

# The Story of the Youth Dreamers

## In Their Own Words

MILDRED HARRIS, CHANTEL MORANT, SHANTA CRIPPEN,  
CHRIS LAWSON, CHEKANA REID, CIERRA CARY, TIFFANI YOUNG-SMITH

### WHO WE ARE (*WHAT & WHY*)

We are the Youth Dreamers, a group of young people between the ages of eleven and fifteen who share the same goals. We want to make our voices heard, help our community, and be a part of making a future for the youth of today. The Youth Dreamers are part of the Stadium School, a Baltimore City public school that serves about 140 students in grades four through eight from the communities surrounding Memorial Stadium. The Youth Dreamers originated in an elective course called Community Action in March 2001. Many of us are now in high school but continue to be involved.

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*Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful,  
committed citizens can change the world. Indeed,  
it's the only thing that ever has.*

— Margaret Mead

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When we started this project, we talked a lot about issues in the community. We decided that one of the issues that really bothered us was that too many young people get involved with negative activities after school. We also read that after school, many kids just hang out with nothing to do, and that this lack of structured activity can lead to bad grades, bad school attendance, drug abuse, and bad behavior.

Once we agreed that the lack of positive activities for kids was a community issue that we wanted to change, we did the But Why? activity (see Part Three) and brainstormed why kids getting involved in negative behavior was a problem for us and what the causes of the problem were. From our list, we decided that one thing we could change was the fact that young people don't have many safe, stimulating places to go after school. We would solve this smaller problem by creating a youth-run youth center. We hoped to keep kids off the street and maybe change their lives by removing drugs, violence, and other negative influences.

If you were to look us up in the dictionary, you might find this definition that we created together: "The Youth Dreamers: n. a group of young adults committed to decreasing negativity among their peers in the community by creating a safe, stimulating environment for personal and educational growth."

## **THE BEGINNING (HOW & ACT)**

We decided that we wanted a youth center run by two adult directors, a board of directors that includes youth and adults, up to twenty-three teenagers in grades seven through twelve, at least eight adult volunteers from the community, Ameri-Corps volunteers, and a janitor. The teenagers would tutor members and teach a variety of classes along with adult volunteers. The center would include a variety of classes, such as sewing, pottery, mosaics, art, cooking, and typing.

Each teenager would commit to working at the center for a certain number of hours each week. They would be paid a small stipend for half of these hours and earn service learning hours for the other half. Adult volunteers would be paid a small stipend for their hours. The directors and janitor would be paid a set yearly salary. Finally, we were trying to set up a scholarship fund for Youth Dreamers who serve on the board of directors.

Not only would the center serve kids, it would also serve other community members. We would host block parties, open houses, neighborhood cleanups, and other activities that bring young people and adults together in positive ways.

The first thing we did to reach these goals was to write a pledge to show our commitment. "We pledge to persevere, knowing that this will take time; have patience as we believe in each other and support each other; face obstacles with courage; and take pride in our successes and learn from our failures." We decided that if someone decided to leave, they would be responsible for finding a replacement. Next, we wrote a business proposal that includes a one-year budget of oper-

ating costs. The budget took a long time to complete because we had to do a lot of research about how much monthly expenses cost, how much it would cost to buy and renovate a house, and so on.

Then we began a letter-writing campaign. We wrote lots of letters to our mayor and other government officials, the Department of Public Housing, the Orioles baseball team, the Ravens football team, and some reporters at our local paper. We wrote more than forty letters and received only three replies. We did not stop. We kept on writing, and though some did not hear us, we kept on fighting to be heard.

In the meantime, we had lots of bake sales at lunchtime. We raised about \$200. We participated in an assembly at school to share what we were doing with all the other students. We wrote a rap for the assembly. We still sing the rap today. At the end of the year, we had a T-shirt fundraiser for the eighth-grade students who were leaving the school. On the T-shirts, we put iron-on pictures we had taken of their friends. Then we decorated the shirts with writing and rhinestones. The first roll of pictures that we took did not come out. This was two days before the last day of school! So we had to retake all the pictures, run to the drugstore to drop off the film, run back after school to pick up the pictures, and then iron and decorate until about 7:00 P.M., when we finally had all of our orders done! Whew! We worked hard!

Our first official funding was from Youth as Resources. We wrote a ten-page grant proposal requesting \$3,000 for furniture for our center. We presented the grant over spring break to the Youth as Resources board of teens and adults. We were all nervous because we had never presented to a board. We were so proud when we got the money.

During the first summer of our project, our teacher called us to tell us that we were part of a federal bill by Senator Mikulski! She was the third person to respond to our letters! The bill set aside \$70,000 for our youth center. We said things like “Wow!” “Oh my gosh! After all those letters!” “It’s about time!” We finally had our dream come true, but we knew that this was only the beginning.

We organized a luncheon at which the senator would hand over the check. At the ceremony, she read aloud part of our letter and told us how impressed she was that we had been able to problem solve our T-shirt disaster. She partnered us with St. Ambrose Housing Aid Center to help us buy the house and with Habitat for Humanity to help us renovate the house. Since then, we have written many other grant proposals and now have over \$180,000 toward our one-year operating budget of \$276,000. Even though we were rejected by some foundations, we still kept writing and never gave up.

