



growing our own

Former Participants
as Staff in Afterschool Youth Development Programs

by Susan Matloff-Nieves

We are in the cafeteria of a middle school in Queens, New York. I am making a routine site visit to an afterschool program that serves 100 sixth- through eighth-grade students five days a week. The participants sit at long cafeteria tables in small groups.

Two of the older boys begin play-fighting, delivering air kicks and waving their arms at each other. Within seconds, Scott is moving toward them. Approaching from another direction is his colleague Luis. Both are college students, age 20.

“Do you need help, Scott?” asks Luis.

“No, thanks, I got it covered,” replies Scott. He calmly separates the two boys, stepping between them and speaking to them in a low voice. They respond quickly, dropping their flailing limbs and returning quietly to their seats. (program observation, Spring 2003)

While scenes like this are common in well-run afterschool and youth development programs, I am impressed. I have known Scott since he was a shy ten-year-old in the Forest Hills Community House (FHCH) summer day camp. In those days, Scott seemed to avoid conflict and often kept to himself while other kids engaged in horseplay. As a teen, he was an active participant in every youth development activity available, forming close relationships with adult mentors. However, it was his role as an afterschool program staff member, in which he applied the lessons learned in his earlier youth development activities, that solidified his leadership skills.

Observing Scott and other graduates of our teen programs as they integrated what they learned in FHCH programs into their work as staff members with younger children sparked my interest in the

SUSAN MATLOFF-NIEVES, LMSW, is the assistant executive director for youth services at the Forest Hills Community House in Queens, New York, where she has worked with youth for 15 years. Prior to joining FHCH, she spent 13 years as a community organizer. She holds an MSW degree from Hunter School of Social Work. Her current research interests include professional development and youth development workforce issues.

benefits of the practice of hiring participants as staff. Another participant-turned-staff-member spoke to me about the impact of his job as a youth worker on areas of his life that had been a source of past difficulty. These two threads led me to explore what it means to youth participants to be hired as staff.

Hiring former participants as staff provides a dual benefit, to the agency and to the youth. The program gets a worker who is already well oriented to the program's and agency's mission, policies and procedures, and philosophy of youth development. The young people benefit from an exemplary youth development practice that offers an opportunity to make a real contribution to the life of their community while developing their social, cognitive, and employment skills. Working in an afterschool program helps bridge the protected world of childhood and the independent world of adults. Parents often support young participants' decisions to work in the programs that nurtured them. The example of the strategies employed at the Forest Hills Community House in Queens, New York, will show how the benefits of hiring participants as staff can be enhanced through staff development and supervisory practices that address the potential challenges of the practice.

A Time-Honored Practice

Robert Halpern's wonderful history of afterschool programs in *Making Play Work* (2003) traces the practice of hiring local youth and former participants as staff or volunteers back to the beginnings of afterschool programming in the early 1900s. According to Halpern, the practice weaves through the history of the field, born of practical necessity. Lack of resources and low budgets made employing former participants a cost-effective choice (Halpern, 2003). Youth development and childcare jobs typically are not well paid and have low social status, but first-time job seekers from low-income and immigrant neighborhoods have few opportunities for meaningful work and are generally pleased to secure a job that pays minimum wage. Then, as now, the jobs were a way station for many youth who were undecided or undirected in their lives.

For many summer programs in New York City, the city- and state-funded Summer Youth Employment Program, which provides six to eight weeks of employment

for income-eligible teens, helps programs meet mandated staff-to-child ratios. The advent of the Beacon youth development model, which serves young people continuously from age 5 through 21 and even potentially into adulthood, created opportunities for youth who "aged out" of childcare programs to volunteer or work in afterschool programs. Eighty Beacon centers in New York City, operated by community-based organizations in public school buildings, offer comprehensive youth and community development activities after school as well as evenings and weekends. Though a search of the Harvard Family Research Project database (2006) reveals few studies of the practice of hiring former participants, two studies of Beacon programs confirm that the practice can serve as a youth development strategy that provides age-appropriate avenues for older youth to continue their learning.

