds -- in urban, small towns, native reservations. So we're in all kinds of communities, of all different ethnic and racial backgrounds. And the issues of adults dominating, of young people being excluded, are truly in all those different contexts in one degree or another.

YouthBuild has a whole range of programs that understand this, from people who really involve young people from the beginning, even writing the proposals, to those who don't yet. And we have to do our work all the time within our context. I'm not claiming that we're perfect, but we understand it, at least from the central office here.

There is El Puente in Brooklyn, NY, that has been doing this kind of work, involving young people in significant leadership stuff for decades now. They're doing good work. [El Puente -- Spanish for "The Bridge" -- is a community and leadership movement, focused on peace and justice. For more information, contact 718-387-0404.]

There are other organizations I've seen. Roca, Inc. in Chelsea, Mass., is another one that I know personally does great work involving young people as advocates. [Roca is a grassroots, multicultural human development and community building organization. Roca's vision is of young people and families thriving and leading change. For more information, go to: <http://www.rocainc.org/>, email info@rocainc.com, or call 617-889-5210.]

YouthBuild has a program called "Youth on Board," specifically helping boards of directors in for-profit and non-profit organizations to incorporate young people in not just a token way, but in a legitimate way. [Youth on Board is a grassroots nonprofit that prepares youth to be leaders in their communities and strengthen relationships between youth and adults. For more information, go to: <http://www.youthonboard.org/>, email info@youthonboard.org, or call 617-623-9900.]

And going back to the things other people were saying earlier in the conversation, helping boards figure out how to time the meetings in ways that young people can be there, prepare the board for youth participation, work with the young people separately, and really begin to have cooperative relationships. Do things, as Melett was saying, that increase the adults respect for the thinking power of the young people.

KYLE: In Waco, Melett and Branson, what kinds of organizations have youth worked with? Who has the youth council been able to reach out to? Who are the community supporters of the council and the youth leadership activity? And which is the area you'd like to do more with?

HARRISON: I think basically we're constantly trying to build on that group. I would say we're four years into the youth council being in existence now, and we're still educating the public, the schools, and the youth of the community, about its existence and what it does. And trying to give them more of an understanding and to make sure everyone knows about it so they can be involved. We constantly rely on all of our different schools. There are nine different public

schools, three private schools, and a large home school association that have the potential for membership of some kind on our youth council. It's not just Waco ISD [Independent School District], but several different school districts and young people who can be involved. So communication with them is critical and key to our success. You've got to keep trying to reach those people and communicate with them. You can't say it enough. The good ideas can and do come from anywhere. The insight is not limited to years of experience. But you have got to go forward with what I call a change of mindset here.

Based on the Youth Council's success and based on how well the City Council has received their opinions and their input, we are now seeing them making recommendations of youth members on *all* advisory boards to the City Council. There has to be commitment of those boards to then be youth friendly to allow for scheduling, to allow for school related issues to take precedence if absences occur.

We tend to work with the schools first because we have such a great diversity there. But also any non-profits -- we have another program here in town -- a great program that Branson was also involved in called "Team Leadership Waco." It takes people from the entire county for one day each month to get a snapshot, if you will, of how the different governing agencies work -- the city, the county, different things in the city that are important to the way it functions, the Chamber -- those sorts of things. It provides them insight as to how the whole community works. Our Youth Council is much more of a concentration on how the city works and getting them involved in changing or enacting city policy for the betterment of everyone.

KYLE: Branson, what did you think of Youth Leadership Waco and that kind of experience? Was that helpful to you? What kinds of other folks were participating in it with you?

GOLL: Well, Teen Leadership Waco has a larger number of people than the Youth Council. Teen Leadership Waco is almost exactly what Melett said. It's kind of a snapshot of the different areas of Waco and different areas you can be a leader in Waco. Also, many volunteering opportunities came out of it.

One of the things I would say about Teen Leadership Waco is that you can kind of get a feel if there is a future job you might want. You have an idea of what that person does in that job. We'd go to hospitals, and we'd go to police stations. We even visited a prison. We visited all the city officials. You get an idea if there's something there in which you would be interested in the future. So in that way, the program is very beneficial. I don't know if there are bunches of other cities that have programs like that implemented. But they are very beneficial.

As far as groups that work with the Youth Council, Melett mentioned schools, and that is probably another pretty big one. When we select members, we don't just select youth from one area. The schools are very important because we want to have all the schools represented. I remember sometimes in the selection process there might have been two people, who were equally qualified, but one of them happens to live in a district or go to a school that we don't already represent, or maybe there's one other representative from that area. That's taken into consideration.

As far as the other groups in the community that work with us, we've done work with Habitat for Humanity. We've built houses. I went to Stephenville and Austin and spoke on behalf of the City of Waco for the quality of our water and some problems we've been having with the cattle industry dumping manure into the river that feeds into our water stream. So there

are many, many leadership opportunities and there are many groups that you can work with and many schools you can work with and many organizations that you can work with through programs like the Youth Council and Teen Leadership Waco.

BELL: I have two more things I'd like to say. One of the approaches that I found successful in getting adults to include young people is to help them think about the benefits of a youth leadership development approach for the individual, for the school, for a program, or for a community-based organization. For the individual, for the program in the community, there are lots of different benefits. For the individual, you have increased strength and self-confidence and skill, knowledge. It counters the feelings of powerlessness and opens doors for them.

For the program itself, if you're a non-profit youth program director, for instance, the program will make better decisions when they are informed by young people. You'll have more buy-in from the participants. That'll improve attendance and retention, and that brings positive public attention and therefore usually more resources to you in terms of fundraising and other kinds of supports. And that's always of interest to a director.

