

# An Interview with Lateefah Simon

## *The Transformative Power of Community Youth Development*

Sarah Raskin, *Centers for Disease Control*

*Lateefah Simon, the youngest woman to ever win a prestigious MacArthur Fellowship (also known as the “Genius” award), is an energetic example of the transformative power of youth development. A high school dropout and former petty thief who used to hide her boyfriends’ drugs and weapons in her backpack, Lateefah rose from participating, unenthusiastically, in one youth development program to passionately leading San Francisco’s Center for Young Women’s Development, whose mission is to “to provide gender-specific, peer-based opportunities for high-risk, low-, and no-income young women to build healthier lives and healthier communities.” As executive director, Lateefah more than quadrupled the Center’s budget and expanded the Center’s violence prevention work to include rights education for California juvenile offenders and San Francisco firearm policy reform. The Ford Foundation, Ms. Foundation, and Oprah Winfrey have lauded her. Lateefah is a self-taught practitioner, activist, and social analyst who influences practitioners, funders, and policymakers at local, national, and international levels. In fall, 2005, she begins undergraduate studies at the University of California – Berkeley, so that she can remain active in Bay Area violence prevention and youth development communities. CDC Fellow Sarah Raskin caught up with Lateefah in early February 2005. Ever the multitasker, Lateefah prepared her daughter’s breakfast as they spoke.*



*How does your experience exemplify youth participation in community violence prevention?*

I came to youth work in 1993 – 94, when I was 16-ish. I had left high school because I worked at Taco Bell full time. It wasn't a glamorous job but many of the young people from my neighborhood either worked full time or they hustled—they sold drugs—because a lot of our parents were on drugs or in prison. School didn't seem like an option.

Huckleberry Youth Programs recruited me for a group for girls at risk of violent behavior. I felt that I was too smart and I'd been through too much to sit in circles, talking about museums, art, HIV, pregnancy, and the men we picked. I had boyfriends who sold crack; I carried their guns in my backpack so they wouldn't get in trouble. But I found myself loving the group. And we—San Francisco's most hard-core girls—took ownership of it.

The Center for Young Women's Development opened around that time and there were street outreach jobs for girls who were parenting themselves or who were involved in the juvenile justice system. I was on probation for habitual shoplifting—I was the best there was until I got caught [*laughs*]. It all really fit. I applied, I became a street outreach worker, and I never left.

*Can you talk about your evolution in the work, having gone from participating in one program to leading another?*

I grew up in this place [The Center for Young Women's Development]. Rachel [Pfeffer, the founder] designed the organization about youth, social services, and other existing paradigms. She believed that their premises failed young people—that although some of them pushed young people to lead, there wasn't a really strong “for and by” model. She wanted to develop an organization where young women who had been pushed aside by pretty much everyone, who make people uncomfortable—sex workers, girls who sell crack, the Lateefahs of the world—could lead.

I interviewed with ten young women who were very different ethnically, culturally. I walked out praying that I was going to get that job, not because of the \$8.50 an hour, but because I really wanted to be with this community: girls who seemed like they really loved and forgave each other.

There was no other place that would respect my experience, my intelligence. If you could analyze why something needed to happen, it was done. Rachel's push was, “Analyze it, articulate it, and then let's do it. We're not an organization where you just get what you want. We have to build it with

thought.” So I was pushed and I was pushed. I went back to school when I could work half time and make the same amount of money I had made working full-time at Taco Bell. I took advantage of every opportunity. We stayed after hours to learn how to use the computer. I had drive, not to be the next executive director, but to be really serious about outreach.

When Rachel decided to transition out of the organization, I didn’t think about that position. We were doing great street outreach with very young sex workers and drug users, and I just loved the work. I wanted to help with the executive director search. Young people are held down if the organization that claims to be building their power doesn’t articulate that possibilities are limitless. But the Center was a place where we challenged everything, including our own abilities. Rachel challenged me to lead the search process, to see what I found out about myself in this process. I was reading resumes of really amazing, educated women and thinking, “I could do that job.” It’s important to have theory but this was a really hard organization to run and I felt like you had to be here to know how to do it. I became co-interim director.

We started doing political education inside juvenile hall, which was a huge win because a lot of us were either just off probation or we weren’t older [than the people who we were educating]. I became executive director formally in 1998. I’ve been challenged. Young women push me every single day. I’m seeing a whole new breed of young women who are impacted by street violence in a way that I’ve never seen before—and we’ve been on the street forever. In San Francisco gun violence has tripled, especially among young African-American men. The Center is a beacon for young women who have children by dead men. I went to about 17 funerals last year. And it’s . . . well, it’s intense.

