



# YOUTH ON YOUTH

Grassroots Youth Collaborative on Youth  
Led Organizing in the City of Toronto



Written and Submitted by  
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A research report prepared for  
the Ontario Region of the Department of Canadian Heritage

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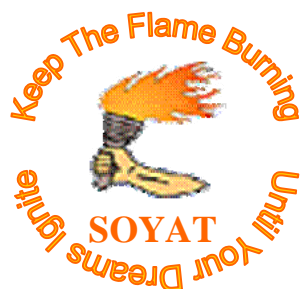
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### Supporting agency:



### Member organizations:



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

'Youth on Youth: Grassroots Youth Collaborative on Youth Led Organizing in the City of Toronto' is the brainchild and end-product of a series of near-year-long meetings by members of the Grassroots Youth Collaborative (GYC). Founded in May 2004 with the aid and initiative of United Way Worker, Dawood Khan, the GYC consists of representatives from six Greater Toronto Area youth-led, non-profit, community-based organizations, including For Youth Initiative (FYI), Somali Youth Association of Toronto (SOYAT), Inner City Visions (ICVisions), Rathburn Area Youth (RAY), Canadian-Tamil Youth Development Centre (CANTYD), and Regent Park Focus.

The need for the current report identifying best practices among youth-led organizations, as well as their shared problems, challenges and recommendations for youth organizers, funders, policy-makers and politicians was deemed imperative, particularly in the context of the heightening public recognition and reality of youth marginalization and alienation in the city of Toronto. This growing acknowledgement of the need for the prioritization of youth issues lends further weight to the importance and significance of this report. The findings contained herein, based on a series of month-long focus group interviews with frontline youth workers, overwhelmingly support and substantiate the critical importance and role of youth-led organizations in the development and provision of programming to, for and by youth populations in the City of Toronto.



Among the key research findings arising out of the focus group interviews with six youth-led, GYC member organisations and their staff, volunteers and service users was this critical importance of having youth organizations and programs run, developed and staffed by youth, primarily due to reasons of greater social proximity, familiarity and awareness of youth issues and tastes, and hence greater ability to understand and relate to youth, and design and implement programs that youth deem attractive and pertinent. Having service providers demographically representative of their service users was deemed critical not only in terms of age, but also in terms of race, gender, ethnicity and class, again for reasons of cultural competence, familiarity, comfort and ability to relate, this being especially important in organizations seeking to outreach to 'at risk' youth. The use of popular culture and the arts as a medium of engagement (digital media arts in particular), was also found to be particularly effective in attracting youth to youth-led programming, affording youth a highly needed and valued expressive outlet and medium to negotiate personal, social and cultural issues and concerns. The use of popular cultural and media arts was also seen as an effective medium and tool for popular education, advocacy and civic engagement.

Equally important to the success of youth programming as having youth staff on board was the empowerment of youth service users through democratic decision-making structures and processes. It was found that, in giving youth a leadership role and voice in the development and evaluation of youth programming, youth were taught invaluable organizational and life skills, whilst gaining a keen sense of ownership over their own programs, and indeed their own lives. The sense of ownership and agency fostered through democratic practice was seen in example after example to increase self-confidence, expand social consciousness and civic engagement, particularly for and among those most often accorded low expectations in society. As youth spend much of their time

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*The use of popular culture and the arts as a medium of engagement was also found to be particularly effective in attracting youth to youth-led programming.*

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(whether at school, work or play) in situations and contexts of unequal authority, most often along an age continuum, they were found to be resistant to having programs pre-packaged and designed for them by adults (or youth for that matter) in positions of authority. This was especially the case for highly marginalized youth, many of whom had experience in the criminal justice system and its rigid authoritarian institutions of reform. Local, democratic, grassroots youth-led organisations, not surprisingly, were thus found to be the most effective and adept at outreaching to marginalized youth, again for reasons of democratic accountability, responsivity and representativity.

