

Know Y.A. R.O.O.T.S.:

A Youth Empowerment Program for Violence Prevention

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This article describes Know Y.A. R.O.O.T.S., a summer program developed to minimize the effects of violence on a group of African-American adolescents from the Civic Park neighborhood in Flint, Michigan. The goal of the group was to raise consciousness about racial identity and social issues that influence violence in our communities.

Know Y.A. R.O.O.T.S. (Young Adults Recognizing, redefining and Reclaiming Our Own True Safe-havens) is a culturally relevant, community-based collaborative effort whose mission is to reduce the effect of violence among African-American youth in Flint, Michigan and empower youth to become active adult citizens and public advocates. Part of the Youth Violence Prevention Center, Know Y.A. R.O.O.T.S. (KYR) drew from community change strategies such as mass mobilization, social action, citizen participation, and public advocacy (Checkoway, 1995), empowerment theory (Zimmerman, 2000; Peterson and Zimmerman, 2004), and participatory action research (Israel et al., 1998).

Planting the Seeds of Change on Fertile Ground

The Ruth Mott Community Health Scholars/Explorers (Ruth Mott) program annually invites about 12 Flint-area high school students (Explorers), selected by local community-based organizations (CBOs), to attend a summer program for under-represented, college-bound minority

students at the University of Michigan (UM). In addition to the in-residence program, Explorers work on community health issues at their host CBOs under the guidance of a “community health scholar” (a UM School of Public Health master’s student).

The Youth Violence Prevention Center (YVPC) in Flint was a participating CBO for Ruth Mott in 2002. Building on a pre-existing community-university partnership, the YVPC implemented a summer youth program in the Civic Park neighborhood in 2002. The KYR segment of the YVPC summer program included several components to explore safe spaces and other issues related to violence prevention, including an ethnic identity development curriculum, photovoice (a research technique), neighborhood mapping, focus group discussions, and informal interviews of adult key informants.

Prior to entering the Civic Park neighborhood, the Ruth Mott group was trained in the Photovoice research technique and needs assessment methodologies at UM. The Explorers were joined by young adults recruited from the community to form a group of 11 young people under the direction of author Rashid Njai, a Ruth Mott community health scholar.

The group met for nine sessions over three weeks. The curriculum focused on violence and its impact on the African-American community (Mattaini, 2001; Sydlo et al., 2000; Faison and Ingram, 2003). Sessions consisted of ethnic identity development modules, a neighborhood walk-through “photo shoot,” reflective writings, drawings, debriefing discussion groups, community asset mapping, informed observation, and other topics and techniques (see Table 1). The group defined three themes of interest: ownership, crossing boundaries, and collective action.

The ethnic identity module infused contextual and cultural reality into the YVPC’s efforts (Faison and Ingram, 2003), challenging the youth to think about the relationship between blackness in America and the violence in their community. The Photovoice process provided cameras for participants to take photographs that spoke to the effects of violence in their lives (Wang and Burris, 1997). The group then discussed and wrote about the photographs. Images and narratives from a Photovoice project are powerful advocacy tools (Wang et al., 2004). Figures 1, 2, and 3 (see pages 72, 73, and 74) provide examples of products from our Photovoice project.

The youth research team also conducted email interviews with community leaders and officials, which focused on conditions that contribute to, or help to prevent, youth violence. The photographs, reflective writings and drawings, discussion group records, neighborhood mapping, and interview records were compiled, analyzed (when applicable), and used to guide and illustrate a comprehensive youth-derived community plan.

TABLE 1. KNOW Y.A. R.O.O.T.S COMPONENTS

<i>Thematic Focus</i>	<i>Program Activities and Objectives</i>
<i>Week 1&2 (July 8–19):</i>	
Know Thy Self Academic, professional, and personal enrichment. Culture Focus: Overview of African/African-American history.	Background and introduction to public health and violence prevention and the ethnic identity curriculum; research methods training. (Photovoice and asset mapping); exploring Ann Arbor as an example of a youth-informed organization/environment; college preparatory training sessions.
<i>Week 3 (July 22–26):</i>	
Artistic Reflection Photovoice Culture Focus: African/ African-American art and artisans.	“Photo shoot” of neighborhood; neighborhood walk-through tour and asset note taking; creative writing sessions.
<i>Week 4 (July 29–August 2):</i>	
Oral Tradition Focus Groups Culture Focus: African-American music, poets, and orators.	Creative writing sessions and focus group discussions about safe spaces and other issues surrounding violence prevention and coping strategies.
<i>Week 5 (August 5–9):</i>	
Mapping the Village Asset Mapping Culture Focus: Notable African-American scholars and activists.	Community asset mapping, “key informant” interviews, and artistic expression around experiences of violence and community solutions; continue poetry, drawing, free writes, and discussion.
<i>Week 6 (August 12–17):</i>	
Community Voice Wrap-up, presentations, future directions Culture Focus: Speaking across generations.	Review, debrief, and create research overview; present findings to YVPC steering committee; prepare presentation for Ruth Mott closing ceremony.