I am leaving the Center because I’ve done all that I can do there. People argue with me about that, but the organization has to walk its talk. Its leadership must make space so that a young woman can push herself and develop and leave, especially someone who has talent and skills. A 23-year-old

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Latina who’s been here for eight years will run the Center. I’m so excited, so happy. And I’m going to Berkeley in the fall!

*Congratulations!*

It's so cool. My goal has always been to go to college. We've pushed about 40 young women from the streets into academia in the last six years. I needed to do that. I want to study young people raised in the '80s. It was a hard decade for people in urban and in really poor rural settings: the drug war, that administration, the de-funding of social services, this whole net being crumbled from housing to food stamps. So when Berkeley called I had to take it seriously.

Some external folks are uncomfortable with the change. That's exactly why I'm leaving. They're uncomfortable because they're used looking to that one long-term leader to be the spokesperson for the work. But our work is bottom-up. The young woman who walks into the door, who's a "drop in," is the best spokesperson: What opportunities are accessible to her? Does she feel safe? Can she grow there? Are her needs met? Or are we directing her to where her needs will be met?

*Some external people are receiving your "nontraditional" style exceptionally well. The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation awarded you a Fellowship that is commonly known as a "genius" grant . . .*

It's been a really humbling experience. I remember the work before the awards, and it hasn't changed. Internally. Girls on the streets are still poor, still getting abused by boyfriends, still in cages [in juvenile hall]. I'm blessed to have these amazing opportunities and awards. It feels so good and at the same time it feels really weird and contradictory. I struggle with that. How do you get awarded for something that's supposed to be done? I mean I'm not giving anything back [*laughs*].

In the last year we've brought an intergenerational circle around us like a belt of wisdom that we can tap from. I've learned from those elders that you take these blessings that have been given to you and you spread whatever your gospel is.

Being a leader inside is way more important than outside.

Women who lead the Center help validate the brilliance in young women who have been told by everyone else that they have far to go. We say, "You

When you walk in the door [of the Center]—regardless of how many times you have failed because somebody has created this stupid definition of failure—you have succeeded. You walked in the door and you want to be in a community that supports you unconditionally.

have everything you need in you right now. Transformation is a lifelong process and, wow, you're still here. You're still alive." The door inside our office is green, so we use that as a metaphor. When you walk in the green door—regardless of how many times you have failed because somebody has created this stupid definition of failure—you have succeeded. You walked in the green door and you want to be in a community that supports you unconditionally. *Unconditionally.*

For someone who's disruptive or chronically absent, we may say, "Look, this isn't working for you. You may want to take a break and figure out when to come back. What's going to make you feel safe in a community where you're being challenged by other women who look like you or who've been through the same experiences, and not people who you can run game on?" Because we're used to running game on a case manager and probation programs—it's the way you survive.

I enjoy that piece of leadership, creating a different way of working for young women. Even the way that we talk about working *for* instead of *with* [young people]. It may not be the only model or the best model but it's amazing what happens, seeing young women from the California Youth Authority who are in for intense charges—violence, drug trafficking—go deep in this work. We process around our healing, our development, and our relationships with our parents. Part of being a good practitioner is having dealt with your own stuff.

*Having worked in this field for a decade, can you tell me about what you perceive to be the state of violence in the lives of youth today?*

My friend Shawn [Richard], who founded Brothers Against Guns after his brother was killed in 1995, and I stay up late sometimes on the phone talking about this—what makes young people, who grew up not even a generation behind us, still trigger happy? In the '80s and '90s a lot of the violence was around the new economy of crack cocaine, which presented a nexus of street violence, of handgun violence. Now, in San Francisco, crack cocaine is still there but it's capping itself and the violence around petty street drug dealing is capping.

What I see now is an offshoot from that. There's an increase in handguns and larger arms—semi-automatics—but young people are not necessarily killing because of drugs and money. There is desperation, anxiety among a lot of the young men of color who find themselves still on the streets. Hopelessness thrusts you towards centering your life about "my respect, my respect," because you have very little of it. It's analogous to slaves who perpetrated domestic violence—they would work all day and be kicked in the

back, and then they would come home and beat their wives. These young men are grabbing this notion of respect so hard. It's so important to them because it's all that they have. They protect that with all of their life.