Aside from having representative staff and youth-run youth programs and organisations, one of the most important features of successful youth outreach and programming evidenced in this research, and particularly so for organisations servicing marginalized individuals and communities, is long-term program and staff stability, sustainability, reliability, and continuity over time. Such continuity in programming and staff was found to be critically important to the effective establishment and maintenance of individual and community trust and rapport, upon which youth clientship so depended, particularly in communities and among individuals accustomed to being minimized and marginalized (or 'getting the short end of the stick,' as one participant put it). The great time and effort required by organisational staff of youth-led organisations to build trusting relations and networks in communities with already low levels of social infrastructure lent added weight to the critical importance of sustaining proven and successful programs and staff over time.



The greatest obstacle to such organizational and program continuity and sustainability for youth-led organisations was the lack of core and multi-year funding support for basic organizational operating costs and staff administration. Whilst capacity and sustainability building strategies such as forming partnerships with other (often higher capacity and/or skilled) organisations and diversifying funding streams (for instance through for-profit fund raising ventures) were among the suggested best practices to address funding shortfalls and capacity/sustainability issues, in no way were the latter envisioned as a long-term solution or substitute for multi-year, core funding. The absence of multi-year, core funding generally contributed to intolerably high levels of staff turnover and burnout, resulting in the continual depletion (and need for repletion) of skilled staff and severing of hard-gained community ties and rapport, as an overwhelming number of front-line youth workers found themselves consistently overworked, underpaid and/or in search of new work. The evident dependence of youth-led organisations on a plethora of project-funds, each of which frequently operated on a short time scale and required ample administrative attention (in terms of application and evaluation procedures) only further destabilized youth-led organizations, contributing to administrative incapacitation, program, staff impermanence and, ultimately, erosion of community trust, rapport, and clientship (though the latter was frequently averted through sheer voluntary will).

The research findings contained within this report thus indicate that if youth are indeed to become a funding/policy priority in the City of Toronto in the coming years, as indeed they should be as the City's future leaders and custodians, levels and commitments of funding and resources to and for youth, and youth-led programming in particular, will have to be substantially increased. The considerable and consistent outpacing of demand over supply and capacity in the case of the highly popular programming and service provision of GYC member organisations is but one indication of the heightening need for, and importance of, a more sustained policy and funding commitment to youth populations, and programs and services delivered to, for and by them.

Research findings further indicate that if an expansion of time, thought and resources to youth issues and programming in Toronto is to be at all successful, government and funding agencies will need to incorporate more youth, ethnic and racial minorities and women into their organisations and become more reflective of, and responsive to, the constituencies they serve. Only in this way, focus group participants stressed, would the latter become more responsive, relevant and in tune with the needs and

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problems of the communities they serve. Focus group participants further thought it essential that funders not only support grassroots youth-led organisations through increased funding (for simple and straightforward reasons of greater effectivity vis-à-vis larger agencies), but that they also cultivate and foster closer and more enduring qualitative, first-person ties and relationships with the youth-led organisations they fund. Bridging the gap in this way, again it was felt, would lead to better comprehension of the

needs of the communities youth-led organisations serve and greater appreciation and understanding of the enduring fruits of their service. Closer relationships between funders and fundees, it was further argued, would also help to alleviate what was often felt to be an underlying yet un-stated concern and anxiety of government and funding agencies over youth organisational management and trustworthiness.

Finally the testimony of frontline youth workers and service users contained in this report suggests the need for a more comprehensive, cross-sectoral and integrated youth policy organ and vision. Ample support is herein given for a shift to a more long-term and holistic, prevention-focussed, community-development approach to youth funding and planning. Such an approach, it was generally felt, would prove much more effective and (cost) efficient at addressing the underlying issues of youth marginalization and 'at risk-ness', unlike the normative contemporary stop-gap approach of funding one-off projects, on a short-term basis, in isolation from each other (with hard-won gains all too often dissipating after the cessation of project funding). In order for youth-led organisations to truly empower and decrease the 'risk factors' facing youth populations, finally, it was found crucial that they be allowed to engage in more youth advocacy than current funding policy restrictions allow.

# PART I: INTRODUCTION

## Report Goals & Aims

The Ontario Region of the Department of Canadian Heritage has established Building Community Capacity, through working with youth in high-needs neighbourhoods, as a regional priority. The following Report by the Grassroots Youth Collaborative is intended to assist youth led organisations and the region in implementing outreach and activities related to this priority through increasing staff knowledge of best practices and policy issues surrounding youth engagement. In addition to presenting best practices and youth-led organizational problems and challenges, the research will also, more specifically, highlight best practices using the arts to engage youth, as well as best practices to engage 'at-risk' youth, including a discussion of what 'at-risk' means.