Beacon Profiles: An Overview of the New York City Beacons Initiative,

published by the Youth Development Institute (YDI) of the Fund for the City of New York (2002), describes the importance of employment opportunities within the Beacons, where hiring both youth participants and adults from the community is a common feature of the program model. According to this study, Beacons build community involvement by hiring youth and adults who are community residents, thus increasing young people's opportunities to contribute to their communities, providing community role models for younger Beacon participants, and creating career stepping stones through volunteer and paid jobs of increasing responsibility (YDI, 2002).

The Academy for Educational Development conducted an extensive evaluation of six Beacon programs that describes both the value of cross-age activities and some of the challenges of relying on young employees. The study notes that youth hired to work with younger children often have weaker group-management skills than more experienced staff members, but it also describes a positive effect on teens' risk-taking behavior and sense of responsibility. The evaluation found cross-age activities to be a valuable part of the Beacon experience. The importance of good training was a key finding (Warren, Feist, & Nevárez, 2002). Both of these studies identify the hiring of youth as a salient feature of the Beacon programs and as a positive youth development strategy.

Lack of resources and low budgets made employing former participants a cost-effective choice.

Research Context and Methods

Founded in 1975, the Forest Hills Community House (FHCH) is one of the newest settlement houses in New York City. We provide comprehensive services to 20,000 residents of all ages in Queens. Programs include afterschool, summer camp, and youth development programs for young people ages 5 to 21 at our main site; two community centers; a facility operated by the NYC Parks Department; and youth development programs based in public school buildings, one of which is a Beacon program. Nearly 80 percent of our youth participants are immigrants or children of immigrants, representing as many as 40 language groups. While economically diverse overall, most come from working-class families.

FHCH youth development practices have been recognized for their quality. Our teen outreach program has been replicated in 25 New York City neighborhoods and internationally. Our arts activities are cited as a model of curriculum-based afterschool arts programming in Halpern's *Making Play Work* (2003).

Our Access for Young Women teen leadership program has been selected three times for study by federal agencies as a model for promoting youth development. In-house and external evaluations since 1995 have documented consistent patterns of positive youth development including improved communication skills, greater awareness of career options, increased interest in reading for pleasure, better school attendance, and improved engagement in education. In addition, four of our teen programs have documented levels of youth retention in high school at 100 percent; two of these have 100 percent of participants enrolling in college (Fox 1999; Mosatche 2004, 2006).

At all levels, from administration to part-time line workers, are employees who have worked at FHCH for decades. As an FHCH youth director since 1992, I have watched young people grow up to work as staff with children and youth who are as old as the staff members were when I first met them. Investment in staff is a part of the FHCH culture; we take risks to hire and develop relatively inexperienced staff. Some former participants have continued as staff for over a decade and moved into supervisory positions. Reaching the 30-year mark means that we have now seen an entire generation grow through participation as children into increasingly responsible staff roles. We are thus uniquely situated to examine the practice of hiring youth participants as an emerging part of our work.

I have watched young people grow up to work as staff with children and youth who are as old as the staff members were when I first met them.

Like the programs Halpern (2003) cites, we initially hired youth for cost reasons. Over time, FHCH has come to value both the positive youth development and the unique staff contributions that result from hiring former participants. The practice enhances our ability to build community and strengthen the surrounding neighborhood. By developing care-taking and employment skills in youth, we are creating a resource: young people who are effective employees with a passionate sense of purpose and a visceral understanding of the FHCH mission.

This article grew out of a participatory research project conducted with support of the Robert Bowne Foundation from January 2003 through January 2004. Six

young people who had been participants in FHCH programs for eight years or longer agreed to be interviewed in depth about experiences that had affected their development. Initially, I simply asked them to tell their stories about how they came to the community house and about what it was like to make the transition to a staff role. I also shared some

of my memories of them as younger people. As we spoke, they suggested questions that I subsequently incorporated into all interviews. I supplemented the data from these interviews with program observations. I also drew on my own memories, as well as those of colleagues, and spoke to the young people's supervisors. Our collective memories of and reflections on our shared history, together with our observations of each other over time, have been rich sources of data.

