Youth Dreamers Put Social Action Principles to Work

BY ART PETERSON

When one of Kristina Berdan’s Youth Dreamers is in a funk because things aren’t going according to plan, Berdan likes to quote Winston Churchill: “Success is nothing more than going from failure to failure with undiminished enthusiasm.”

Given the scope of the Youth Dreamers’ ambition, they should have expected a few setbacks. The Youth Dreamers is a group of students, ages 9 to 13, who take Berdan’s community action elective at the Stadium School, a middle school in Baltimore. Though Berdan has been involved in community action projects for some years, the Dreamers proposed an idea that went far beyond anything she had been involved in before. Previously, she worked with younger students, responding to the expressed needs of her school community: painting bathrooms, creating a school garden, organizing a recycling program. But the Youth Dreamers wanted to take community service to a whole new level. Their dream was to buy and renovate a house that would serve as a community center for the youth of northeast Baltimore’s Waverly neighborhood.

see Youth Dreamers, page 4
Youth Dreamers

continued from page 1

Part of the inspiration for Berdan's work has come from her involvement, through the National Writing Project, with the Centre for Social Action (CSA), a social service organization based at DeMontfort University in Leicester, England. A key premise of CSA's work is that community members are best equipped to define and solve the problems that affect them.

Berdan, a teacher-consultant with the Maryland Writing Project, has attended two CSA workshops sponsored by NWP. She says, "I was used to working with surveys that ask the people affected to identify community problems. CSA pushed me to ask the next question: Why do these circumstances occur?" For the Youth Dreamers, one problem was not difficult to identify. After school, too many young people were on the streets in a neighborhood that had more than its share of crime, drugs, and even homicide. Then came the "Why" question and the answer: There were too many kids on the streets because they had no place to go. The Youth Dreamers began brainstorming and agreed on an obvious, if—as it seemed to Berdan—totally fanciful, solution. If the Dreamers acquired a house and provided activities that the neighborhood kids wanted, the kids would be off the streets. The students had been inspired by the story of University of Maryland basketball player Juan Dixon who lost his parents to drugs and AIDS but emerged as a confident young man because he attended a youth center. Berdan was slightly overwhelmed by the ambition of the project, but she bought in. "I didn't want to be the person who quashed their dreams," she said.

One thing that everyone connected with the emerging project understood was that this was going to be a long-term endeavor—one that would require students' dedication even in the years after they left Stadium School. The Youth Dreamers developed a pledge (see box, this page) in which they expressed their dedication to stick together and support each other through good and bad. In a written account of their journey, the dreamers say, "We understood that big dreams don't come easy."

So in March of 2001, the work began. The Dreamers wrote letters to the mayor of Baltimore and other government officials, the Department of Public Housing, the Baltimore Orioles and the Baltimore Ravens, as well as some reporters at Baltimore newspapers soliciting support. For the most part, the silence was deafening. At such moments, Berdan called up the words of Churchill and other plucky people. But after many letters and no responses, she decided to turn to the Maryland dignitaries and elected officials who had recognized her when she was awarded National Board certification in November 2000. The students redrafted their original letters, making reference to their National Board certified teacher, and sent them off to the list of prominent persons.

Though Berdan has been involved in community action projects for some years, the Dreamers proposed an idea that went far beyond anything she had been involved in before.

“Miss K. always said it would be a lot of work,” says Youth Dreamer Chantel M. But the Dreamers did have some early successes. Representatives from the Department of Housing and from Habitat for Humanity came to the school to meet with the Dreamers. They provided no money but did give lots of valuable advice. And when the students identified a piece of property that they thought would be just the right location, Habitat for Humanity also provided budget information for rehabbing it. The Dreamers did have one other success. They wrote a grant application to a local foundation, Youth As Resources, in which teenagers were active participants. They received a $3,000 grant to buy furniture. But the daunting problem remained: they still had no building to furnish.

However, as the students knew and as CSA teaches, people with concerns cannot rely entirely on others to solve their problems. The group sponsored lunchtime bake sales, raising about $200. They participated in an assembly at school to share what they were doing. They wrote a rap for the assembly. (See box, page 5.) Then, as they tell it, “At the end of the year, we had a T-shirt fundraiser for the eighth grade students who were leaving the school. The T-shirts had iron-on pictures of friends. We took the pictures, then planned to decorate the shirts with writing and rhinestones. But the pictures didn’t come out. This was two days before the last day of school! So we had to retake all the pictures, run to the drugstore at lunch to drop off the film, run back after school to pick up the pictures, and then iron and decorate the T-shirts until about 7 p.m. when we finally got all those orders done. Whew!”

Then came the big news. In July, Barbara Mikulski, a senator from Maryland who had received one of the letters from the Youth Dreamers, earmarked $70,000 in a piece of federal legislation for the “Youth Dreamers of the Stadium School's creation of their youth center.” The students responded with comments ranging from “Wow!” to “After all those letters, it's about time.” The Youth Dreamers knew this would not be the end of it. The bill still had to pass both houses of Congress and then the president had to sign it. (“It was an excellent lesson in how a bill becomes a law,” noted Berdan.)