## Methodology

All of the research data gathered and contained in this report was obtained through six separate, semi-structured, qualitative focus group interviews with GYC member organisational staff, including on various occasions a minority of volunteers, co-op students and youth service users. The six GYC-member organizations participating in the six focus group sessions included Somali Youth Association of Toronto (SOYAT), Inner City Visions (ICVisions), Rathburn Area Youth (RAY), Regent Park Focus, Canadian-Tamil Youth Development Centre (CANTYD), and For Youth Initiative (FYI).

Focus group sizes ranged between 3 and 5, with the exception of the Rathburn Area Youth session, which was attended by the Rathburn Area Youth Council, bringing the number of participants up to nine. Interview questions were prepared in advance and distributed at the time of meeting, though by and large, interviews assumed an unrestricted, spontaneous and free

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“ *I think that there is a role for GYC in terms of providing organizations like ours with greater profiles to funders to let them know what our issues are, what our challenges are... I am hopeful that the GYC will continue to be successful in networking with organizations and policy-makers and politicians about the need to support youth-led programs.*”

*-Adonis Huggins,  
Project Co-ordinator,  
Regent Park Focus*

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form, with questions acting more as a guideline ensuring mutual comprehension and a consistent, comprehensive and relevant questioning focus and format. The interviewers own positionality as a young, male youth of colour already familiar with focus group participants, on several occasions, arguably further facilitated the honest and open dialogue that was a hallmark of the focus group interviews.

Focus group interviews were conducted over a two-week period, commencing the second week of March 2005, and were immediately transcribed in full by a Research Assistant before being individually qualitatively coded by the Researcher using NVIVO coding software. After all six interviews were individually transcribed and coded, coding categories were compared, combined and condensed, with the remaining coded interview data forming the basis of the report findings and conclusions. The final report –

“Youth on Youth: Grassroots Youth Collaborative on Youth Led Organizing in the City of Toronto” – was submitted to Canadian Heritage and the Grass Roots Youth Collaborative on March 31, 2005. Finally it should be noted that part of the impetus for the qualitative format of the report

evolved out of Grassroots Youth Collaborative concerns over the inability of quantitative research methods and measurements to effectively capture the innumerable benefits of youth-led organizing.

## GYC Background

The Grassroots Youth Collaborative (GYC) consists of a coalition of Toronto-area, non-profit, youth-led organizations, which currently include Rathburn Area Youth (RAY), Somali Youth Association of Toronto (SOYAT), For Youth Initiative (FYI), Inner-City Visions (ICVisions), Canadian-Tamil Youth Development Centre (CANTYD), and Regent Park Focus.

The GYC first met in May 2004 in response to the promptings and initiative of United Way Worker and former For Youth Initiative Executive Director, Dawood Khan, whom saw the need for an organizational body to strengthen and formalize ties between youth-led organizations in the Greater Toronto area and increase their policy voice, visibility and effectivity.

Representatives of GYC member organizations have been meeting on a bimonthly basis since May 2004 in an effort to formulate and implement GYC’s mandate, mission and vision.



Among the core values informing the work of the GYC and its member organizations are a commitment to ‘youth-led, youth empowerment’, ‘collective, democratic decision-making’, ‘grassroots’, ‘prevention and response’ service provision, ‘accountability to communities’, and respect for values of equity, justice and cultural diversity (GYC Minutes June 11,2004).

Particularly distinguishing GYC member organizations are their youth-led governance and decision-making structures, which, constituting a chief criterion for inclusion in the Collaborative, place youth at the center of service provision, program development, administration and evaluation. Member organizations are further binded by their youth service provision to marginalized, racialized ‘at risk’ communities in the Greater Toronto area, which generally lack adequate social infrastructure and services.

