

Written by Dottie DeHart  
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In our super-connected global world, it's ironic and sad that so many people still seem disconnected from those of other faiths and cultures. Youth LEAD, a Massachusetts non-profit, is seeking to bridge this chasm of misunderstanding and prejudice. Executive Director Janet Penn explains why its approach works so well.

Sharon, MA (April 2012)—The world is, without a doubt, flatter than it's ever been. Corporations that a mere 30 years ago were bound to their home country now have locations dotting the globe. The Internet lets us "talk" to people on the other side of the earth with just the click of a mouse. And the U.S. itself is becoming far more culturally diverse: The 2010 census found that Hispanic and Asian populations increased considerably over the past decade, while the non-Hispanic white population grew at the slowest rate.

Given all this change, you'd think that people would naturally gain more acceptance and understanding of those whose skin has more (or less) pigment or who have a different concept of God (or none at all). Unfortunately, says Janet Penn, executive director of Youth LEAD ([www.youthleadonline.org](http://www.youthleadonline.org)), you'd be wrong.

"Sure there are exceptions, but many people seem, if not more polarized, at least more entrenched in their comfort zones than ever," says Penn. "Watch the news and you'll see ample evidence of racial strife, of cultural suspicion, of wars and acts of hate waged in the name of religion. In fact, you don't even have to turn on the TV to see the roots of these problems—just look at the self-segregated makeup of the typical high school cafeteria."

How can a global society function well when its members can't (or won't) connect with each other in a meaningful way? It can't, insists Penn, which is why she's made it her goal to help

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bridge what she calls the “difference divide” between people of different cultures and faiths. That means getting to them at a young age and helping them understand each other.

This is where Youth LEAD excels. This non-profit organization based in Sharon, Massachusetts (an exceptionally diverse town), trains a diverse group of area high school students to reflect upon their values and beliefs, connect with others across differences, and then the youth themselves act together to address local and global challenges. What makes Youth LEAD very different from typical diversity programs is that the youth truly do lead—adults offer support, but the teens do the hard work of facilitating tough talks across differences themselves.

Youth LEAD has enjoyed tremendous success during the eight years it’s been in operation. It’s being featured as one of only two promising youth practices in the United States in a major new study by Harvard’s Pluralism Project ( [www.pluralism.org/interfaith/practices](http://www.pluralism.org/interfaith/practices) ). America’s Interfaith Infrastructure Study, a pilot initiative of The Pluralism Project, documents the growth of interfaith initiatives across the U.S. and considers the implications of our multi-religious reality for citizenship and leadership today and in the future.

The Pluralism Project recognized Youth LEAD because of its “authentic youth leadership” model (rather than just talking, they actually plan and facilitate complex events) and their multi-year trainings that give teens critical 21st century skills. Unlike many programs or peace camps that bring youth together for one encounter (even if it’s for a week or two), Youth LEADers spend several years together, running their own meetings and community service projects. It’s too hard to talk about the “hard stuff” on your first date.

Currently, the teens are planning the TIDE Conference, to be held May 25-27 at Northeastern University in Boston, MA ( [www.youthleadonline.org/tide-conference/](http://www.youthleadonline.org/tide-conference/) ). TIDE brings together young people from all over the United States for youth-led workshops on issues like religious bigotry, youth violence, drug and alcohol abuse, civic engagement, and more. While such issues are typically discussed from a public health perspective, in this case the young people will present and explore them in their own voices—a rare occurrence indeed.

Penn says Youth LEAD’s overarching goal is for youth to develop the skills they’re going to need to operate in an increasingly global, culturally diverse world.

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“How do you ask the questions that help you truly understand someone—especially if it’s someone with whom you have a fundamental disagreement?” she asks. “How do you work together with people from all different backgrounds to address the problems in your community? If people can learn these skills while they’re in their teens, they’ll be able to decrease polarization on their college campuses and later in their workplaces and communities.”

Penn’s plan now is to take the template she’s spent years refining and share it with other communities. Last year, Youth LEADers provided year-long trainings to youth at a local Islamic Center and on Staten Island, NY. This year, they trained youth at a local YMCA. Next fall, Youth LEAD plans to spread further afield, to Oklahoma City, Boston, and Central Massachusetts.

“Media stories often reinforce stereotypes and do not fully describe the rich complexity of communities,” says Penn. “Youth LEADers have a nuanced understanding of ideas and conflicts, based upon their communication and facilitation training as well as long-term relationships with others across differences.”

So why does Youth LEAD’s approach work so well? Penn and several alumni of the program offer the following insights:

- Youth get deeply invested because they plan and run the programs. What sets Youth LEAD apart from other programs of its kind is that the teens find their own voice and truly do the work themselves (rather than following orders given by adults). Youth LEADers don’t just run an icebreaker; they plan the entire conference. They are trained facilitators who are often called upon to mediate discussions in the larger community. They do it all themselves, from assessing problems to organizing events to implementing every detail.