After combing through the interview transcripts, notes, and tapes for themes, I re-interviewed the young people at least once to follow up these themes in depth. In order to broaden the scope and in response to strong interest from colleagues, I also conducted interviews with staff of five other youth programs. Accompanying the interviews were weekly observations of the programs and interviews with program directors. Other Robert Bowne Foundation (RBF) research fellows contributed their own experiences with former participants as staff; one participated in a formal interview. I inquired during RBF and other citywide networking meetings about colleagues' experiences with youth staff and, in some cases, their own experiences as former participants. I then reviewed the data for common themes and followed up with additional interviews to expand on and clarify the themes throughout 2004 and 2005.

Employment as a Youth Development Strategy

Through these interviews, former participants clearly articulated the benefits of working as staff in their after-school programs. These benefits go beyond the basic need for a job that allows teens to contribute to their households or pay for college. Assuming a staff position meets an essential developmental need of older adolescents: the opportunity to take on adult roles.

Facilitating Individual Development

Joan Wynn (2003) describes the importance to youth development of offering a “system of opportunities for adolescents.” This system should be composed of four types of opportunities: “engaging activities, apprenticeships with skilled professionals, work-site internships, and part-time and summer jobs” (Wynn, 2003, p. 60). Employment in a comprehensive afterschool, summer camp, or mixed-age youth development site such as a Beacon can complement other program or community offerings to create a full range of opportunities for teens. Work in a community center also fits Wynn’s criteria for ideal jobs for youth: that they “should not reproduce the often-routinized work available to teenagers, which isolates them from adults and reinforces disenfranchisement” (Wynn, 2003, p. 62). The opportunity for youth to make authentic contributions is a characteristic of a quality youth development program.

The opportunity to assume adult roles as colleagues and employees enables young people to remain connected to the adults who mentored them. We’ve found that young men, in particular, often continue to need the support and structure provided by our teen programs into their 20s. Working in our programs provides a transitional stage in which they learn to assume adult responsibilities for younger people while retaining contact with supportive adults. The expectations of their staff role provide an appropriate level of challenge for their developmental stage.

The staff role can also reinforce a reduction in the young people’s risk-taking behavior. José,¹ who came to FHCH when he was eight and remained throughout adolescence, overcame difficulties with substance abuse and was given an opportunity to work with younger teens. He said:

Now I tell my friends: “If you’re going to do that, I have to leave, because the younger kids look up to me and I can’t have them seeing you do that [drinking] around me.”

