Speaking Up for Positive Youth Development – Join ME!

I'm committed to speaking up when I hear devaluing remarks about teens. I won't be idle when someone remarks that today's youth are lazy, ill-mannered, hopeless, and dangerous. Jenny Sazama, national director of Youth on Board calls this devaluing "systematic invalidation, denial of voice and disrespectful". You too may have noticed similar negativism when youth are put on committees as tokens, when young people are excluded from decisions that affect their well-being, or when someone says "Why invest in them anyway? They're just going to leave town when they graduate." These stereotypes not only affect how adults view teens, but it influences how teens see themselves. A culture of bias against teens can have dire consequences akin to those I observed while in England this June.

During my trip abroad to study the well-established British system of youth work training and delivery I was stunned by the negative view England's governance, education and civic structures seem to have of youth. For example, a May 28, 2009 issue of the Camden New Journal reported a town hall meeting of adults concerned about on-going vandalism of CCTV (closed circuit television) cameras. Adults at the meeting accused youth of stalking them and calling them "grasses". One adult said, "Kids today are so rubbished, what can we expect? " At that same meeting a youth worker stated that the CCTV cameras victimized youth by following them when they walked to school or went into stores. "Heavy-handed tactics like this won't help and it sends a message that this is what we expect from our youth."

Following my trip, I'm more convinced that the positive approach to youth development is the correct path. Though there is some natural tension between generations, a positive youth development approach includes understanding that tension and helping young people learn confidence and competence from adult/youth partnerships. William Strauss and Neil Howe have written about this tension in their many books documenting the generations, Gen-Xers, Millennials, etc. Strauss and Howe state that there are basic rules that help us to understand generational tension:

- Each rising (i.e., younger) generation breaks with the styles and attitudes of the young-adult generation, which no longer functions well in the new era (e.g racial bias).

- Each rising generation corrects for what it perceives as the excesses of the current midlife generation – their parents, designated leaders – sometimes as a protest, other times with the implicit support of parents and leaders who seek to correct the deficiencies of the adult world (e.g., environmental activism).

- Each rising generation fills the social role being vacated by the departing elder generation, a role that now feels fresh, functional, desirable, and even necessary for a society's well-being (e.g., the current generation of responsible, community, volunteer- oriented young people). (pg 47)

Thus, some tension between near generations is socially healthy. Typically, this sort of conflict stimulates new ideas, innovation, and cultural advancement. Our willingness to engage youth, respect their unique views and support their independence is positive.

So, I'm going to **Speak Up!** when I hear someone bashing young people, calling them by derogatory terms, labeling them with serotypes or devaluing their input and experiences. My response to this bias

will be informed by the Southern Poverty Law Center's **"Speak Up!"** guide. Respectfully, I'll ask, "I'm sorry, I don't understand what you have just said about [teens, college students, young people, all people]. Can you explain what you meant?" Join me! When we speak up together with respect youth will learn to respect themselves by our actions.

Learn more:

Speak UP! Teaching Tolerance from the Southern Poverty Law Center:
http://www.tolerance.org/speakup/trainingtool.html

Strauss W., & Howe , N., (2006). Millennials and the Pop Culture. Life Course. New York:NY

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