“I was given the immense responsibility of leading a group of teenagers to productively plan a weekend-long conference,” says Aaron Birnbaum, a Jewish participant who is a freshman at Middlebury College. “During the actual conference, I gave a speech, led many workshops and dialogues, and made announcements to keep the conference running smoothly. People built lasting friendships across what might have previously been boundaries. People were given a chance to communicate effectively, and I’m certain that people will be able to bring back what they learned to the outside world.”

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- It forces young people to get in touch with their own beliefs. Youth LEAD requires its participants to articulate in front of a group what they believe in. This helps them gain clarity on their own views, which in turn creates confidence and a strong sense of self. This is an important first step in being able to communicate with people who disagree. A Christian or Jew who is secure in his own faith, who is not just “going along” with what he thinks he’s “supposed” to believe, is less likely to feel threatened by hearing beliefs that are the polar opposite of his own views. In fact, a democracy depends upon a citizenry able to understand why they hold their beliefs and how to defend them, rather than blindly following the pack.

“People fear that interfaith work will dilute their religion or convert them, but it’s not like that at all,” says Daisy Alioto, a Youth LEAD alum and Christian Scientist who attends Bowdoin College in Maine. “It really helped me become more articulate about explaining my religion. Sometimes it takes someone asking you a question that you never considered to increase your understanding of your religion.”

- It helps them give “different” a name and a face. Left to their own devices, kids tend to gravitate toward others who are most like them. Youth LEAD forces them to truly get to know young people from other faiths and cultures. From there, it’s just a hop, skip, and a jump to getting to like them. And from that point on, when they think of Jews, they think “Talía.” When they think of Muslims, they think “Amal.” This makes it far more difficult to feel apathy or negativity toward these groups. They come to see the essential humanity in everyone.

“The program made it easy for me to look at the individuals, and not the religions as a whole,” explains Talía Fishbon, a Youth LEAD alumna who attends the University of Delaware (Class of 2012).

“I became friends with many people I know I wouldn’t have gotten to know at school,” adds Amal Cheema, a Muslim and a junior at Sharon High School.

- Participants learn what real acceptance and tolerance look like. Penn doesn’t like to use these words. (They connote, “I’ll tolerate you if I have to, but I don’t really want to engage,” or, “I accept that you think differently from me,” she explains.) Still, for many people, they serve as shorthand for the kind of deep cross-cultural understanding Youth LEAD aims to promote. The organization’s goal is for youth to actively reduce stereotyping, demystify differences in beliefs, histories, and practices, increase empathy between people, and foster genuine encounters and dialogue among individuals and groups.

“I was never a racist person, and I give thanks to my parents because of that,” says Cheema.

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“But trust me, I did harbor some stereotypes. What Youth LEAD did was make me realize what tolerance exactly is. Tolerance is not merely accepting someone exists but taking an initiative to understand another’s identity and pride.

“I became a leader, a facilitator, a conflict resolver, a diplomat, a cultural person, a religious person, a citizen because of Youth LEAD...It allowed me to overcome the human tendency to create patterns—patterns that often lead to stereotypes, then to racism, then to conflicts,” she adds.

- They gain a “toolkit” of communication skills that transfer to other people and situations outside the immediate group. Youth LEAD provides intensive training to its participants on how to listen actively, to communicate respectfully even when they disagree, and to negotiate difficult conversations. These are valuable skills that not only help them meet the goals they set inside Youth LEAD—say, initiating an interfaith dialogue between religious Muslims and religious Jews, or educating communities on how to stop teen pregnancy or violence—but that will help them in all aspects of life.

“Life is filled with tough conversations,” Penn points out. “Knowing how to negotiate them can mean solving serious conflicts between people at home or at work. It can mean disagreeing with your spouse without the situation erupting into a huge fight. It can mean convincing the boss to give you a raise. And yes, it can mean confronting those who express prejudice and misinformation about other cultures and helping them to gain a better perspective.”

- They develop the speaking ability and other leadership skills they’ll need to influence others. The idea, of course, is that Youth LEAD alumni will go on to become successful, well-rounded leaders who are well equipped to work together with people from all different backgrounds. And it seems to be working. In a three-year study (conducted without a control group), Youth LEAD found that teens who took part in the program gained nuanced understanding of other groups and were able to articulate sources of conflict. But those youth who actually facilitated the dialogue or chaired the conference or program saw positive changes in their family and school groups.

“I think the organizational and leadership skills that I gained in Youth LEAD allowed me to become a student leader right away at Tufts,” says Dan Resnick, a Jewish alumnus who spent much of his childhood in Israel. “I was able to lead meetings with other students, craft an agenda, identify likely challenges, and demand responsibility and organization from others...The skills I gained at Youth LEAD prepared me to be a leader right away on campus. I can’t think of one specific example, but as the CAFE president, I led many board meetings and other events.”

When asked if he might be willing to start an intercultural group on his campus, he replied, “Already did...I believe it is such a waste having so much diversity on college campuses, only

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for students to self-segregate and not learn anything about other cultures from their fellow students.”

- Participants end up working to make those around them more accepting of different faiths. Many Youth LEAD alumni may not end up promoting cross-cultural understanding and engagement in an “official” capacity. But certainly, they’ll do so in an unofficial one. Anecdotal evidence shows they’re already doing so.