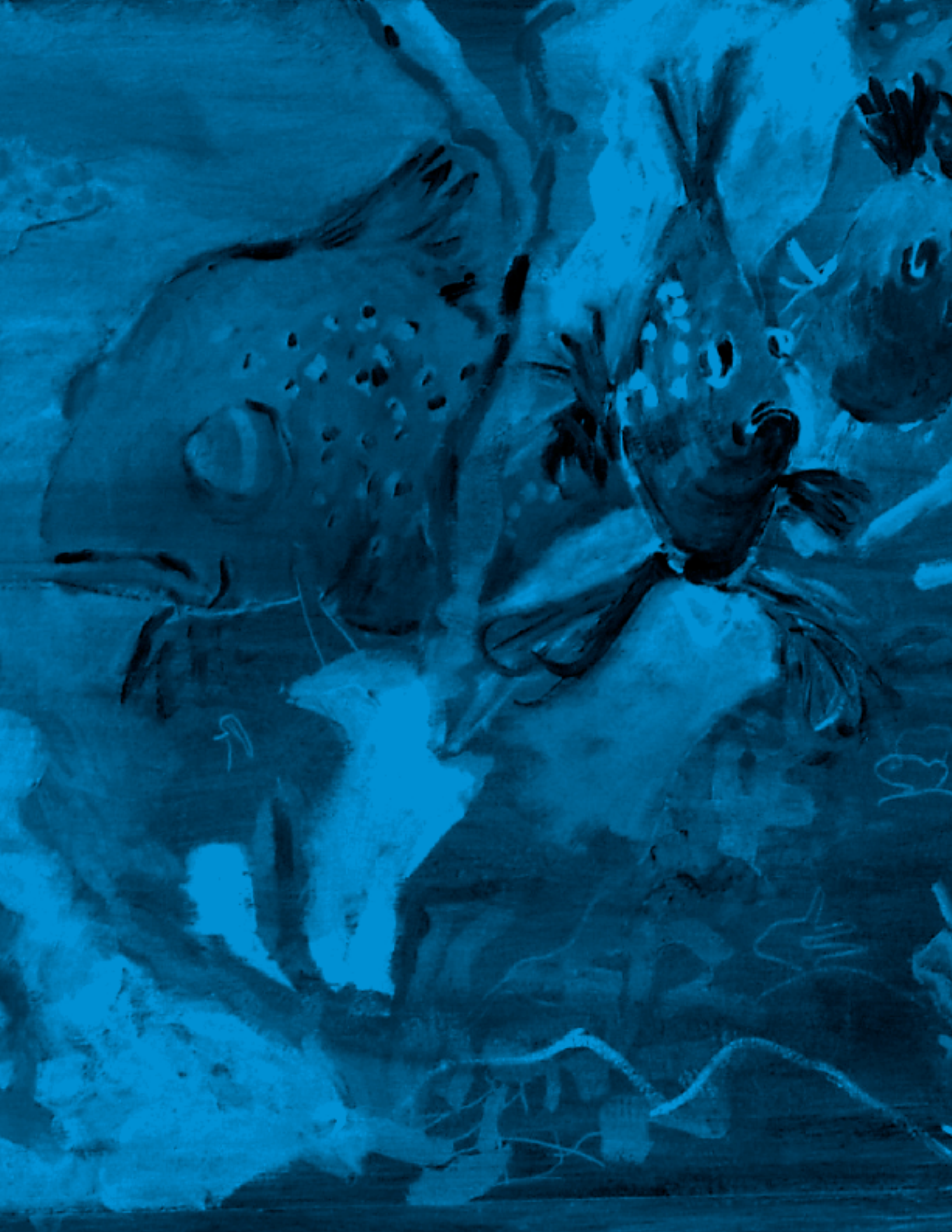
Now I tell my friends: “If you’re going to do that, I have to leave, because the younger kids look up to me and I can’t have them seeing you do that [drinking] around me.” ...I tell them [the youth he works with], “There goes my friend; he does that and I don’t; that’s his path and we’re still friends, but I don’t have to do what he does.” (personal interview, May 1, 2003)

José’s experience is confirmed by that of youth interviewed for the AED report: “[O]lder youth repeatedly mentioned that they felt responsible to serve as role models for younger children, and that seeing themselves in this way helped them avoid negative behaviors such as fighting or using drugs” (Warren, Feist, & Nevárez, 2002, p. 12). This strategy, which builds on young people’s assets and ability to contribute, is the essence of a youth development approach.

Supporting Educational and Employment Goals

Youth employees of afterschool programs benefit from working in a situation that supports their success in school and encourages their educational goals. Most youth programs I examined have a policy that young people must be in school in order to be employed. Young people’s academic progress may be tracked and their work schedules adjusted if their grades drop. This approach to promoting school attendance and performance is consistent with the youth development principle of building on young people’s assets and ability to contribute.

Many youth programs offer college and career counseling, including financial aid advice, as well as exposure to different fields of work. FHCH offers such counseling to youth employees as well as to participants. With our in-depth knowledge of the young person, we can offer detailed guidance. At least one staff member was able to secure a partial college scholarship as an employee benefit. Adult staff members write letters of reference for jobs and recommendations for colleges, citing not only the young people’s present achievements, but also their growth and accomplishments throughout their teen years. Some long-term participants find meaningful careers in related fields such as education, social work, physical therapy, law, and medicine—or in unrelated fields. *Beacon Profiles* calls this benefit “providing stepping stones for careers” (YDI, 2002, p. 13).



