

First Person

Full Scale Ahead

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How YouthBuild plans to help five times as many people **BY DOROTHY STONEMAN**

IN 1978, AS A NEW YORK CITY SCHOOLTEACHER hoping to mobilize low-income youth into a force for change, I asked informal focus groups of East Harlem teens how they would improve their community if adults provided the resources. They all said the same thing: They would rebuild run-down houses to create homes and take empty buildings back from the drug dealers. At that time more than 300 abandoned buildings blighted East Harlem, and thousands of idle teenagers and hundreds of homeless people roamed the streets, so their answers were compelling.

Soon thereafter, I founded the Youth Action Program and enlisted 20 young people and five adult volunteers. Our first project was a five-story abandoned tenement on 107th Street in East Harlem that was “in rem”—taken from its private owner by the city. It was a mess, full of garbage and rotting dead animals. We learned as we went, taking five hours to lay the first 14 bricks.

The Youth Action Program evolved into YouthBuild USA, which now consists of 226 local programs in 42 states engaging 8,000 students each year. In these programs, low-income 16- to 24-year-olds earn their GEDs or high school diplomas and learn job skills by building affordable housing for homeless and low-income people. They also participate in leadership development activities and build a supportive mini-community of peers and adults passionate about rebuilding their communities and their lives. Since 1994, 76,000 young people have produced 17,000 units of affordable housing in 226 of America’s poorest communities. Most of them have also qualitatively improved their own lives through education and employment and internalized the ethic of service.

Nonetheless, we’re still not meeting the nation’s need. Many local YouthBuild programs are turning away three to six times as many young people as they can take in; last year we turned away 14,000 applicants. Young people are knocking on our doors and we are forced to say, “Sorry, no room at the inn.” When I sat in the waiting room at YouthBuild Philadelphia Charter School in the summer of 2004, on the final day of admissions, many of the 800 young people not accepted were crying, and I vowed to try harder. It’s my job to open those doors wider.

To get from partial to full scale—and for us full scale means 50,000 students a year in 850 communities—YouthBuild’s federal funding must increase from \$60 million annually to \$1 billion over an eight-year period (or an average of \$125 million annually). Local programs will also need to raise \$250 million annually from state and local education and criminal

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justice funds for diploma-granting and reentry services, and from private funds.

How will we achieve this breakthrough? By going back to our past supporters, and by decisively stepping up our communications and advocacy to bring in powerful new allies.

PRIVATE FUNDS

YouthBuild would never have gotten to partial scale without private support. To get to full scale, we’ll approach all the private funders who have ever supported us and ask them to contribute to an \$85 million growth fund. This fund will strengthen federal and state advocacy, provide resources for quality assurance and innovation in an expanding field, support the next generation of research on program impact, strengthen the management capacity of YouthBuild USA to handle growth, and provide strategic grants to local programs.

We’ll also approach the new generation of billionaires and persuade them that the challenge of expanding an established but still inspiring program to full scale to help solve a critical social problem is as interesting, important, and feasible as replicating promising new initiatives in a few dozen locations. Many funders have been

attracted to the initial replication process because they consider it scaling, but few have committed to the more ambitious goal of expanding programs such as YouthBuild (which have already been successfully replicated and proven to work over time) to full scale.

We'll even revisit funders who in the past decade refused to invest in YouthBuild because it was "too big" and "already a government program," or because they believed it could lose federal funding at any time through a political decision and was therefore too insecure. This time we'll tell them that yes, we did succeed in creating a government program that is dependent on political decisions, but that this is a reason to expand support, not to avoid it. (In 1992 Sen. John Kerry and Rep. Major Owens helped us build bipartisan support in both houses of Congress to get the YouthBuild Act passed and \$40 million appropriated to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) for this new federal pro-

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gram. Every year since then, between \$20 million and \$65 million has been appropriated, thanks to the support of these champions, a mobilized constituency, and steadily expanding bipartisan congressional support.)

