

YouthBuild participants work together on a house in California.

Upon graduation from the YouthBuild program, students leave with a solid foundation on which to build a successful future, having acquired a high school diploma or GED, construction and leadership skills, and new tools for use in coping with life.

Although the Bureau of Justice Statistics reports that more than two-thirds of released inmates are rearrested within three years, things are significantly different for YouthBuild graduates. Eighty-five percent of those who were convicted of felonies before they entered the YouthBuild program have not re-offended since completing the program. In addition, two-thirds of the graduates who had been involved with the criminal justice system prior to entering the program have not been arrested, convicted of a misdemeanor or felony, or spent one or more nights in jail or in prison.

YouthBuild's comprehensive, alternative approach to working with youths has resulted in a low recidivism rate. The organization fosters a strong program culture, providing concrete services, developing positive relationships with youths, creating opportunities for community service and leadership, and establishing a direct connection to the future.

YouthBuild programs provide low-income, out-of-school and out-of-work youths and young adults ages 16 to 24 the opportunity to embark on a productive path to the future. The program's comprehensive approach focuses on creating a caring and supportive mini-community among youths and adults with a model focusing on five key components: education, construction, leadership development, counseling and graduate services. Typical participants remain in the program for eight months, spending half their time in the classroom pursuing a high school diploma or GED and the other half at a construction site learning valuable skills as they build affordable housing for members of their community. Leadership training provides the youths the opportunity to learn and practice taking responsibility for themselves, their families and their communities. Program participants

Photos courtesy YouthBuild USA

By Tim Cross

WHAT WORKS With At-Risk Youths

“If I didn't find YouthBuild,
I would either be dead or locked up now.”

— James Turner
2002 Isles YouthBuild graduate, Trenton, N.J.

Each year, thousands of low-income youths, who either have not completed high school or who have completed high school but have not been able to find a job, take a decisive step to turn their lives around by applying to YouthBuild — a national nonprofit program that assists disadvantaged

youths. Of the thousands who apply, approximately 6,500 are accepted into one of the 200 YouthBuild programs located around the country. Typically, 80 percent of those accepted are black or Hispanic, 75 percent are male, 40 percent are adjudicated and 29 percent are on public assistance.

become engaged by assuming active roles in making decisions about things such as staff selection and program planning, and governing both at the program and community levels.

YouthBuild programs are in urban, rural and tribal communities across the country, and are connected by one national intermediary — YouthBuild USA — that provides individualized technical assistance, publications, training and professional development.

Working With Adjudicated Youths

In 1978, a group of New York City teenagers approached Dorothy Stoneman, then director of the Youth Action Program of the East Harlem Block Schools, and expressed their desire to renovate an abandoned building to house homeless dogs. Stoneman helped them select a building, raise funds, hire adult trainers and realize they could actually build houses for homeless people. The teenagers' successful renovation of the East Harlem tenement led the Youth Action Program to form a city-wide coalition in 1984 to replicate the program.

In 1988, national demand to replicate this program made it clear that it should spread beyond New York City, so in 1990, YouthBuild USA was founded to orchestrate all aspects of the replication and policy impact of YouthBuild across the country. By the early 1990s, the program had been replicated in 14 cities. By 1992, legislation authorizing the federal YouthBuild program was passed, followed in 1993 by an appropriation of \$40 million. In 1994, the first federal grants from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development were received by local YouthBuild programs and YouthBuild USA was selected as HUD's training and technical assistance provider through a competitive process.

Since 1997, when YouthBuild USA convened a national meeting of YouthBuild directors, students and graduates to explore the challenges and program design implications of working with adjudicated youths, the question of how YouthBuild could serve as an effective court diversion

and community re-entry program had been actively pursued in local programs. In some YouthBuild programs, between 60 percent and 90 percent of the participants have been court-involved. These programs provide instructive examples of how local YouthBuild directors have entered into working partnerships with courts and probation officers, and positioned their sites to be a first point of re-entry for young adults coming out of the juvenile justice system. At least two YouthBuild programs are now offered in locked detention facilities. Below are short profiles of four of the programs.