Employing young participants also develops their academic and employment skills. As Wynn (2003) puts it, “Through these opportunities, young people can develop and deepen specific content knowledge and know-how. In addition, they can acquire the kinds of soft skills—leadership, decision making, negotiating, and working as part of a group—that are important for participating effectively in education, employment, and civic life” (p. 63).

Building Community

Without being prompted, each of the young people interviewed mentioned a concept of neighborhood. All cited the benefit of the community house as a place where they could find and maintain friendships from throughout the neighborhood. The area surrounding the FHCH main site includes a population that is diverse in every way: economically, ethnically, racially. In fact, the mission of the founding board was to provide a bridge among diverse sectors of the community. The young people expressed their value of having a place where they can mingle across barriers. When they become staff, they become part of the continuous community fabric, where they could maintain positive social relationships and network with the community—another important youth development strategy. One young employee noted, “There is a group of friends that are my community house friends who I see when I come back from college” to work in summer camp (personal interview, June 23, 2003).

A number of interviewees used the phrase “second family” to describe the community house. A similar feeling is expressed in *Beacon Profiles*, describing a young woman who worked in several positions at the La Plaza Beacon run by Alianza Dominicana: “La Plaza is now her second home and she considers each staff person a cherished uncle or aunt” (YDI, 2002, p. 19). *Beacon Profiles* also cites the benefit of connecting young people more closely with their communities, quoting John Kixmiller of the Center for Family Life as saying, “You need people at all developmental stages to build a strong community center” (YDI, 2002, p. 13).



Young people who were summer campers eight years ago are counselors now, sometimes working under program directors who were their own camp counselors. This continuity offsets the notable turnover in the afterschool field.

Reinforcing Families

Parents in the youths’ “first families” know that their children’s educational goals will be respected and encouraged. Program employment policies that promote school attendance and check in on academic progress create a seamless support system with families and schools. Particularly in neighborhoods with high rates of high school non-completion, the employer’s message can be a factor in raising retention and graduation rates.

Friends and family play a part in a young person’s decision to maintain long-term relationships. Stated one interviewee: “My father always tells me, ‘Stay close to those people at the community house; they are good people and they can help you’” (personal interview, June 25, 2003). Parents of young employees meet with staff for guidance on the college application process and for assistance in filling out financial aid forms. They may also seek assistance in finding fulltime jobs for their children outside the agency when it is time for them to move on.

Young employees also learn parenting skills, as one young woman pointed out in her interview. Teens working in afterschool programs learn effective, non-punitive ways to discipline children, as well as how to listen and to communicate assertively but not

aggressively. Such skills strengthen the fabric of families and the communities they live in.

Benefits to Programs

The “generations” of youth participants who become staff mimic the generations of families. Young people who were summer campers eight years ago are counselors now, sometimes working under program directors who were their own camp counselors. This continuity offsets the notable turnover in the afterschool field documented by Halpern (2003). The multi-year retention of young people fosters continuity of staffing and relationships between adults and youth.

Staff who grew up in programs often have a strong sense of loyalty and identify with the agency mission. States a Beacon staff person who joined the program at age 14 and is now a fulltime staff member: “I am grateful to the program. Sometimes I wonder what I would

have done without this program and where I would be” (personal interview, August 14, 2003). Her esteem for the program is reflected in the intensity she brings to her projects and her dedicated efforts toward continuous improvement of the program and her own work in it. Staff members who engaged in learning activities when they were participants associate education and growth with the program. They are receptive to continuous staff development because it is consistent with their past program experiences. All of the interviewees articulated many ways that they learned on the job, describing the methods with enthusiasm.

Employment of older youth becomes a retention strategy for adult staff as well. “Every time I think about leaving, I think about having to say good-bye to the kids,” confided one program director who entered the agency as a participant in the summer youth employment program. The pleasure of watching young people grow up to share our history becomes the glue that keeps good adult staff in a program.

Components of Successful Youth Employment

Continuing staff development is not only key to the success of youth employees, but also an important youth development strategy. Our young people learn by a variety of methods, including mentoring, observation, formal opportunities for reflection, and careful supervision.

