

Cristina Gair: Give youth a voice

By Cristina Gair
Vail CO, Colorado,



Fifteen young people from five public and private high schools and a handful of adults closed their eyes while walking in a line. Everyone put their trust in the person ahead of them. The leader of the group, Matt, a recent Red Canyon High School graduate, was the only one with his eyes open.

It was easy to walk and be led in this line of trust, I know because I was there putting my faith in the person ahead of me. Young people and adults can work together and form effective partnerships. It happened with The Eagle River Youth Coalition's Youth Leaders Council (YLC).

The Youth Leaders Council is a collaborative effort of The Eagle River Youth Coalition, The Youth Foundation, and The Eagle County Volunteer Center. The YLC is an integral part of the youth coalition to ensure that youth voices influence the decisions around policies and programs serving young people in the valley

Sometimes as adults we get caught up in lamenting, "what's wrong with kids today." I am more concerned with figuring out how we can support and believe in what youth can offer as individuals to this world and to this community.

One way that we can do this is by focusing on building young people's self-esteem, but instead looking at it from a self mastery point of view. The old paradigm way of thinking about self-esteem was to give affirmations and to get kids to say positive things about themselves.

The new paradigm is to take it a step further. Now youth should develop skills and understandings that reinforce their self-esteem by mastering projects, managing their emotions, and finding opportunities to lead.

No matter what their life circumstances, all young people in the valley have faced some challenges. These range from dealing with their parents' divorce, to illness and injuries of family members and themselves, to depression, to moving from place to place, to finding true friendships, to alcohol and substance abuse by themselves or others, to name just a few examples.

Most of the youth have taken these challenges as opportunities. These young people have been successful in setting and meeting goals, working to help support the family, participating on sport teams and in theater productions, receiving honors for their contributions, and helping those in need.

Recognize potential

What has stood out to me as an adult leader on the Youth Leader's Council is that young people and adults can build bridges by sharing stories about their lives. We all go through the same tribulations. The youth leaders did just that with a service-learning project about their life stories outlining the ups, the downs, and the pivotal moments that make them who they are today.

The upperclassman then shared these same stories with Berry Creek Middle School eighth-graders. The next step was for the eighth-graders to develop their own posters about their lives. Everyone in the room felt the connection when the kids shared their stories and opened up in a way that Robert Cuevas, Berry Creek Middle School principal said rarely happens.

The eighth-graders came away with the realization that high school wasn't going to be such a scary place after all. The high school students got a chance to lead and to give back their knowledge and experience.

So let's shift the conversation and dialogue away from what youth aren't doing in our community to what they are doing. It's time to give youth a voice, and instead of talking at them, to listen! Listen so we can recognize their talents and potential together.

High school students interested in joining The Youth Leaders Council 2008-09 can go to www.eagleyouth.org to download an application, or call 949-9250 for more information.

The guiding principle of Eagle River Youth Council is to make youth a community priority. If you want to get involved, call 949-9250 or visit www.eagleyouth.org.

Cristina Gair is the executive director of The Eagle River Youth Coalition (www.eagleyouth.org). This column will appear bimonthly to discuss the issues facing youth in Eagle County. She can be reached at cgair@eagleyouth.org.

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