Cultivating Change

The prevalence of violence within the African-American community in Flint is significant, somewhat higher than the statewide statistics (Michigan Department of Community Health, 2000), and exacerbated by recent political and economic turmoil in Flint— including increased school closings, high unemployment rates, population decline, state receivership due to serious fiscal problems, and the recall of its mayor. The program approach contained several key components that encouraged peaceful behavior and discouraged violence (Caldwell et al., 2004), including enhancing racial pride, attachment to positive role models, engendering family and civic responsibility, and educational attainment.

Minority adolescents may be especially vulnerable to violence because they must handle the developmental challenges of adolescence in addition to the pressure of growing up as a member of an oppressed minority group (Wilson, 1992). Thus the achievement of a healthy and positive ethnic identity is extremely important to the psychological well being of ethnic minority youth (Muuss, 1996). Pro-social and positive ethnic messages/images (e.g., Langston Hughes, Aaron McGruder’s “Boondocks” comic strip), politically conscious hip-hop music (e.g., KRS-One, Mos Def, Common), and culturally specific accounts of the effects of violence (e.g., enslaved African narratives, modern media accounts of violence against blacks) were used to enhance the program’s appeal to African-American adolescents (Bennett, 1996) and to place the program in a relevant context for participating teens.

At the same time, it was important for youth to explore the relationship between being black and the violence they encounter in their daily lives. Violence prevention within black communities requires sensitivity to the cultural oppression and alienation that African-American youth encounter (Caldwell et al., 2004). A realistic evaluation of African-Americans’ societal status may help decrease the likelihood that a person experiencing discrimination will internalize the occurrence (Caldwell, et al., 2004).

Part of the KYR strategy, grounded in the work of Paulo Freire, was to help participants become aware of the roles and effects of historical, institutional, social, and political legacies in their community (Freire, 1973; Wang et al., 2004). In addition, the program was designed to help adolescents connect to the larger society, integrate with their peers, foster a stronger bond between them and their community, and help them understand how to mobilize the community to promote positive self images and peaceful behaviors (Stern and Smith, 1999; Kuperminc et al., 1996). The KYR program also focused in a culturally sensitive manner on four of the five major tasks of adolescent development: autonomy, achievement, identi-

ty, and intimacy (Phinney et al., 1990) and the development of a positive concept of adulthood. Teen participants worked with caring adults to communicate their feelings about race, sociopolitical issues, and the connections between race and violence.

Reaping What You Sow

Program participants learned valuable lessons about building relationships and a sense of community as they developed an empowered organization. YVPC was a critical partner in addressing implementation limits and problems.

Relationships and community building. Relationship building was a motivating factor as well as a learning opportunity in KYR. Indeed, relationships with community leaders, activists, and other youth were the foundation for youth empowerment and the KYR collaborative process.

Explicit discussion of group norms and values helped to develop group members' collective and individual identities. We successfully established a sense of community as people of African descent, connected by our commitment to minimize the effect of violence on our lives and on our community. KYR's "bottom-up" emphasis on mutual respect, ownership, and emotional investment allowed the youth, with the help of adult facilitators, to understand the issues and articulate them in presentations to community leaders. By adhering to an assets-based approach, we were able to build on the community's strengths and resources to promote a learning process that attended to social inequalities in the youths' lives (Israel et al., 1998).

The empowered organization. Another goal of the program was to develop an empowered youth organization (Peterson and Zimmerman, 2004), which may be vital for creating a youth community that can critically examine the causes, consequences, and prevention of violence (Fals-Borda, 2001). Several factors contributed to the successful application of empowerment theory in the KYR program:

- *Youth involvement.* Youth owned the program, took leadership roles, and developed skills. Explorers were involved in almost every aspect of the KYR project, including the decision to examine the problem of violence in Flint's African-American community. They helped to recruit neighborhood youth to participate in the program, developed a research agenda, conducted focus groups, mapped neighborhood safe spaces, and interpreted the results. Ultimately, the Scholar, Explorers, and neighborhood youth group developed an action plan to create safe spaces, environments, and attitudes in the neighborhood.