Meanwhile, the group continued its work, writing to Oprah Winfrey, Bill Gates, retailers Target and Wal-Mart, and various foundations to solicit help. They also continued to plan what they thought their center should be like. It would be a place where neighborhood children grades one through six could come and a place where older teens could work, tutoring, teaching, and supervising activities. Some students would volunteer as part of Maryland’s service learning requirement, but the Dreamers understood that many of the teen workers would need to be paid as it is difficult for volunteers to maintain the level of commitment they knew the center would require. They wrote, they would be “a place to come and do homework, get tutoring, hang out with positive

Youth Dreamers Pledge

“Dreams take time, patience, sustained effort, and a willingness to fail if they are ever to be anything more than dreams.”

We pledge to:

- persevere, knowing that it will take time
- have patience as we believe in each other and support each other
- face obstacles with courage
- take pride in our successes and learn from our failures.

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

—Margaret Mead
people, play games, do research on computers, watch movies and participate in classes like basketball, dance, art, sewing, cooking, and typing." Adults as well as teenagers would be involved as supervisors, teachers, and tutors.

Soon, several months had gone by, and the students had heard nothing. Last November, when the Dreamers could be patient no longer, they sent a classmate off to phone Senator Mikulsiki's project director to find out what was happening with the bill. The student returned with the news: "It's on the president's desk. He's going to sign it."

And with that positive news, the next phase of the Youth Dreamer's work began. The senator came to Baltimore to meet with the students and present the $70,000 check. She told the students she had been attracted to the project because she herself had grown up in the neighborhood, and beyond that, she understood that the Youth Dreamers had "sweat equity." That is, they had not only written letters, but they had followed through; they had demonstrated that they had persistence to see the project to completion.

But much work remains. The Dreamers are realizing that $70,000 is just a start. They'll need more help. A representative of the Dreamers went on a local Saturday morning telecast to explain the project and recruit help. The original house the group had identified is no longer available, so the search is on for a new location. But even this setback hasn't dissuaded the Youth Dreamers, whom, Berdan says, a visitor to her classroom might mistake for a team of aspiring real estate agents. "What's the square footage?" they'll ask about a potential site and then get on MapQuest to check out exactly where the property is located. "They want a safe location," she adds.

As the project has progressed, Berdan has been struck by the "incredible integration" of all subject areas as students have engaged in writing letters and grants, proofreading, note taking, fundraising, making posters, estimating cost and bills, planning budgets, researching grants and available homes on the Internet, and manipulating the processes of government. "All these real-world applications," she says, "happened in an elective course."

"The thing I like most about Youth Dreamers," student Chantel M. says, "is the excitement. I never knew what was going to happen next."

Another student, Astarte M., a sixth-grader new to the Youth Dreamers, describes what might be happening on any day she attends class. "We meet to decide what has to be done. Maybe I'll make phone calls about getting grants, or I'll make posters, or I'll be on the computer looking at houses. What I've learned from Youth Dreamers is how things work. I've always wanted to be a singer, and I still do, but I've learned some lessons from Youth Dreamers that will help me whatever I do. I've learned that it's important to be responsible for everything you do and that if you are willing to stay with a project and work with others, you can make things change."

Asali Solomon, a program specialist with the National Writing Project who works as the project's liaison to the Centre for Social Action, concurs with Astarte on a major point. "The part about staying with a project is important. CSA introduces students to the concept of 'sustainability.' Kids learn that when they get involved in social action there may be a beginning, but there's no end."

Those wishing more information about the Youth Dreamers may contact them in care of the Stadium School, 2500 E. Northern Parkway, Baltimore, Maryland 21214; Phone: 410/396-6732; Fax: 410/396-7008; Email: youthdreamers@hotmail.com.

**Kristina Berdan** is a teacher-consultant with the Maryland Writing Project. A National Board certified teacher, she currently teaches grades five through seven at the Stadium School in Baltimore, Maryland. She is also an adjunct faculty member at Towson University, teaching arts integration courses for Maryland teachers.

This article has made extensive use of "The Story of Youth Dreamers," an account of their adventure written by the Youth Dreamers.

---

# Youth Dreamers Rap

**April 2001**

**by Chantel M. and Shanta C.**

We're the Youth Dreamers,
And we're here to say, We're gonna bring success and education Your way!
We're gonna find a place For kids after school, Where they can sit back, Relax, and be cool.
Drugs and violence Are not what they want to meet, And all that happens While you're on the street.
We wrote a grant And letters, too, We asked for donations From stores near you.
We wrote to the mayor And the people downtown, Hopefully they'll listen And not play around.

We're not gonna stop We're gonna keep on writing, And if they don't hear us We're gonna keep on fighting.
We went to Youth As Resources on a Tuesday It was during our Spring Break, And we wanted to play, But we wanted a youth center, so we went anyway.
We found our house And we are planning to buy it, We have to write to Pepsi and Nike So they can supply it.
We have to end our song Hopefully you'll come along, When we get our center together It will be open during any type of weather.

---

**Urban Sites Network Conference**

Savannah, Georgia

April 26–27, 2002