Having created a federal program at the \$60 million level does not solve the problem, meet the demand, or exhaust the capacity, we'll argue. We'll also point out that such expansion takes private investment in advocacy, communications, research, leadership development, and quality assurance. To maintain the quality and impact of a federal program, a national nonprofit must constantly negotiate with the federal government at every level and keep the entire grassroots network engaged at a high level of inspiration and connection with the mission. The nonprofit must also fill the government's gaps and correct its errors, and that takes private, flexible resources. In the unique public-private partnership that we have created, the federal government acts as the ocean liner that manages the taxpayers' funds, and we are the flexible tugboat that can move quickly to correct mistakes, support innovation, and maintain inspiration at the grass roots.

GOVERNMENT FUNDS

A little background: After the first \$40 million of federal YouthBuild funds reached local communities in 1994 under HUD's jurisdiction, YouthBuild grew from 15 sites to 106 in two years. But after 1996, Congress changed leadership and the YouthBuild appropriation was cut in half. Still, the YouthBuild Coalition fought every year to increase the appropriation, and we managed to generate a steady rise to \$65 million in 2002. In 2006, the program was moved with our cooperation from its incubation in HUD to institutionalization in the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL). The Bush administration felt it was better aligned there, and DOL wanted it as a cornerstone of their approach to disadvantaged youth. Some of the glitches in this transfer process resulted in a 23

percent cut in funding, down to \$50 million. Over the same period, since 1994, six additional federal agencies have gradually invested in key aspects of the YouthBuild program, using YouthBuild USA as an intermediary for targeted grants.

Still, this success is incremental, and it comes nowhere near meeting the nation's demand or need. To go to full scale, YouthBuild USA and our local affiliates must convince politicians to make a national commitment to reconnecting all unemployed, out-of-school young adults to education, employment, and service. Such an achievement would play an essential part in building our economy and eliminating poverty in America.

YouthBuild, combined with all other comprehensive programs reconnecting low-income out-of-school youth, could end the drain on society represented by 2 million idle young adults in an economy with worker shortages in industries such as construction and health

care, 250,000 young adults in prison, and thousands of unemployed young adults who can't afford to care for their own children. Seventy-two percent of YouthBuild students are young men, attracted to the manliness of building houses for homeless and low-income people, and to the opportunity, as they

tell it, to become better fathers than they had growing up.

Of course, having the President of the United States as an advocate would be the optimal situation, and I felt deeply hopeful when during his presidential campaign, Barack Obama included expanding YouthBuild to serve 50,000 youths in his national service platform.

To build political will and private support, YouthBuild USA will create a private sector advisory board. Bank of America, Home Depot, and the Wal-Mart Foundation have been our primary corporate allies so far. We'll also enlist the help of forces and organizations with overlapping goals—the Alternative High School Initiative, America's Promise Alliance, Campaign for Youth, the Forum for Youth Investment, the National Collaborative for Youth, the National Youth Employment Coalition, ServiceNation, Voices for National Service, the Youth Policy Action Council, and many others. The YouthBuild Coalition itself has 1,000 organizational members committed to the expansion of YouthBuild.

It does seem that for a solution to be taken to full scale, the problem needs to become high in the public's mind. Sometimes this happens spontaneously through an event or crisis, sometimes through a strategic and well-funded campaign involving many advocates and various communications professionals. At the moment, the dropout crisis is rising steadily in the public's awareness, and this can lead to awareness that reenrolling students is one part of the solution.

Hundreds of young people have personally thanked me for YouthBuild and asserted that without it, they would probably be dead or in jail. Instead, they say, they are doing well and giving back to their communities. Last year I asked 75 YouthBuild graduates at a conference how many of them had acquaintances or relatives who had applied to YouthBuild, were not accepted for lack of room, and were now dead. Some 80 percent raised their hands.

We have no choice now but to go full scale ahead. ■