

Breaking the Mold, Changing the World

By Mickey Rogers
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Most of the time teenagers get a bad rap: they're reputed to be lazy, self-centered and even reckless. But through Youth Venture - a national nonprofit organization that empowers young people to create their own enterprises - teenagers are able to disprove those stereotypes. The mission of Youth Venture (YV) is to assist young adults in creating a positive impact on their communities and ultimately, the world. Following are profiles of four YV kids who have turned their ideas into actions.

SHARING INFORMATION THROUGH RECREATION

Henry Lee Thompson Jr., 18, is now a senior at Ramsay Alternative High School in Birmingham, Alabama. He found Youth Venture through the Youth Leadership Team (YLT) under the [National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy](#).

"I have lots of ideas and I thought Youth Venture would be a great ally in getting my ideas into action," he said.

Thompson founded "Baller's Midnight Basketball" where participants play non-stop pick-up basketball from 8:00 p.m. to 12:00 midnight, twice a month. "Each game lasts 12 minutes or the first to get 24 points." he said. "The first night there were 15 people, and by the third night it jumped to about 60 participants. This venture has shown me how to be patient and organized with my ideas."

Thompson also provides information on topics that concern teens. "This experience is about helping others. I set up information tables at the entrance of the YMCA, on the following topics: Health, Sex, Drugs, Alcohol, Violence, etc. If this information only reaches one person, then I know that I have done something.

"Most parents wait until their child is in a negative predicament before they attempt to talk with them." His advice? "Most of us really are willing to listen. I would like adults to know this, because most of them think teens are inattentive. Talk to your child while he is young and everything is good; don't wait until he or she is in trouble."

Through Youth Venture, Thompson's career goals are slowly coming together. "Not only has this experience helped me in the present - it will also help me in the future. My career interests are in Aeronautical Engineering, but I would also like to be a well-established entrepreneur whose goal is to provide teens and young adults with a positive outlet in the community," he adds.

"My venture has taught me one simple thing, and that is to act on my ideas and not let them go to waste. Now I know that my capabilities are unlimited. I want to take this venture as high as humanly possible. My mother, Joalice Thompson, was amazed that I was taking on a project

of this caliber. She has been there from day one and continues to assist me in this endeavor. My father, Henry L. Thompson Sr., passed in August of 1999. I know he is very proud."

UNIQUE BOOK HELPS KIDS

In May of 2001, 15-year-old Annamarie Kelly co-wrote a book entitled *Why Tease?!*. The book, geared toward children in the primary level grades, helps kids learn about the negative effects of teasing and bullying.

Kelly explains the book's premise: "The story line involves a young boy named Chris who is teased by other children on the playground for his shy nature. What's unique about this book is that it's designed not only to alert children to teasing, but also to teach them how to react to it." She adds, "All the characters in our book were drawn from the chest down, colorless and featureless, to show that anyone can be teased."

Kelly, currently a junior at Resurrection High School in Chicago, credited her co-authors for their contributions. "My friends and fellow Girl Scout members (Troop #161), Julie Piwowarczyk, Molly and Erin Lappe, and I worked for months to get *Why Tease?!* off the ground. After weeks of brainstorming, writing and rewriting, we emerged with great book, complete with pictures, a teacher study guide, and a class questionnaire. However, we lacked many of the connections possible to make the book an on-going success. Thus, we sought out an application for the Youth Venture Organization."

Because of its originality, the project was presented to a group of YV panelists who provided the girls with ideas on how to better their project. For their work Kelly, Piwowarczyk, and the Lappe sisters received a \$900 grant from Youth Venture. The money was used to print 50 copies of *Why Tease?!* to distribute to local grammar schools for class discussion.

Kelly said that the book is property of the Girl Scouts because it was a project to earn the Girl Scout Gold Award - involving over two and a half years of work and over 20 hours of community service. "We have made no material profit from this book, but the personal benefits from this work have been astounding! We've had our book forwarded to a publishing company in New York. Whether or not the publishing giants choose to grab it, it will live on in the scouting realm. The Girl Scout Organization has developed a *Why Tease?!* patch [as part of an] educational program designed to raise awareness about the harm and repercussions of teasing."

"Thus far, hundreds of children have read our book. We have received nothing but positive feedback. The process has been an amazing experience because amidst our efforts to teach others, we learned a great many things as well." Kelly declares. "The truth is, anyone can make a positive impact in his or her community...and we did just that."

A DIALOGUE FOR RACIAL EQUALITY

Twenty-year-old Nina Sung, a junior at Stanford University, needed a venue like Youth Venture to make Students United for Racial Equity

(SURE) more than just an idea. SURE is a 9-week-long dialogue process where students engage in an after-school discussion, meeting once a week for two hours. Through readings, videos and field assignments, they critically examine the meaning of race and racism, as it exists in greater societal institutions, public policy, and media.