Apprentice/Mentor Roles

Working as staff under the supervision of an experienced youth worker is like an apprenticeship. In some staffing structures, young staff members are intentionally paired with more experienced staff members who are charged with developing their skills. A young staff member may also be paired with an older staff member who has professional expertise in an area of interest to the young person. For instance, a high school student with a strong interest in theater found employment as coordinator of the cultural committee of the FHCH Beacon, also staffed by an adult who operated her own theater company.

In some cases, staff learn by observing the actions of more seasoned staff, particularly when learning to defuse conflicts and handle challenging behavior. One young staff member noted, “I learned from experience and by observing. . . . I try something, and if it doesn’t work, I try something else, and if that doesn’t work, I ask someone. But usually it works” (personal interview, July 10, 2003).

These youth-adult partnerships exemplify strategies for promoting learning in a youth development setting. Steve came to FHCH at age 13 through the Hot Spots Street Outreach program, where he remained until he aged out at 19. As a youth worker, he is highly skilled at engaging young people, mediating conflicts, and guiding groups. Scott, the young man described in the opening vignette, cited him as one of the people who plays a key role in setting the positive and welcoming tone of FHCH: “He makes it a comfortable place to be, and everyone knows he’s there to help.” When I asked Steve how he learned, he credited the outreach director:

Everything I know I learned from [the outreach director and the senior outreach worker].... My first few weeks as an outreach worker, [the director] really put me to the grind. We had meetings; he gave me reading material. We had training sessions. Through my trainings as an outreach worker, I learned so much about understanding people, the importance of listening to people, the importance of continuity, the importance of being a role model... I also remember how [the staff] were with me, and I try my hardest to emulate them. (personal interview, June 13, 2003)

The importance of having adult supervisors that they look up to and trust was a common theme that emerged in all of the interviews.

The importance of having adult supervisors that they look up to and trust was a common theme that emerged in all of the interviews.

Feedback

Our formal evaluation system incorporates an extensive process of self-reflection and a joint process

with the supervisor to plan for growth. Senior staff try to provide clear parameters so that younger staff can think through the logical consequences of their assumptions and behavior and act independently while alone with children and youth. Supervisors offer a great deal of feedback, both orally and in writing. One supervisor has his staff keep journals. He encourages workers to use the journals to reflect on their practice and periodically reviews their writing to give feedback.

Paths of Progressive Responsibility

Returning staff receive progressive training for positions of increasing responsibility. Employment offers young workers an opportunity to integrate lessons introduced to them through curricula and activities when they were

younger. Cathy, who graduated from the FHCH Access for Young Women girls' empowerment program, began as a counselor-in-training and ended up as assistant director of the summer day camp. She ultimately went into the field of therapeutic recreation. She described her progression through specific skills that built on previous skills, beginning with her leadership experiences (personal interview, June 25, 2003). Another employee articulated a similar theme:

I became a better person as staff; I learned responsibility. I couldn't act like a regular teen. It made me mature a lot. Even as a volunteer, my time was more my own. But being a staff person was better, beyond the salary; I like the recognition and being integrated [into the program staff] and becoming a leader. I like showing my peers we can make a difference and being a role model. (personal interview, August 14, 2003)

Staff also have an opportunity to try new approaches and new roles, including serving on teams that design and facilitate staff development sessions and on agency and departmental committees.

Challenges

Hiring former or current participants as staff is not without its dilemmas. The work of child and youth development requires a high level of skill. Quality, experienced supervision is required to bring out the best in young staff. With our pattern of promoting young people from within, we often find that our young staff are supervised by a director who is also inexperienced. The supervisors themselves need the supervision of seasoned directors who understand and appreciate this challenge and can work with the advantages inherent in the situation. Smaller programs, with fewer staff who can receive more attention from the director, can be an asset in adopting this model.

We generally hold that we can work with any young person who is motivated, but directors must bring a blend of good judgment, good communication skills, personal balance, and consciousness in developing their staff. Youth staff seem to benefit most when they have a close supervisor who can observe and give feedback and with whom they can honestly raise questions.