And then for the community, the benefit of a leadership development approach is the participants give back to the community. People become a positive force and become more engaged in community affairs. So sometimes that's a good approach to try when you have some people who are a little bit hesitant.

One last thing I'd like to say. In listening to our conversation, if I had the liberty of summarizing what I'm hearing, it's really important to *change* several things, to shift several things.

One is our language. Let's think about not calling young people "kids" because that itself is one of the "set you aside" categories, but call them "young people" instead.

We change our mindset, as Melett said. We change our expectations of what they're capable of. We change the opportunities for them to be involved. We change the skill development the way we're supposed to invest in them. We change the power relationships. And finally we change our level of respect, increase our level of respect, as adults to never again disrespect another young person in tone of voice or in attitude or in comments or any of the various ways that we inadvertently do it. Just to be aware of all these things.

KYLE: I want to give each of you a chance to do some summary remarks as we come to the close of this call. If there's a particular website or publication or resource that you want to leave people with as a place to turn to, feel free to do that.

This has been a great call. We're going to have a series of six more audioconferences starting in January. Upcoming audioconference dates and themes are posted on our website at <http://www.nlc.org/iyef>.

I want to also thank MetLife Foundation for supporting this particular audioconference. They're supporting NLC through our Youth-City Connection project. We're working not only with 11 individual cities, but also with providing materials and resources to a broad range of individuals and organizations across the country.

Let me go back around to our speakers and give them a chance to give a closing comment like John did, and he was very eloquent.

GOLL: For me, the thing that I would like to emphasize is that it works better when you focus on an outcome, and an outcome other than "it's good for young people." To give some

examples, in Hampton, young people and police officers started to work together in a true partnership in a neighborhood that had an increase in juvenile crime. Within a year, they reduced that juvenile crime by 54%. In a Bronx neighborhood that is 100% Laotian, the young people in that community worked with the non-English speaking parents of the young people there to help them stop getting ripped off by the system. They decreased jail time and decreased the poverty in that community. When young people in Kansas City, Kansas' school system took their developmental assets survey and found that they didn't think it was a caring climate, they turned that completely around. They also reduced suspensions and improved test scores.

In my own organization, Alternatives, which was one of the leading substance abuse treatment and prevention programs, I asked young people how to re-invent ourselves. They said, "Stop looking at us like drug abusers and start looking at us as leaders. Stop asking where we've been and ask us more often where do we want to go." The City of Hampton hasn't had a drug-specific treatment or prevention program since 1991 when we shifted, and every single year the number of drug incidents has gone down when the number in our sister city has gone up.

So those are the reasons why we're involving young people. It's because it makes a difference in the community. And I think that's where you start. You don't start with, "Well, wouldn't this be wonderful for kids?"

HARRISON: I sincerely believe that if you polled our City Council and asked them if the Youth Council has been a worthwhile endeavor, they would wholeheartedly, without exception, endorse it and recommend it to others. I think something that they have come to realize is that our youth council has been some of the best representation of our city as they go about representing the city in different public forums, at different conferences, and around the country. They have been tremendous assets for Waco's image and what we have to offer to the rest of the world.

Waco has a very young population -- about 30% of our population is under 20 years old. We have about 25,000 college age students here. That is something that is a reality for Waco. So when you have almost 50% of your population that's under the age of 25, gosh, you have something where youth is not only a tremendous asset for the community, but they are the majority voice. And I think there are some basic things you can do. You view them as the tremendous assets they are. Youth already believe they are invincible to a certain point. Give them some real authority with some parameters to operate in, boost their confidence by taking the recommendations they do provide and get out of their way a little bit and let them be the leaders that they can be.

KYLE: Branson, final words from you?

HEINZ: In my opinion, not only is working with youth in programs like the Youth Council beneficial, but it's also an investment for the future. If we train our young people today to be leaders, and to be good leaders, then to have organizations that will help them be good leaders is an investment for the future. They grow up, and they expand on their leadership abilities, as they grow older. Then they can also in turn do that for the next generation after that. I think that programs like the Youth Council, Teen Leadership Waco, and other programs I've been involved with are very, very beneficial. The Youth Council I would recommend to any city. It has not only helped me become a better leader, it has helped to make our city a better place for our youth. And our youth now have a voice in our city. It has been extremely, extremely beneficial.

And also, I just can't emphasize enough that if we have programs like these, today's youth will become tomorrow's leaders. That is probably what I want to close with.

BELL: I have a resource to share. YouthBuild has written lots of manuals and handbooks on youth leadership development coming out of our context, but a lot of it is applicable to lots of situations. If you want to check out our website, it's <http://www.youthbuild.org/>. You can download a materials order form.

The second thing is that we have the Academy for Transformation, where we offer different training around youth leadership development. And if you go on the website soon, you'll be able to find a schedule of events happening there. [The YouthBuild Academy for Transformation convenes youth workers, program directors researchers, and policy makers from the YouthBuild network and the wider youth and community development fields with the aim of researching, learning, and teaching about the most effective practices that support the ability of young people to transform their lives. For more information, go to: <http://www.youthbuild.org/academy/> or call 617-623-9900 x1243.]

It's been very enjoyable being with all of you and talking together.

KYLE: I want to thank all of you for being part of our audioconference today. This is John Kyle at the Institute for Youth, Education, and Families at the National League of Cities signing off for today, hoping you'll join us again in a future audioconference, or look for announcements and further information and other materials we have available at <http://www.nlc.org/iyef>. Thanks a lot, and I appreciate all of you being part of the call, both in the audience and on the panel.