"I am working with local schools, trying to get the pilot program started," Sung explains. "Students have an intense desire to talk about these issues, and a burning curiosity about intergroup relations. SURE gives them an opportunity to discuss them in a provocative, challenging way, to critically examine fundamental assumptions, and to learn better how to engage in meaningful dialogue [which] in and of itself is truly an art!"

Sung finds she's constantly having to add to and revise the curriculum as more dialogue and education give her new perspectives. "I'm learning more about society, institutions, and how people and groups relate to one another." Sung hopes that one day, this dialogue process about race and multi-culturalism will become an actual part of the curriculum, which she feels is increasingly important in a nation that is becoming more and more diverse. "My hope is that by giving them the initial tools, students will start to examine their own lives and society more critically, and go on to enact social change."

Rather than overt hatred, Sung believes racism today is portrayed in a more subtle and subconscious form; indicative of a society that has inherently racist institutions. She admits that the portrayal of races by the media has always disturbed her - not only because it provides a glamorization of society's "ideals" - but also because in her opinion, popular television tends to caricaturize different groups, leaving people with simplified and potentially harmful ideas of others.

Finding others dedicated and devoted to greater ideals has been inspiring and motivates Sung to work harder to effect change. "Teens often feel alone, or invalidated in their ideas about social issues and change. My experience with Youth Venture has shown me that my work is truly important."

While registering as an actual nonprofit corporation at this stage is not realistic, Sung says if the project takes off, she would definitely look into expanding it into a nonprofit. "I would love to explore the idea of continuing to work in social entrepreneurship or public policy. I really feel like I'm doing something of substance right now, and I couldn't be happier. It's amazing to think that I'm living out this dream to be part of a movement that is greater than myself."

NEVER TOO YOUNG TO START SOMETHING GREAT

After watching a program with her grandmother on Elder Abuse, 11-year-old Nadia Campbell began volunteering at a nursing home. "I was touched and motivated to do something to help eliminate [abuse]. So I called up my best friend and asked her if she would like to volunteer at a local nursing home with me, and she said 'sure.' I called up the home and set up a date and time."

At the age of 13, Campbell started The Victorian Hands Foundation (T.V.H.F) in memory of her late aunt Victoria who strongly believed in

helping people. Most participants are sophomores, juniors and seniors from high schools in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, and New York. Youth Venture helped steer the way for the volunteer program to expand, and they now boast about 50 members. The group's motto is "Youth advocates for our Seniors."

"Our mission is to help the elderly feel loved and appreciated again. And to make sure they don't feel abandoned by the communities they have contributed so much to. We volunteer mostly in nursing homes and senior centers and keep in contact with the elders who live in our own communities." Campbell states.

She approached Youth Venture because "I was looking for financial help, guidance and ways to further my organization's mission. Youth Venture has so much to offer. They even have scholarship opportunities, media opportunities, allies, online tutorials, technical allies and [other] workshops available. I asked for \$700. Some of it goes towards (T.V.H.F) T-shirts, building a website, business cards, film, greeting cards, etc."

One of Campbell's most meaningful relationships was with a woman named Rose, whom she met on her way home from school. "She was struggling to walk, so I asked her if she needed help. Rose said her Health Aide had left her alone because she had to go home. I was very upset. Health Aides are not supposed to leave you until you are home and settled in. Especially in the street! So we walked to the bus stop and I waited with her," relates Campbell. "I got her phone number and called her to make sure she was okay. I also called up the agency and complained. She is with a great new agency now."

"Since then, I visit her at least once a week. I know all of her family, she knows mine. She calls me her "grandbaby" and I call her grandma."

Campbell's appreciation for elders came from growing up with her grandmother. "My grandmother always told to have respect for my elders. And she has always been my mother's top priority. I learned that elders are important and should be cared for till the end. Now, I have cherished memories and higher knowledge." What would Campbell tell others who don't have the same appreciation for elders? "Imagine yourself in their shoes..."

"Spending time with someone in a nursing home is very important. Many of the residents feel abandoned and depressed, and a simple visit makes a huge difference in their day," Campbell muses. "No one likes to feel alone - everyone needs someone. After just one visit to a nursing home, [you] can see the difference in the residents, and they can feel the difference within themselves."

The tireless volunteer "would like to expand on recruitment so we can touch more lives. Community Service is now a requirement for graduation in New York State, and volunteers are in demand. Put these two together, and both teens and seniors are very happy. I would also like to expand to other states so other teens can experience the wisdom our elders have to offer. We already have a second base in Scranton, Pennsylvania."

Campbell is now 18 years old, a freshman at the Borough Of Manhattan

Community College. She is majoring in Social Work-Geriatrics as a result of her volunteer work.

"I would like adults to realize that a child is never too young to start something great. I was 11 when I started volunteering in nursing homes and became interested in that field. Who knew that what I enjoyed doing would inspire other teens and become a recognizable organization of teen volunteers?" she said. "I would like the people of New Mexico to know that Youth Venture is a national movement that invests in young people who are creating positive change in their community. Just like their motto says, "Dream it. Do it."