When that respect is challenged, you don't fight. If you try to fight somebody the old-fashioned way they may kill you. They may have a handgun. It's not just "I'm 'gonna take this young man out because he disrespected me." You have to be the aggressor. Get them before they can get you—at a club, on the street corner, in the classroom, on the MUNI bus, at a stoplight. We also see fear and anxiety with a lot of these young men.

You know, one day I called Geoffrey Canada [author of *Fist, Stick, Knife, Gun*]. I needed to know why a young person could kill another person and turn around before the body hits the ground and go to school. He said, "Lateefah, no one asks 'why' and 'how' from that deep place. This generation has seen the gun in every aspect of their lives. From a spiritual context to a street context and everywhere in between. Violence has permeated their being."

It's everything, from the normality of owning a gun to going to funerals. If you have more power in executing someone than you do in any other part of your life, you will use that. Life and death is a very different experience, even for me. I've become accustomed to going to funerals and to saying goodbye to very young men. I don't get tremendously surprised or hurt. Of course I get sad when someone's been shot because it is almost the same thing that my mom talks about, growing up in Jim Crow South. When some black kid had cancer and he wasn't going to get the best treatment, you knew he was going to die. It was the same thing: "Wow, that's really horrible"; but it is status quo.

*Can you talk about the intersections you use in your analysis—the links among interpersonal, community-level, and structural violence; drugs; sexuality; addiction; joblessness—and how your understanding informs what you believe to be the “solutions” to these social problems?*

My analysis has developed around young people who are on the margins of youth social service and youth development practice: What are they dealing with and what are they suffering? And when I say “on the margins,” I mean that they're being left behind. They're “too hard to serve.” And I have a lot of ideas around that—how do you say they're too hard to serve if you don't want to serve them? If you don't want to build with them? That's part of it.

Liberation, to me, comes when young people atone for everything that they've done or that has been done to them. It's not clinical. These spaces go deeper and facilitate a process where young people acknowledge what

they need, what they want, what they didn't get, and what's going to make the difference. So that's one space.

And then there are jobs. The Center provides jobs, and not just jobs but opportunities to transform via employment and training for young women from communities that have dealt with an incredible amount of sexual assault and violence and joblessness. Liberation happens when these young women confront their beauty and their demons.

These issues—violence, health, safety, poverty, lack of education, race, homophobia, xenophobia—are interconnected in every young person in our organization. And they're not all young women anymore. The fathers of the children come in, needing to use the computer. They can't go anywhere else.

There are a lot of dichotomies that I wasn't aware of when we began. We've expanded our work deeply to get young women to look at their lives in racial, political, historical, and economic contexts. An elder brought us Paulo Freire's methodology around building existing intelligence and we were like, "This is it—popular education is the way for us to mobilize!"

*How do you evaluate your programs? How do you "prove your success" to strategic allies like funders and influential partners?*

It's extremely hard work, honoring the voices of young women *and* making sure that the organization has integrity in its core programs. I spent most of 2004 raising crazy money—our income is over a million dollars. I did that by pushing our circle of funders to really rethink success and failure. I tell funders to expect intense challenges. We have the numbers, but it's irrelevant. Philanthropic organizations expect life change to occur within grant periods. It's not possible! Process evaluation tells more of the story.

Many young women from these situations loop throughout their lives in six to nine month cycles. I don't know what they're going to do tomorrow because they've been living 15 years of straight hell. You can do our groups, go to South Africa, speak at a conference, and all this great stuff, but your demons are still real. Your mom's behind bars—that's real. So you may release that on the streets. We don't want that to happen but we have to be honest about this unrealistic expectation of going from the darkest dark to the brightest light in a particular period. This isn't an organization that's going to give up on our young women. We understand what they're going through. A person has to shift and change a lot to subscribe to the national status quo. Our young women don't like other young women initially. Women have taken their boyfriends, stolen from them on the streets, stolen their clothes in group homes. Their horrible experiences always go back to their mothers. If we're not dealing with that, we fail. Sisterhood is the first

module of our employment-training program: What does sisterhood mean, and how can you lean on a community of women who love you? That is a foreign idea [to them]. Some people critique this as “touchy-feely.” Well, that’s going to be what changes violent young people who have been on the streets and in the juvenile justice system. It’s not just outcome-based, because that’s unrealistic.