## GYC Goals and Objectives

Representing “organizations that lie between large agencies and loosely constituted youth groups” (GYC Minutes May 28,2004), the goals and objectives of the GYC include:

- To raise the profile and credibility of GYC member organizations and youth-led initiatives and educate funders and stakeholders on the value of youth-led organizing.
- To encourage and facilitate networking, collaboration, mutual support and the exchange of expertise, best practices and resources among and between youth-led organizations.
- To “create a collective youth voice that has an impact on systemic policy issues facing youth” in such a way as “influences the way institutions, governments and funders make decisions affecting youth” through and by “developing resources, leadership and advocacy.”<sup>1</sup>

## PART II: RESEARCH FINDINGS

### OVERALL BEST PRACTICES

# 1

#### For Youth, By Youth

Forum participants were unanimous in their appraisal of the key importance of youth-led decision-making structures, processes and leadership within organisations servicing youth populations. Given their common experiences and cultural-existential milieu, youth staff at youth run organisations were deemed better able to communicate and relate to their youth service users than adults, and thus better able to empathise with and identify the kinds of issues, interests and concerns facing the youth participating in their programs. Youth organisational leadership and familiarity with youth issues and interests, it was repeatedly argued by youth staff, volunteers and service users, not only made for better, more culturally appealing, adept and enticing programming, it also made youth feel much more comfortable to interact with youth-staffed organisations, and hence much more likely to participate in the programs such organisation's offer.

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*"Youth-led organizations know what's going on with the youth and the youth environment"*

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"You can't say 'yes we service youth but however we don't represent them,' SOYAT Executive Director Amina Yassin for instance stated of one of the key's to SOYAT's success: "Even when they come to volunteer, they can see themselves as staff, they can feel like they have ownership over the place and it's that sense of ownership that keeps them involved. Knowing that I can be here one day doing that job", she explained.

"When I first started volunteering at SOYAT" 18-year-old SOYAT co-op student, Mustapha Ali tellingly recalled,

the first person I actually saw was one of the senior employees, and I was kind of like, 'Is this guy going to talk down to me? How am I going to conversate with this guy?' And then I met with other younger staff not much older than me and I realized that I could just sit down and kick it right there... You have to make the youth feel comfortable with people at least close to their age. If it's youth led then they can relate.

This view was echoed by Vinh Duong, a 22 year-old Audio Arts Co-ordinator and Computer Network technician at Regent Park Focus, whom similarly explained of his attraction to Regent Park Focus at the young age of 15: "[Youth led organizing] is important because when you are dealing with youth they want to deal with someone who is on the same level." "Young people have a certain way of talking. They have a unique lingo" 23-year-old, Emmanuel Kedini added, in his effort to explain his success at Regent Park Focus as a Youth Video Instructor stemming from his familiarity with popular youth culture. "Youth-led organizations know what's going on with the youth and the youth environment", 24 year-old SOYAT Youth Worker, Ali Farah, similarly explained: "I mean they know why youth might dress in certain ways. Why they might act or speak in certain ways. They can kind of think like them, understand them. They are on the same level." Because of their shared interests, experiences, obstacles and background, fellow SOYAT Youth Worker and Program Co-ordinator, Guled Warsame, further added, "Youth led organizations...are passionate about what concerns other youth."

Gavin Sheppard, 22 year-old founder and Project Co-ordinator of ICVisions and fellow Project Co-ordinator, Derek Jancar, age 24,

similarly viewed their success in running North America's first government-funded hiphop youth community center as having much to do with their shared cultural knowledge, age and class background with the youth whom frequented their programs. As Gavin for instance commented: "I think the reason why we are so successful is because we come from the same environments, we come from the same backgrounds....People know who we are...They will see us walking around on the street." "I think it's important that the staff represents what you are trying to represent in a project" Derek moreover emphasised, describing his own background as a hiphop producer, in and from the community he services:

It works a lot better that me and Gavin dress like them and talk like them... and we can talk about the same songs and about whatever is going on in the hip hop industry - before even getting into any programming, we can relate on a friendship basis... And so they have that respect for us...They feel more cool with us which opens the door for a million other things. Like whenever they have problems they feel like they can tell us, [and] whenever we feel like there is a problem it's easier for us to approach them because we are on a closer level with them... They don't feel like we are their parents or something.