New Waverly YouthBuild in Texas. Gulf Coast Trades Center Inc. (GCTC) began operations in 1971, initially serving troubled youths from the Houston-Galveston metropolitan area by providing a residential vocational trade school. The program joined YouthBuild after incorporating home construction for low-income families as an applied learning experience for participants.

The program serves adjudicated youths ages 16 to 19 from across Texas. Either a county juvenile probation authority or the Texas Youth Commission refers youths. GCTC provides vocational training to students in residence at a state-secure facility, an extensive community-based after-care services program around the state in lieu of state parole supervision, and community-based transitional services for up to one year for youths re-locating to Houston.

A recent study by the Texas Youth Commission found that GCTC youths have a rearrest rate of 16 percent compared with 27 percent of youths in group home programs, 55 percent in other contract programs and 61 percent in Texas Youth Commission state institutions.

YouthBuild Jacksonville, Fla. A relatively new YouthBuild program in Jacksonville, operated by the Department of Community Service, works with incarcerated youths in the Duvall County Jail. Participants, whose offenses range from drug possession and drug sales to assault and burglary, are either court-ordered to enter the program or chosen by program staff as likely to succeed in YouthBuild. In return for good behavior in the program, students may

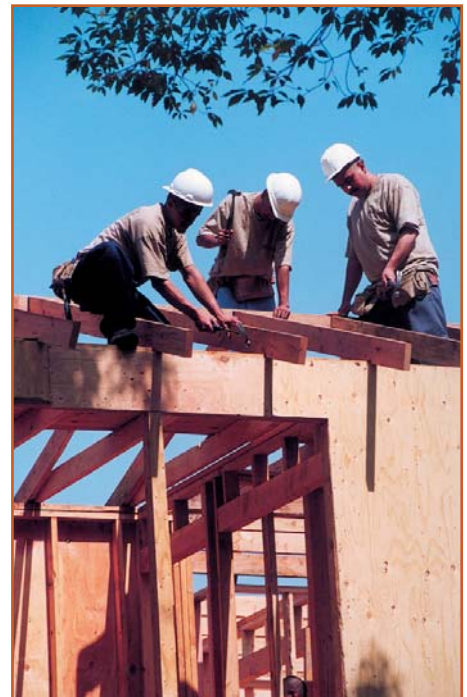
have time removed from their sentences and have the opportunity for work release.

At a minimum cost, the program provides nearly 15,000 annual work hours to the city. Initial program indicators are positive — only three out of 10 graduates have been jailed again.

Trenton and ISLES (Newark) YouthBuild, N.J. Under this proposed partnership, students from the juvenile justice residential community homes in Essex and Mercer counties will have the opportunity to be active members of one of two New Jersey YouthBuild programs in Trenton and Newark and to complete many of the YouthBuild graduation requirements before their release. The Division of Juvenile Parole and Transition Services (part of the Juvenile Justice Commission) would develop the students' parole plans, incorporating YouthBuild as their educational component.

The partnership would allow Juvenile Justice Commission students to begin a re-entry plan prior to their release that leads to a high school diploma, job training and job placement.

Students from Essex Residential Community Homes would attend YouthBuild construction training during the day and receive the education component during the evening. To



YouthBuild participants frame a house.



In addition to acquiring construction skills, YouthBuild participants graduate with a high school diploma or GED.

effectively balance daytime training and academic instruction, the commission plans to provide YouthBuild with a full-time certified vocational teacher and academic teachers on-site. Additionally, students who have been paroled to Essex County will be allowed to participate in the YouthBuild program.