Dual Roles and Boundary Issues

Our young staffers have dual roles: In some ways, they are still participants. A staff member running an activity at one site may, at another site, be a team member with a participant from the activity she runs. Staff who have been around for a long time may assume that unprofessional conduct will be tolerated as it was when they were participants. At FHCH, a job candidate who was a former participant assumed a level of familiarity in the interview that was inappropriate to the situation. Similar dilemmas may exist for adult staff: A staff member's counseling client may be hired as staff in another program, so that the client is also a colleague. Mattison, Jayaratne, and Croxton (2002), addressing this dilemma in adult social work, ask, "When, if ever, does an individual cease to be a client?" They conclude that the answer may vary depending on the roles and the community and agency setting.

Boundary issues can be complicated in a community setting, even for mature staff. The web of relationships that enriches layers of support for young people also adds layers of confusion. Staff members may be friends with participants through pre-existing relationships, putting agency guidelines about maintaining social relationships with participants into a gray area. A participant may enter the program with a group of friends and subsequently be hired as staff, complicating his or her social relationship with peers. Furthermore, supervisory and

administrative staff enroll our own children in our programs. While there is no higher recommendation of our faith in our staff, being charged with care of our families can be a burden for junior staff.

Finding an appropriate balance between fostering young people's growth and ensuring that they meet employment expectations requires the supervisor to be clear about those expectations and the staff member to be willing to accept challenges. Clear and consistent codes of behavior are key. Supervisors communicate a common message about how staff members should conduct themselves, providing time in staff development and supervision sessions to reflect on these codes. They remind young staffers that the purpose of our work is to promote the growth of participants rather than our own gratification. Supervisors work with young employees on trusting their own authority, extending respect, and

Boundary issues can be complicated in a community setting, even for mature staff. The web of relationships that enriches layers of support for young people also adds layers of confusion.

holding participants to expectations. They point out that young staff are role models who represent participants' own near-term future. Perhaps the most important factor is a strong and trusting relationship in which young staff can speak frankly about their dilemmas and adult staff can respectfully challenge young people to grow.

Time to Move On

In the FHCH peer counseling program, a strong group of young people remained for several years as staff. At a certain point, the “peer counselors” were highly skilled, but they were no longer peers of the high school students. Now in their 20s, they needed to move on so that teens could take their positions. Young workers' level of comfort with their programs may stunt their professional growth if they stop looking for opportunities elsewhere. Supervisors must be sensitive to young staff members' need to move on and gently encourage them to make the break. One strategy we've found promising is to maintain relationships with other agencies so we can refer our staff members when they need a new opportunity in order to continue to grow.

Equity Issues

Some groups of young people, though they may have something important to offer, experience barriers to employment in a youth program. We had to deny employment to a former FHCH participant with a strong interest in coaching sports because he lacked the necessary literacy skills due to learning disabilities. Another long-term participant, who was successfully getting his life back on track during a felony probation, was barred by NYC regulations from working with children or youth. A young woman who was in a wheelchair was able to volunteer one day a week tutoring younger children and gave workshops to other teens on disability awareness but was not able to work full time.

At FHCH, we are addressing such dilemmas through annual job fairs organized by the Youth Employment Program and by posting and referring afterschool jobs in FCHC and other agencies. Potential employees are pre-screened by the youth employment coordinator and then referred to afterschool sites for employment. Through this process, young people receive assistance in preparing good résumés, as well as coaching on the interview process, in order to present

their skills in the best light. Over the years, staff have received training on the Americans with Disabilities Act and the rights of youth with felony convictions.

Another equity issue has to do with the web of relationships in a community-based program. Every group of children and youth includes those who are comfortable reaching out for adult attention and those who hold back. The young people interviewed for this project all related well to adults and reached out to staff throughout their tenure as participants. For this reason, they were close to the directors who were in charge of hiring. Other young people, less skilled at reaching out to adults, may be missing out on employment opportunities—and they may be the very young people who are most in need of supportive employment. Attending to the importance of employment as a youth development strategy can help us to look past the obvious candidates and see those who might benefit more. A willingness to take a chance on a promising candidate who is struggling with personal issues can provide significant rewards. As one senior director stated, “Sometimes the

staff person we hire is the one who most needs the job.”