As former teen-age participants in recreational programming in the South Etobicoke area

themselves, Derek and Gavin were adamant about the importance of staff understanding and 'representing' the constituency's they serve, as Gavin poignantly put it:

You may have the best intentions...but if you're really not in tune with what's going on...especially with hip-hop [being] so based on a culture of authenticity...you will not succeed....Especially this generation of youth, we are such good bullshit detectives...The youth, especially the ones in our programs, are aware that they are getting one-sided information. They see through the different kinds of community workers and social workers that have no real understanding of what's going on yet come in and try dictate what they think should be going on.

The importance of youth run organisations in this respect was amply affirmed in all six focus-group interviews. "We have seen other organizations that do work similar to us" CANTYD Youth Outreach Worker, Pirathep Gnanasuntharam, for instance observed of other adult run organisation's working with the Tamil youth community, "but they are run by middle-age women or middle-age men who have no relationship at all to the students. They love to feel like they are part of the youth culture" he related (chuckling with the rest of us), "but the fact is that they are not. Lets face that, and give more authority to youth and make them leaders."

## Democratic Grassroots Decision-Making Structures and Processes

*“My own personal perspective [regarding GYC’s function and role] is advocacy and addressing larger issues that you don’t always get to do within your own organization. As an organization you tend to serve particular communities so there is always the need to address the larger issues. That would be a really good role for the GYC, to advocate for these larger issues.”*

*- Shahina Sayani, FYI Executive Director*

Complimenting the focus group participant’s stress on youth leadership and staffing of youth service organisations was an equally important emphasis on democratic accountability to, and stewardship by, youth service users whom, it was generally agreed, should play a central role in youth program development, implementation and evaluation. “I think the most important thing is that it is youth based and we ask the youth what they want. [Unlike] the larger organizations that tend to develop programs on what they think is needed, here we tend to ask youth for their input” FYI Executive Director, Shahina Sayani, representatively stated, further adding: “We are successful because we ask youth what they want and we ask them to help develop it and then implement it. This is what is true to being community-based, grassroots. That is the most important thing, that bottom-up approach.” “We are all youth and [FYI’s] a non-hierarchical agency [with] very horizontal management” FYI volunteer and former program co-ordinator, Andrea Zammit added.

A young female, teen-age member of the Rathburn Area Youth Council cogently explained, in agreement with RAY Project Coordinator Cutty, why giving youth service users decision-making authority, as exemplified in the powerful voice given to the RAY Youth Council on which she sat, was so important and crucial to RAY’s success and appeal to local youth:

Kids come here more because would you want to go somewhere that is just like school where you have a person older than you telling you what to do and telling you what you want?...If there was an authority figure here saying okay you sit

down and do that... people wouldn’t want to come. If it’s someone that you know, and it’s a youth, and they know what you want, then it’s more fun.

When I asked the same youth why she wouldn’t want to come if there was more of an authority figure, she further elaborated: “Because what would be the difference from staying home where you are told what to do, and then to have to come here to have people tell you what to do...I mean they (parents) don’t know what you want... They don’t understand the minds of youth.”

Gavin Sheppard seconded this opinion, in our conversation at the IC Visions premise in the Lakeshore West area: “[Youth] are in authority situations all the time like from 9 to 3 at school and at home...To have recreational programs that are also in that rigid authority structure of adult and youth... it’s just that that we are trying to get away from.” FYI Program Director, Chris Banton, similarly contrasted his organisation’s effective democratic youth engagement style with traditional top-down approaches to pedagogy and organizational leadership:

We give youth a voice in what is going on in the program. We speak as a group... Just going away from the typical teaching model that society tends to use...with the teacher dictating what is going on...Even just sitting with youth in a circle...not the typical teaching style...They really enjoy this kind of learning style.

The youth staff at SOYAT and CANTYD likewise attributed the success of the ‘youth discussion forums’ their organisations hosted to the organic, democratic structure and process informing the

forum's format. "The youth like to come to forums where we can all get together and discuss issues amongst ourselves" Ali Farah, Youth Support Worker at SOYAT for instance observed. "We found this very healing among the youth - a place for them to express themselves." What makes SOYAT's youth forums so successful, Ali opined, was that "We don't force our ideas or opinions on them. They are able to present their ideas." Ali nevertheless also stressed the importance of sometimes "challeng[ing] their ideas and make[ing] them open to new ideas".