How YouthBuild Makes A Difference

Unlike many other youth development programs, there are few characteristics that preclude a young person from being accepted into a YouthBuild program. The emphasis is on serving under-skilled, out-of-school and out-of-work youths, so up to 25 percent of enrollees are permitted to be high school graduates. YouthBuild serves an extremely disadvantaged group of young men and women, none of whom are excluded from participation based on past mistakes or the type, number or severity of challenges faced in their lives. Rather, the program looks at a young person's readiness to embark on a journey that requires hard, dedicated work.

At YouthBuild, retaining and involving students has been a challenge that over the years has been distilled into a few key learnings.

Typical YouthBuild Participant*

	Before YouthBuild	After YouthBuild	Percentage change
Has a GED or diploma	21.7%	59.2%	127%
Is a parent	35.0%	52.7%	51%
Used marijuana	71.6%	25.1%	-65%
Used hard drugs	29.7%	6.4%	-78%
Sold marijuana	37.7%	8.6%	-77%
Sold hard drugs	32.4%	7.8%	-75%
Used alcohol	75.7%	42.9%	-43%
Arrested	55.6%	26.2%	-53%
Convicted of a misdemeanor	37.5%	15.3%	-59%
Convicted of a felony	27.0%	9.2%	-66%
Been a victim of abuse or violence	19.6%	10.8%	-45%
Been homeless	26.0%	11.7%	-55%
"What age do you think you would live to?" (for those who think they will live longer now)	40 years	72 years	32 years

* These findings are part of the 2003 research study, *Life After YouthBuild: 900 YouthBuild Graduates Reflect on Their Lives, Dreams and Experiences*, funded by the Marcus Family Foundation. The research was conducted by Brandeis University and Temple University.

Program Culture

In order to inspire young people to regularly attend the program and stay for its duration, there must be a strong program culture. This culture is passed on from staff to participants through day-to-day interactions, including recruitment, intake interviews, orientation and informal conversations. It has to be reinforced every day, and it has to be something the young people must share in creating. A positive culture is the organizing principal from which all decisions and activities flow. Fundamental to the YouthBuild culture is the profound respect for the intelligence of the students and the commitment to their development. As a result, a community based on caring, solidarity, teamwork and optimism arises — the young people call it family.

Concrete Services

Program participants might initially demonstrate the resourcefulness to get through the program, but as one YouthBuild graduate stated, "There are sometimes extenuating circumstances — stuff from the outside world — that might necessitate young people to leave the program." Challenges such as child care, transportation, responsibilities to parents or siblings and substance abuse are among the issues that can get in the way of consistent, sustained participation. Part of the program's role is to assist young adults in negotiating these obstacles by providing counseling and building additional capacity to address some of these issues. In

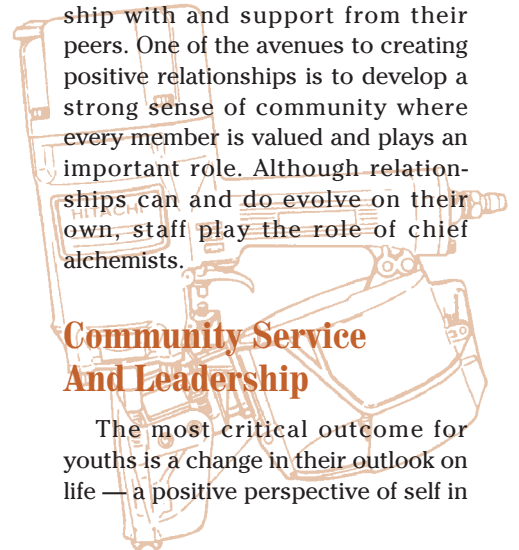
fact, some programs provide residential and child care services to meet their students' needs. And most programs have an established referral network of community-based organizations that can handle a variety of issues, including mental health, substance abuse, housing and transportation.