A willingness to take a chance on a promising candidate who is struggling with personal issues can provide significant rewards. As one senior director stated, “Sometimes the staff person we hire is the one who most needs the job.”

Supervision and Training

Supervision and training—which should be both universal and individualized—are the keys to meeting these challenges. Universal training includes giving all staff a set of common parameters: the values, protocols, and language of the program. Many former participants have already absorbed the values, but the specifics of protocols may have been invisible until they happen to “bump up against” one. Clarity about policies and procedures, ample opportunities for discussion, communication through weekly individual and group staff meetings, and formal staff development are essential elements of a good supervision and training system. Staff should also be exposed to training outside the organization so they can meet colleagues from other agencies and develop an understanding of the language and practices of the field.

Supervision must also be tailored to each young person. For example, an FHCH staff member who exhibited exemplary skills and abilities with younger teens was subsequently hired into a program serving older teens who were nearly peers. In spite of his pride in the new position and support from supervisors, he

was never comfortable working with the older teens. He couldn't establish the necessary balance between friendliness and authority. He was terminated in a gentle interview in which it was acknowledged that the position was not a good fit. The supervisor, concerned with the staff member's opportunity to learn about himself, wanted him to experience the termination as an occasion for growth and reflection rather than as punishment. The staff member continued to work successfully with the younger teens. This experience helped us remember that the youth development model of our programs can serve as an educational framework for supervising young staff members.

The Bottom Line

The practice of hiring former participants as staff in youth programs is a salient feature of the youth development field. Originally an expedient and cost-effective way of staffing programs with thin budgets, it is beginning to be recognized as a youth development strategy that is effective in providing older youth with a pathway to adult roles. The benefits to the sponsoring agency include a strong sense of mission among staff members as well as continuity of relationships in the program. The challenges of this strategy can be offset and the benefits maximized by attentive and supportive supervision, reflection by both adult and youth staff, and honesty on both sides about when it is time to move on. The youth development field would benefit from further research on this practice, particularly on the most effective supervisory techniques and program practices. Examination of best practices through case studies, as well as broad-scale documentation of the extent of the practice of hiring youth participants, could advance our knowledge of this often-used but little-studied strategy.

Acknowledgement

This article was researched and written with the support of a Research Fellowship from the Robert Bowne Foundation. Thanks to the young people of the Forest Hills Community House Street Outreach and Beacon programs who shared their experiences with honesty, generosity, and intelligence

References

- Fox, S. (1999). *I really love this job: What it takes to do street outreach. A review of the Forest Hills Community House Hot Spots Program*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Halpern, R. (2003). *Making play work: The promise of after-school programs for low-income children*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Harvard Family Research Project (2006). OST evaluation database and bibliography. Retrieved August 31, 2006, from <http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp>.
- Mattison, D., Jayaratne, S., & Croxton, T. (2002). Client or former client? Implications of ex-client definition in social work practice. *Social Work*, 47(1), 55–64.
- Mosatche, H. (2004). *Evaluation of the Forest Hills Community House 21st Century Community of Learner Program, Years 1, 2 and 3 (final)*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Mosatche, H. (2006). *Evaluation of the Forest Hills Community House Access for Young Women's Program funded by the Women's Educational Equity Act*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Warren, C., Feist, M., & Nevárez, N. (2002). *A place to grow: Evaluation of the New York City Beacons. Summary report*. New York: Academy for Educational Development.
- Wynn, J. (2003). High school after school: Creating pathways to the future for adolescents. In K. Pittman, N. Yohalem, & J. Tolman (eds.), *When, where, what and how youth learn: Blurring school and community boundaries*. New Directions for Youth Development, No. 97. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Youth Development Institute (YDI), Fund for the City of New York. (2002). *Beacon profiles: An overview of the New York City Beacon Initiative*. New York: Fund for the City of New York.

¹ All participant and staff names in this article are pseudonyms.