In the latter respect, it was generally agreed by forum participants that 'grassroots' service provision need not translate or devolve into the acceptance or embrace of any and everything deemed 'cool' or popular by contemporary youth. Adonis Huggins of Regent Park Focus and Shahina Sayani of FYI, for instance, pointed towards the core values of anti-racism and anti-oppression guiding their organisational work. Key to their success in upholding and promoting such values amongst their service users and providers, nevertheless, was the non-authoritarian manner in which such ideals were promoted, particularly when and where conflicts of interest arose between youth staff members and service users. "Instead of saying, 'no you can't watch that because there is violence, there's sexism, there's discrimination', Andrea Zammit for instance explained of the conflicts on occasion arising over media programming content during their drop-in and media literacy program sessions, "we'll rather show it then deconstruct it, so you get to know why these images exist."

Shahina gave a good concrete example of how to maintain core values whilst holding on to grassroots, democratic objectives:

I can give an example of when there were magazines in the program room and some of them could make females uncomfortable because there were nude pictures in them. We were concerned because some of the youth really wanted them there and we did not want to be promoting sexism. So we had a big staff volunteer meeting, we sat down and

looked at the magazines together. We tried to imagine how they would make us feel if we were young women. We decided that the organization would not get subscriptions for those types of magazines.

Program Co-ordinator, Chris Banton, further explained how such collective inquiry processes altered his own perceptions in regards to the representation of women in popular culture. "We didn't condone it, we discussed why these images were around and what we could do not to follow the stereotypes. Since I've been here my mind has definitely changed in terms of what I now find acceptable in popular culture."



One of the major benefits and outcomes of youth-driven and responsive programming, focus group members all agreed, was the tendency for youth participants, because of their empowered status and respected voice, to take ownership of the programs they participated in. "I think all of [Regent Park Focus's programs] are successful", Youth outreach worker, Dwayne for instance explained, "because we tell them that you guys are going to produce this content...this video... You guys are going to be in charge. When you say that, they get very happy and excited. Its like, 'I'm going to be in charge'! That attracts more young people to the program because youth know what they want... They know what kind of stories they want out there...The youth that are leading the program have a sense of ownership in the program. If it's not youth led, youth will feel forced into participating and youth don't like to feel forced into participating...They want to do things that they want to do."

## Representative Service Providers

Another point of agreement in all six focus group meetings, not unrelated to the above emphasis on the value of youth-run and led organization's, was the importance of having culturally representative youth staff, particularly in organization's servicing culturally and racially diverse communities, again for reasons of cultural familiarity, role modelling and positive identification. As evidenced in the above example articulated by Derek and Gavin of ICVisions ('me and Gavin dress like them and talk like them...'), such calls for culturally representative staff often also had a class component significantly attached. As FYI Program Director, Chris Banton, representatively lamented:

**In a lot of structures and organizations, when they hire they are not looking for visible leaders to that particular community. And if you don't do that I don't know how you are going to build any trust. It is almost impossible and they couldn't identify with us, and not particularly about colour, but just to be able to identify and understand where they are coming from...or actually have been in a situation where we know where they are coming from.**

An ability to empathize with the experience and reality of Canadian racism was another reason given for the import of ethno-racially representative staff in particular: "[Having service providers that are reflective of their service users] is important because when you experience racism in society the last thing you want is to come here and only see white people [rather than] see someone that you can automatically identify with and say they probably have experienced some of the things that I have experienced" (Alana, Project Co-ordinator of the Girls Program at FYI).