Good Relationships

One of the most important messages that YouthBuild provides students is, "We're here to support you and to do whatever we can to help you be successful in the world." Forming strong relationships within the first two to three months of the program improves the likelihood of student completion. Strong relationships with staff are essential, but relationships with peers are also important. YouthBuild graduates have said one of the reasons they stayed with the program was friendship with and support from their peers. One of the avenues to creating positive relationships is to develop a strong sense of community where every member is valued and plays an important role. Although relationships can and do evolve on their own, staff play the role of chief alchemists.

Community Service And Leadership

The most critical outcome for youths is a change in their outlook on life — a positive perspective of self in



A Story of Transformation

By James Turner

When I was growing up, my father used drugs and my mother was an alcoholic. I was the last of six children, so they basically made sure I had clothes on my back, food and things of that nature. But on the streets, when I was getting in trouble, they were not there for me. The way they lived did not teach me right from wrong. I thought that what I saw them doing was OK.

I left school at the beginning of ninth grade. I used to take things from others and use people. I sold and used drugs at the same time. I knew that it was wrong, but my mind was in a negative state, so I did not think of the consequences.

The first time that I was arrested, it was for stealing a car. I was sent to a youth detention center for two weeks. In the center, they told me things that were positive — like what I should and should not do. They said I should be in school, be able to read and spell, and dress and speak a certain way. At the time, I was complying so that I could get out.

Upon my release, I went back to my mother with the same negative attitude. It was like I was addicted to negative things, nothing positive. It was not long after my first arrest that I got caught again for stealing.

During those six months that I was incarcerated, my mind got stronger and turned positive. I learned a lot of things that I never knew I had the ability to learn. This time, when I got out, my mind was in a different state and I wanted to do the right thing. When I was released, I was put on probation. My probation officer was like a father figure. He got me a job and was there for me when I needed him. I was doing fine up until my probation was over. After that, things got rough, and I had no one to turn to but the streets. I lost my job and just forgot about school. I went back to the streets, the only real love that I felt I had.

I was not sure which road in life to take. I started to sell crack cocaine. It was fun at the time — fast money and living that life, as they would say. Once again, I was trapped in a corner with no way out. I was arrested again, but this time I was an adult, 18 years old, on my way to what they call the Work House at Mercer County Correctional. It was my first drug charge as an adult, and I was unable to post bail. My mother and father had no money because they were trying to keep a roof over their heads. So I spent five to six months in the Work House, where I learned it was a place I did not want to be. All you have there is yourself. You are in there with all men and your freedom is really taken away from you. You are in one room for a long time and have no one talking to you or telling you right from wrong. I had a lot of time to think about my situation — wondering why I did what I did, what I could have done to prevent it and what I could do to get myself out of the present situation. Basically, there was nothing that would get me out but to do my time.

This time when I was released, I made up my mind to become a positive person and a leader. The first thing I did was go to church and learn what God was about. I turned to him because I knew he would never turn on me. I started going to church on a regular basis, and I entered the ISLES YouthBuild program.

I joined the program in February 2002, lost and confused about what I wanted out of life. YouthBuild helped me find the real me by motivating me to come on time, all the time and to be a team player. They gave me a chance to look forward to something when I woke up in the morning. They also gave me the opportunity to see places and experience things.

I met André Thomas, a staff member at ISLES, who had a similar experience with the prison system

and had gotten over it. So I knew I could too. I did not know many positives before then but he was a mentor and motivator. He kept me motivated from doing negative things and got me through.

Two of the many opportunities I had in YouthBuild made a big difference in my life. The first was when some of us from my YouthBuild program were invited to attend the Children's Defense Fund National Conference in Washington, D.C. It was there that I learned about tax dollars and how to use them in useful ways. I also was excited to attend the democratic presidential debate and get the chance to meet presidential candidate Al Sharpton.

The second experience was going to Bloomberg News. I was chosen along with 10 of my peers to be able to job shadow at Bloomberg where we were taught presentation and communication skills and received personal computer training.