## THROUGH THE YEARS (*HOW, ACT, REFLECT*)

During our years as Youth Dreamers, we have successfully completed many fundraisers in order to add to our budget. We have had benefit basketball games, bake sales, a penny drive, T-shirt sales, a talent show, a picture day, and a marathon fundraiser when our teacher ran the Boston Marathon. Each year that we have held the picture day fundraiser, we have gotten better at organizing, planning, and running it. All of these fundraisers have certain problems, but we wrote them down so that we will know how to do better the next time.

We have been involved in many presentations to spread the word. We have presented at Towson University and Villa Julie College. We have also presented for the Maryland Bankers Reinvestment Group, the University of Maryland's Law Clinic, Councilwoman Lisa Stancil, Youth as Resources, Youth Venture, and community groups. We have led workshops for middle school students in Baltimore City. We even organized a luncheon for potential funders so that they could see what we are trying to do. We presented our proposal at the Baltimore City Council meeting because we were invited to do so by Councilwoman Lisa Stancil. We have also gone on many site visits to other community groups to find out how they got started and how they do fundraising.

We have been on two different newscasts and on the radio. We were on stations all over the country when we won the Angel Soft Angels in the Classroom Award. At the ceremony, Jane Kaczmarek from *Malcolm in the Middle* donated an extra \$10,000 from her family for our center. Last summer, Angel Soft came to film us for an educational documentary they are making to inspire students to do community work.

## IN THE COMMUNITY

We have begun going to area elementary schools during the day to work with students who may be our future members. This is part of how we are going to recruit members for our center. We wrote letters to the principals to get permission and then planned activities and lessons to do with the younger children. Working with younger children is hard, but it pays off in the end.

Each year, we work with the Baltimore Community Foundation to review proposals for after-school programming in Baltimore. This is a long and hard

process, but it gives us a chance to see how proposals are viewed from the “other side.” One year, we also ran workshops for other middle school students in the city. We helped them identify problems in their community that they wanted to solve. We will continue to work with them, giving them advice and helping with their projects. Finally, we organized and planned an event called Interaction Festival for National Join Hands Day. Join Hands Day is an annual day of service that develops relationships between kids and adults through neighborhood volunteering.

## **NEXT STEPS**

Toward the end of our second year, we did a lot of research on becoming a non-profit organization, and that June, we voted 16–1 to go ahead with it. By August, thanks to the University of Maryland’s Free Law Clinic, we had become the Stadium School Youth Dreamers, Inc. We have a board of directors that has seven kids and seven adults. We spent that entire summer rewriting the bylaws and revising our mission statement. There are both youth and adult officers on our board, and we meet once a month.

Every new school year, Ms. Kristina gives seasoned Youth Dreamers the opportunity to teach the fresh Youth Dreamers what we have learned in past years. We have to do many different lessons on subjects like fundraising, talking on the telephone, working in elementary schools, budgeting and balancing a checkbook, and presentations. It takes us a lot of time to set it all up, especially since we try to make the lessons fun because kids can easily be distracted. Most of the fresh Youth Dreamers think this is a more effective way of teaching because they relate to their peers more than their teachers. Being a Youth Dreamer gives you opportunities to do things you would not usually do.

As far as getting our house, we have found the perfect one and are about to buy it. It is in horrible condition, but we have help from a Housing Aid Center to renovate and an architect who is working with us for free to sketch out the rooms. We have learned how to file a zoning appeal and are waiting for our hearing date. We have canvassed the neighborhood to get support for the change and to recruit members and volunteers. Plus, we have written to several TV shows that fix up homes and challenged them to take on our project. Finally, we wrote to lots of corporations like Home Depot to ask them to donate materials.

## REFLECTIONS (OBVIOUS!)

We have learned a lot over the past three years. When we started, we didn't realize that this project would be so much work and take so much time. We have had to spend a lot of time—in school, after school, and on weekends—working. Some of our biggest challenges were not staying on task, getting responses, being comfortable presenting, and staying committed. But we have benefited because we have learned how to write grant proposals and letters and plan and run fundraisers, and we have learned from our mistakes. Most important, we have learned that if we stay committed, we can accomplish a lot by working together. When we thought we would have to give up on our dream home because it was in such bad shape and would cost so much, one of us said, “We didn't get this far by giving up.” That inspired us to launch a campaign called “40 Days to \$100,000,” and even though we raised only \$12,000, we got a lot of community support, and that is how we got our free architect. We have become good problem solvers, and we know how to reflect on our work to make it better.

The most exciting part of this whole experience has been seeing the things we want to happen actually happen, like getting our bill passed. We hope that other areas in our city will develop youth centers in their communities, which we hope will decrease crimes committed by teens. We hope that the newspapers and TV, which talk about bad stuff too much, will see the positive sides of Baltimore. We would like to see less young people on the corner and more going to college and becoming successful because of our project. Some people have become more positive about us, but we still have to deal with some adults' negative attitudes toward us. Sometimes they think that this is just a cute project and don't take us seriously, but we want our youth center to be known nationally for its outstanding achievements, accomplished totally by the young people in Youth Dreamers.