Cutty Duncan, Project Co-ordinator for the Rathburn Area Youth project in Central Etobicoke which services a predominance of Afro-Caribbean and Somalian youth, likewise felt

it crucial that staff leaders be drawn from the communities served, in part for reasons of cultural competence as well as to encourage youth ownership of and identification with the programs. As he for instance explained in the former regard: "there is a prayer schedule among Muslim kids in this community...and we have to be aware of the differences in culture to make sure that you don't offend, because parents have a lot of issue on how they are raised." Stressing the need for youth programming and staff to be drawn from and situated in the community, he thus hoped that "eventually, [RAY] will have strictly Central Etobicoke kids participating, staffing, taking my position and leading the program..." ICVisions Project Co-ordinators, Gavin Sheppard and Derek Jancar, both of whom are white, were exemplarily cognisant of the dangers and issues of representation facing organization's such as their own, which service a significantly non-white constituency. As Gavin reflexively argued: "we are a hip hop based project and what we have to be really careful of is funders giving us preference because we are the white kids doing the hip hop thing and saving the black kids or some shit like that... We definitely try to make sure that... everybody is represented equally in terms of the decision making process, policy and what not."

CANTYD's Program Co-ordinator, Vathany Uthayasundaram, viewed familiarity with Tamil language, values and beliefs as crucial to CANTYD's ability to effectively outreach to and service Tamil youth. Discussing CANTYD's frequently requested role as mediator between Tamil youth and parents and/or school teachers, administrators, and/or police, Vathany explained:

It would be very difficult for another outreach worker who wasn't Tamil, in terms of understanding the issues. As a [Tamil] outreach worker you will be able to understand background...and the family issue, in terms of where the mother and father are coming from...and their point of

view, and help them understand their kids view...Because we are in [the culture], we know it. I can explain to parents in a way that is acceptable to our culture the benefits of being involved in the programs...

SOYAT Youth Worker, Ali Farah, also spoke about the cultural brokering he often undertook under SOYAT auspices, further underlining the importance of having culturally representative staff with requisite cultural knowledge to function effectively: "Many times I get called in by schools but sometimes by parents when they don't understand the punishment their child receives at school... and they want me to be there because they feel a lack of trust for the system and the schools... We have to be there in order to translate, support, to give our professional opinion."

Being able to read between the lines and remain culturally sensitive to and aware of potentially underlying and unexpressed culturally taboo issues facing ethnic minority youth was another advantage of being a member of the ethnic community that one services, as CANTYD Youth Worker, Pirathep Gnanasuntharam, for instance explained:

it's difficult when it's cultural-based problems that we face...It's already hard enough for [youth] to open up but it's really harder when its over a problem that is considered Taboo in our society...When you keep digging, digging and digging...you have to know how to get the wheels to start turning... I mean the cause of the problem might be a totally off the wall...something that they would never discuss with any body...For example, some girls will say 'this guy I'm going out with is following me'... and if you dig deeper this guy might have molested the girl several times... and she can't say that out loud because she doesn't want her parents to know..."

Whilst the ability to detect such underlying issues may be an advantage for Tamil youth workers, Pirathep was nevertheless also aware of the ways in which such cultural and social proximity

potentially worked against open and honest peer counselling relations. "Since we also often know each other outside [the organisational context], we have to ensure them their confidentiality...that it's not going to go back to the community" CANTYD Youth Outreach Worker Darshika Selvasivam for instance explained of the added precautions necessary when dealing with such culturally sensitive matters.

Youth organisations like SOYAT and CANTYD servicing primarily immigrant and first-generation Canadian ethnic minority communities in many ways functioned as a "bridge", as SOYAT Executive Director Amina Yassin put it, not only *between* new and old Canadian communities and the public resources available in what for many is a new land, but also between oft dissimilarly culturally-oriented generation's *within* the ethnic communities serviced. As Amina contended of her staff's generational make-up and composition, and the kinds of issues they must negotiate, including racialisation ('we get painted with one brush....black') in the new Canadian environ:

we are between this [youngest] generation and the coming from back home generation and I think that we are kind of like this bridge that they need... this group...We're not really young people or really old people...Our generation is the one that is doing the bridging that is necessary between ... you know, like we have the black problems...and then the Somali problems as a community, and I think for us it's to be that voice between this gap.

SOYAT's youth staff's ability to recognize and navigate such generational chasms was key to it's appeal to 18-year old co-op student, Mustapha Ali, who left his father's non-youth-led organisation to come and join SOYAT's: "If [SOYAT's staff] were a little older, I don't think it would have the same impact because they would try to bring the old tradition from back home and bring it here and try to run it here...Here they are understanding, and they know what's going on in the community and stuff so that they can help."