I have learned that nobody is perfect and sometimes you mess up. But there are all sorts of ways you can make a comeback. You have to just believe in yourself and have faith. And that is how I did it — I had faith in myself. There were times when it was hard to have faith and the staff would boost me all the way back up. They would sit me down and tell me the situation was not that bad and that I could overcome it. They would tell me how to do that and really made me feel like I was part of a family.

This past year, I graduated from YouthBuild with my high school diploma.

Maria Vugrin, YouthBuild USA communications specialist, interviewed James Turner, a graduate of ISLES YouthBuild in Trenton, N.J., for this article.

relation to society, which helps sustain their motivation to succeed.

These youths are often looked at in terms of their deficits, but the community service portion of the program asks what assets they have and how they are going to share them with the community. Other leadership opportunities, such as a policy committee and member activities, are powerful because students are making decisions about their own program and finding out how they can have an effect on their own lives and the outside environment. It is not always easy to engage young people in service and leadership in the beginning. Youths have to trust the adults who are facilitating these opportunities, and trust grows when the adults demonstrate care, consistency and competence. Once a level of trust is established, young people begin to take these experiences more seriously and become more fully engaged.

Connection to the Future

A major aspect of future planning is helping participants make the connection that their efforts today will result in a brighter, better tomorrow. However, program staff cannot just talk about the connection between attendance and the opportunities that are ahead, they have to make it a reality throughout the program. Future connections often start during orientation at which time the importance of commitment, work ethic and conscience are discussed with the students. Those who complete their orientation are immediately and publicly recog-

nized for milestones and achievements such as achieving Occupational Safety and Health Administration certification and CPR training. YouthBuild programs work to provide students with such milestone achievements. The programs also work with existing community networks to provide mentoring opportunities and exposure to college.

So what happens in a YouthBuild program that leads to such profound change in its participants? According to graduates who were interviewed for the 2003 research study, *Life After YouthBuild: 900 YouthBuild Graduates Reflect on Their Lives, Dreams and Experiences*, two important changes emerged as a result of their participation. First, they were able to envision another life. They spoke of how their view of the world had changed and that they realized they were no longer limited to a life on the streets. Along with an expansion of possibilities for their life path was an emerging feeling to claim a better life for oneself. Graduates said YouthBuild made them feel like they mattered and that they deserved a place in society. One result of these changes in beliefs and attitudes was that graduates wanted to give back and help others.

Next Steps

As part of its work in youth development, YouthBuild has had significant exposure to the criminal justice system. Its national alumni council, an elected body of YouthBuild graduates who represent their peers on a variety of national policy issues, has

identified gaining knowledge of the criminal justice system as a top priority. YouthBuild USA sees this as a two-way street: YouthBuild wants to educate local and national officials about the impact of its program concepts on the decision-making, leadership and skill development of thousands of young people who, were it not for YouthBuild, could potentially be incarcerated. The organization is actively seeking experienced national partners to develop tools and training resources that will address the program design and funding challenges that YouthBuild directors face in meeting the particular needs of adjudicated youths; train staff to develop creative working collaborations with local court systems by presenting case studies of successful working models; generate tools and information for YouthBuild staff, strengthening their ability to partner with youths in an effort to understand their rights and responsibilities and resolve court-related histories; and inform others of the manner in which YouthBuild program directors design their programs to most effectively facilitate a youth's transition from the criminal justice system into a YouthBuild program.

With the current recidivism rates for general society not likely to sharply decrease during the next few years, YouthBuild is expanding on its collaborations with members of the criminal justice system to find better ways to work with youths. For members of the criminal justice system, partnering with YouthBuild is not just an opportunity to learn more about what works in the youth development field, but also an opportunity to have a significant impact on the lives of thousands of youths.

Tim Cross is chief operating officer of YouthBuild USA. For more information on collaborating with YouthBuild, e-mail tcross@youthbuild.org. Daryl Wright, director of knowledge development for YouthBuild USA, contributed to this article.



YouthBuild participants from Brockton, Mass., built the house pictured above.