Divya Chandramouli, a Hindu and a sophomore at Mt. Holyoke College, reports that when she got involved with Youth LEAD, she was able to educate her extended family in India on the different faiths she learned about—dispelling many myths and untruths they may have heard elsewhere.

Fishbon agrees. “If I saw a lack of tolerance of other religions being shown by members of my family or religious community, I would question or call them out because of Youth LEAD,” she says. “It made me look at the reasons why people believed what they did and motivated me to make those around me more accepting.”

- They get to improve their communities in many ways. Youth LEAD doesn’t teach understanding for its own sake. A big part of its mission centers on using the skills to identify a community’s most pressing problems and to make inroads toward solving them. Last summer, for instance, Sharon participants worked to raise awareness of food insecurity in Massachusetts. Teens on Staten Island made anti-violence public service announcements to educate their community.

“Many of society’s biggest problems, including terrorism and other forms of violence, stem from desperation and hopelessness,” says Penn. “And I think that’s one of the most powerful things about Youth LEAD. We encourage young people to think about how they can help lift their fellow human beings out of those conditions.

“It’s not all about talking,” she adds. “It’s about trying to fix what’s broken in the world, together—and it’s about not letting the fact that you don’t look like each other or agree with each other stop you from your mission.”

- The program gives them hope in a world that often seems hopeless. If you did nothing but watch the news, you’d believe America and the world are so deeply fragmented—politically, culturally, and economically—that we’ll never be able to solve our problems. (And, admittedly, the situation seems pretty dire!) But when Youth LEADers bring people together on a local level and reap positive, tangible results, it shows the community, as well as the young people themselves, that it is possible for youth to change things for the better.

“I believe that I became more optimistic regarding the potential of diverse members of a

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community to work together for the common good,” says Resnick. “Even as I follow international conflicts and learn theories that suggest we are on a path to a cultural clash, I always remember that at least in my home community that was not the case.”

- It sets them up for success in an increasingly global economy. Youth LEAD may seem on the surface to be a deeply idealistic organization. And it’s true that both the organizers and participants fervently believe in the cause of interfaith and intercultural harmony. But participating in this program also has practical benefits. It helps young people gain the skills they’ll need to influence and collaborate in a world whose boundaries are dissolving and whose workforce is growing ever more diverse.

“Interfaith organizations need to exist,” says Rabya Saraf, a Muslim and a sophomore at Mt. Holyoke College. “Everyone will benefit, even if it’s indirectly. In this world there’s a high chance you will come in contact with different people, and you will need to understand them and their stories. Interfaith organizations provide a forum for that, and their existence will definitely lessen misunderstandings.”

Renata Bakousseva, who now works for an oil company in Brunei Darussalam, Southeast Asia, says she is currently using many of the skills she learned during her time with Youth LEAD. “I find that I am...more understanding of the traditions, despite being newly exposed to them, than some other expats,” she says. “Youth LEAD taught me how to handle these differences, how to agree to disagree with someone’s ideas without showing disrespect for the opposite culture...Youth LEAD nurtured within me this desire to learn more about other people. So anywhere I go, I make the effort to befriend people who have different backgrounds. It makes life more fun and interesting!”

Ultimately, the biggest fans of intercultural organizations tend to be the young people who’ve belonged to them. They wax eloquent about the rewards they receive from the experience.

“What it does for each person is different,” explains Cheema. “For some people, they find their identity. Others connect with their culture, religion, or heritage. Some become leaders; some become dialoguers. Youth LEAD is completely personalized in how it changes you as a human being.

“Maybe, just maybe,” she adds, “if youth from all over the U.S.A. participated in Youth LEAD, then any type of conflict would be resolved in a flash, people could be more tolerant of each other, and in a long shot, world peace would not be so far off.”

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## About Youth LEAD:

Youth LEAD, Inc., (YL) was founded in 2004 to inspire and motivate youth to reflect upon their values and beliefs, connect with others across differences, and act together to address local and global challenges. YL's Leadership Program trains high school students to reach across religious, ethnic, and racial divides to increase understanding and to turn fear of differences into hope and positive action.

YL teen leaders at the flagship program in Sharon, MA, have developed and facilitated community dialogues, celebrations, and school programs for over 4,000 people. They have presented workshops at national conferences in Chicago, Kansas City, Cambridge, and Atlanta, and international conferences in India and Jordan. In the spring of 2011, YL Sharon teens were featured on Linda Ellerbee's Nick News segment "Freedom to Believe...or Not" as an example of teens "waging peace" in the name of religion (available on [www.nick.com/videos/nick-news-videos](http://www.nick.com/videos/nick-news-videos)).

Youth LEAD has just been identified by The [Pluralism Project](#)

at Harvard University as a promising practice based upon their unique focus on building skills youth need to engage across differences and that the program is replicable across the U.S. Youth LEAD is currently forming new communities across the country.

For more information, visit our website at [www.youthleadonline.org](http://www.youthleadonline.org) or call [781.784.0651](tel:781.784.0651).