- *Photovoice.* The Photovoice project enhanced youth involvement and commitment to the program and helped participants reflect and act upon their personal and community strengths.
- *Effective communication.* Critical dialogue enabled youth to build and strengthen relationships and to have a voice with local policy makers.
- *Participatory Evaluation.* Program assessment was built around empowerment evaluation, a community-based participatory approach that aims to foster self-determination and improvement and skill building in program participants and administrators (Fetterman, 1996).

Program limitations. Throughout the summer we faced a number of logistical problems, including finding a location for the daily program, developing film in order to view photos in a timely manner, and accounting for unexpected expenses. YVPC helped to solve these problems and otherwise supported the KYR approach. The KYR-YVPC relationship was pivotal in our attempts to create a learning community for preventing youth violence. YVPC provided needed support while also relinquishing control, so that genuine youth empowerment could emerge.

Time was the biggest obstacle we faced during the summer pilot program. Prior to recruiting additional youth members for KYR, the core group had planned specific daily activities. After recruitment and the initiation of the program, however, it was difficult to complete the planned activities. As a result, the KYR core group reorganized some program components, such as combining Photovoice picture taking with qualitative data collection for our needs assessment and asset mapping objectives. Given more time, we would have been able to progress further, allowing for more critical analysis of the emerging themes by the program participants.

Lessons Learned

The KYR program provided an opportunity for sharing power and coping with violence. Professionals may need special training and an open mind to prepare them for the level of intensity and rigor necessary to conduct and implement a grassroots, community-based program that truly engages youth. Community work is not a cookbook process. Professionals must not only be able to relinquish control in order to empower the community, they also must remain fully engaged in order to lend assistance, share knowledge, and facilitate legitimacy. The roles of learner and teacher shift across generations and through program activities.

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Abby Letcher, M.D. (abby_s.letcher@lvh.com) focuses on translational research integrating empowerment and community building into health-care. She is currently developing innovative models of outreach among youth and uninsured adults in an inner-city community to provide health care that builds on individual and community assets. In addition, she is working in partnership with a community-based organization that strengthens social networks.

Lee Bell (belll@umich.edu) has over 17 years experience as a community organizer and is the local leader of Youth Violence Prevention Center in Flint, Michigan. He represents the YVPC on local committees and coordinates the Center's activities with related initiatives and programs. As an officer of the Flint/Genesee County Neighborhood Roundtable, a voluntary organization of associations and block clubs that coordinates activities, his work influences policy and promotes community development.

Figure 1. ALIENS
by Sonsat Tom-Quinn



I see two people walking.
These people live in the world that we all live in
but they are not part of it.
Our lives are all intertwined.
One cannot be a part of our world without being
a part of another person's world.
We are aliens for a number of reasons.
We are aliens because we are of a different race,
because we wear our hair differently,
or simply because our hair is different.
We can eliminate the status of being aliens by
learning to accept anyone else's differences.

Figure 2. The So-Called Park
by Shalane McFarlane



I see a park with nothing to play with. There's no grass.
It's only a little and there's trash on the ground.
The kids in the community don't have anything to do
except get into trouble.

This relates to my life because I have to look at it every day.

How can people call this a park?

All I see is drug dealers and hear the dogs bark

It's so sad that I sometimes feel bad

The kids have nowhere to play

They have to stay at home all day

The slide is all dirty and the swings could break any day

'Cause they're really not steady

The parks were made for the kids

But now they're just taking up space

Now when kids go they feel out of place

But we should fix the community

So all the boys and girls can come together in unity

Figure 3. Voices of a Desolate Pile
by Leda Turner



A massive pile of garbage lies in front of an abandoned home. At first glance, I think the people who once lived here left this behind. A neighbor enlightens us all—and explains that when the previous tenants moved out, the neighbors all began to dump their trash there.

This pile speaks to me and the voices all say—it just takes one. One person to lead the crowd. One person to stand up. Everyone else will just follow behind them. Most likely one neighbor dumped his/her trash there and a few more followed their lead. All it takes is one. So why are we all still sitting here? Why are we just taking pictures of the trash rather than picking it up? The answer remains the same: All it takes is one.

In life we all play different roles. Few people lead but many follow. So many people sit around waiting for someone else to do something—someone else to lead. It's a lot easier to follow than to lead. Still, all it takes is one. One person, one hour, one effort, one day, one chance—you could be that one.

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