We’ve struggled with this. We’ve not gotten money or we’ve not applied for money because the funder wants unrealistic stories or unrealistic numbers. Some organizations tell funders that [they manipulate the numbers]—I’m a fundraiser so I know how people can lie on reports. Do we want to keep the field like that or do we want to change so that it’s an honest field, so that we ask for stories instead of outcomes? It’s revolutionary.

We have two young women in the “Sisters Thriving” program who were rivals, and now they’re best friends. They were—we were—shocked when they found themselves together on the first day because one’s brother killed the other’s brother. It came out in a deeply intense emotional process. One said, “I wanted to see you dead. You killed my brother. Not your brother, *you* killed *my* brother.” These two young women called off a two-year beef between two sides trying to kill each other because of that horrible death. We brought in an elder who worked with them around the passing of spirits. They did a ceremony for the dead brother, releasing him from the anger. And I thought, “Wow, this may be a real possibility for young women who have forgotten their internal selves because their external being has become so important. You move mountains when you do that work and you save people’s lives. We’re saving their lives.

*What is your advice for young people who do youth development work? What is your advice for young people and for “allies”—adults, people who have formal education or other historical positions of power who want to do this work well and in solidarity?*

I just turned 28 and [laughs] now I have to write a national apology for making adults feel unwelcome for years. Because that’s ridiculous. Community is community, that’s exactly what it is. “For youth, by youth.” It’s a model that works, but I cannot say that the Center survived because we were young, vigorous, vivacious, and smart. We survived the hardest times because there were adults with lived experience. We, as young people who have been let down by a lot of adults, must let them back in.

The best thing adults can do is listen. Listen. Whether in developing or evaluating programs, we must suspend some of our ideas around what works and just listen to the folks who are benefiting from it [the work]. It

is a scary thing for me because I'm comfortable with what's worked for us. It's important to listen and act in a way that is responsive. My most important advice for practitioners is to be active listeners, but also to move in action with that information.

I don't think all organizations should be like the Center—it's really difficult to have young women in charge of everything. It's a wonderful experiment in possibilities. At the same time, we will tell a young woman to go to other agencies because they provide housing, which she needs and which is something we will never provide. There are youth organizations that are run by adults who are good people and who want to see young people live.

And as for younger activists, it's the same thing as for adults. We have to listen [*laughs*]. Not "we" because I'm not young anymore. You—you—have to listen.

The best thing adults can do is listen. Listen. Whether in developing or evaluating programs, we must suspend some of our ideas around what works and just listen to the folks who are benefiting from [the work].

*Lateefah Simon, formerly the executive director of the Center for Young Women's Development, the nation's foremost juvenile justice reentry youth-run organization, has spent over a decade creating dynamic community programming, advising public policy, and raising funds on the behalf of young people affected by the justice system. A gifted and highly sought after speaker, Lateefah has keynoted at over 75 trainings and conferences around the country and abroad. Ms. Simon employs her immense knowledge from her years as a street-based youth development practitioner, community organizer, and nonprofit executive to move and inspire communities to proactively engage low-income young people in social change work. In 2003 she was awarded the prestigious Macarthur Fellowship for her groundbreaking work in San Francisco. She has also won awards from the Ford Foundation, National Council for Research on Women, the National Organization for Women, Oprah Magazine and the California State Assembly, which honored her as the 13th Assembly District's "Woman of the Year 2005." She is currently a member of the Board of Directors of the Women's Foundation of California and the Advocacy Institute (Washington DC). Lateefah lives in Emeryville, California with her 9-year-old daughter Aminah. After 11 years, Lateefah transitioned from CYWD to return to college and develop her private consultant practice.*

*Sarah Raskin is a fellow in the CDC Division of Violence Prevention, where she researches special topics in youth violence prevention. A former community health educator in southern Appalachia and intervention specialist in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, she earned an MPH in International Community Health and Development and a Certificate in Human Rights from Emory University, where she received the Gangarosa Award for “creative approaches to global public health problems.” Sarah hopes to begin a Ph.D. program in Medical Anthropology in September 2006.*

*The views in this article are those of the interviewee, Lateefah Simon.  
They do not necessarily represent the views of the U.S. Centers  
for Disease Control and Prevention.*

**Contact:**

The Center for Young Women’s Development  
1550 Bryant Street  
Suite #700  
San Francisco, CA 94103  
Phone: 415.703.8800  
Fax: 415.703.8818  
Web: [www.cywd.org](http://www.cywd.org)