

The Power of Social Connection: 2017 Promising Youth Program

Forging and maintaining durable, meaningful relationships has always been a key component of the human experience. Since the dawn of time, we've had to rely on the important network of trust within our communities, and today is no different. During spring of 2018, Ashleigh Fletcher, gang prevention specialist of the Salt Lake City Police Department, visited the Sorenson Multicultural Center in the Glendale neighborhood of Salt Lake City. As a former office supervisor, she and I spoke about our experiences working with youth who were frequently found on the margins of society. We talked about their resilience, strength, complicated lives, and, most important, how we as adults could better serve them so that they could be presented with opportunities that may not ordinarily be available. We also brought to light the occasional disconnect between disaffected students and the officers placed in schools to keep the institutions and those within safe.

The latter part of our discussion provided a perfect segue for Ashleigh as she began to discuss an idea that she and her team were developing: a summer program for promising youth in middle school and high school *and* their assigned Student Resource Officers (SROs). The purpose of this program was two-fold. The first was to offer free summer activities to promising youth in the community and the second

was to help participating youth see the value of getting to know the SROs outside of the usual contexts and settings.



As has been the case for millennia, our roles in relation to one another dictate the dynamic at play. Individuals within the Gang Prevention Unit, and by extension, the Salt Lake City Police Department, wanted to foster an environment that allowed participants—youth and adults alike—to cultivate a more authentic rapport outside of the confines of school and work. This summer program represented a conduit to building an ongoing, strengthened relationship between two groups that may sometimes appear to be contentious. But once the program began to unfold, participating leaders noticed that the change in setting had some major social benefits. Officer Doug Teerlink had this to say: "It was great to see the youth step out of their comfort zone and try new things. They gained confidence that will

help them throughout their lives. I also noticed that by interacting with the police they realized that we care about them and we are not the enemy.” Many of the program surveys from some of the disaffected youth validated his sentiment by mentioning a shift in their perception when it came to their personal youth-police officer relationship, particularly, though, with the officers who participated in this program. But this enhancement within the promising youth-officer social connection was merely one part of the result.

Program leaders had a host of intended outcomes and the most prominent one was to give these children and teens an opportunity to participate in activities during the summer in lieu of remaining at home or biding their time on the streets and, potentially, by some of the youths’ own admission, getting into trouble. This summer program provided a means to navigate differently through power structures and aided in shifting perceived alliances. One youth wrote, “I learned that there [sic] people like me so they deserve my respect like a person.” While this individual’s view didn’t necessarily reflect every other participant’s sentiments, it did echo a general shift in the collective perspective: these officers *chose* to be here and take part in these activities with the youth. This holds true to what the late social neuroscientist John T. Cacioppo wrote: “the boundaries we have always assumed to exist between ourselves and others are not nearly as fixed as we once

imagined.” I believe that this program merely scratched the surface of this profound statement.

The program lasted for several weeks and included officers assigned to specific middle and high schools in Salt Lake City. The activities were made possible by staff at the Sorenson Multicultural Center and the National Ability Center (NAC)—the latter also offered a generous scholarship in addition to running the program’s outdoor activities. The program had 15 registered participants and had an average of 11 regularly-attending participants. (Though the numbers may seem low, they exceeded expectations for a program that had just launched.) Activities included archery, swimming, hiking, rock climbing, and, a collective favorite, boxing.



The program activities were free of charge to all participating youth, travel to and from sites was made possible through the Salt Lake City Police Department, equipment for various activities was covered through the Sorenson Multicultural Center, and connecting the youth to the outdoors occurred, again, thanks to the National Ability Center.

Human capital, existing partnerships, and a developing awareness of the value of social connection led to an overall successful program—and one that ought to perhaps be replicated in other high risk areas.

Since 2002, Lisa Aiono has been working with youth who have been involved in the court system, and for over 16 years in this line of work she has become intimately familiar with the deeper parts of the juvenile justice framework—many aspects of which the wider public may not be aware. While discussing this summer program, she had this to share: “I’d love to see more of this type of program in higher-risk areas [throughout the valley].” Our conversation encapsulated a shared view that finding meaningful connection among seemingly disparate groups—in this case, police officers and disaffected youth, has deeper and invaluable implications for the potential growth and development of these promising youth. But this connection also provided a way for officers to see this demographic in a different light.



Officer Moronae Lealaogata shared, “One of my favorite moments during the Promising Youth Program was doing community service on Wednesday at the Hildegard’s Food Pantry. The youth we had were exposed to the idea of community service for the first time at a food pantry. At first, a few of the youth had some unhappy faces going into it. After two hours of services, the whole group loved what they had learned and enjoyed it so much they looked forward to food pantry services throughout the summer.” Much like Officer Teerlink’s previous comment, this too was confirmed through program surveys. One youth shared this: “the [food bank] is a wonderful resource for people who are struggling.”



In our current political and social climate, it's become the norm to highlight the individual and collective disconnects that exist among our communities. This program made possible through collaboration and partnerships—on all fronts—presented us with compelling evidence that transformative learning and meaningful connection is a strong precursor for a strengthened community.

When we step outside our usual contexts and forge relationships with individuals we assume are different from us, we find that we share this experience similarly: we want what's best for ourselves, our families, and the community at large.

Once again, the goal was to provide youth with a means to keep busy during the summer and to continue developing a relationship with their Student Resource Officers, and, by all measures, the goal was met. While our young participants had so many exceptional comments, perhaps this best captures why we believe that this was successful and needs to continue: "I would love to help other kids who are in the same situation as I currently am in. It has really helped me open my eyes."