## Female-Specific Programs

### *By Females for Females*

Staff focus group participants, by and large, observed a male predominance amongst their service users. Often times the reasons for the latter had to do with cultural mores and norms restricting and/or discouraging female participation in mixed-gender programming. Female youth also occasionally felt threatened by aggressive young male behaviour in mixed-gender settings, which also in part explained their disproportionately lower participation in community programming. One of the strategies found successful in countering such tendencies and inhibitions was female-specific programming, run by females and for females. As Alana, Project Co-ordinator of the Girlfriend's Program at FYI noted of the problem of male hegemony in society in general, and youth programming in particular, and how FYI countered this:

I see a problem in the way this society... western society... does the masculinity thing. There is a culture of masculinity that really runs programs... Like we just started this girls group that we never had before and we realized that we needed it because we would have these co-ed programs and the male participants were running the programs...Females didn't really get a chance to relax and stuff...

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*"There is this attitude of guys feeling and acting like they have ownership over the programs," FYI Program Director, Chris Banton, further explained, in support of female specific and led programming. "[So] we are trying to develop female specific programming."*

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Like FYI programmers, IC Visions Co-ordinators, Derek Jancar and Gavin Sheppard, also found it necessary and effective to create female-only programs and spaces to counter male dominance, especially within the hip-hop culture that informed their programming. "We have a ladies night on Wednesdays for the studio" Derek explained of their tactics to address this phenomenon: "Yeah...so it's only for females...so they can do what they want and not have guys in the background...So they are not nervous or the guys trying to talk to them or get their number or whatever the situation is," Derek explained. "Hip-Hop is a male dominated culture historically" Gavin further explained, of their successful strategy, "so we wanted to address that. It's not about saying that the girls can't hang with the guys. It is about creating a safer environment so they are free to speak on what they want to do."

## Long-term Community Development/Prevention Focus

Forum Participants also all stressed the importance of maintaining a longer-term, community-development vision and implementing prevention-oriented programming focused on building stronger, more healthy communities, as opposed to (though not to the exclusion of) what was often felt to be a one-sided emphasis on crisis intervention in the social service sector. Regent Park Focus's media arts-based programming - funded by the Ministry of Health and supported by the Center for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) - was exemplary in this regards, in many ways going against the grain of dominant governmental practice in relation to anti-drug programming. As Regent Park Focus Program Co-ordinator, Adonis Huggins related of the exemplary support of CAMH for their unorthodox approach to drug prevention:



A lot of people wonder what is the connection between Mental Health and the Media Arts programs we offer....CAMH is an organization that recognizes the connection...For us it was about the reasons why people use drugs and take drugs. One of the major reasons why I think young people take drugs is that it is a form of escaping, it is a form of avoiding

problems that they are having difficulty with...It's a way of getting rid of the pain that's caused through unemployment, through not having stable housing, through not having academic supports from school. The organization feels that if we are able to address those underlining issues more effectively, that less young people will turn to drugs. To me that's the connection and that's the argument that Regent Park Focus tries to address. We still do drug awareness but very little of our actual education is about drugs because its too late by then.

Regent Focus' ability to sustain such creative, preventative programming had much to do with the organisational support it received from CAMH, which resisted the pressure to conform to more

conventional approaches to mental health and addiction programming. As Adonis explained of the exemplary support of CAMH in this regard: "The Ministry of Health doesn't really support the Arts. They would like us to be more focused on drinking and driving and doing more substance abuse sort of education and awareness. But because CAMH supports what we are doing, we are able to do our work."

## Sustained Programs, Staff and Community Rapport

*“With GYC we have that opportunity to build relationships with partners around the table, understand how they deliver programs, and find ways to deliver programs better...So it’s those networking opportunities and finding best practices and best ways to deliver programs, and coming up with different strategies for funding [that GYC enables]...I am happy that we started it.”*

*-Cutty Duncan, Project Co-ordinator, RAY*

One of the most often invoked ‘best practices’ mentioned by focus group participants concerned the crucial importance of sustaining programs after their introduction to the community, as this was felt to be imperative to maintaining strong connections, networks, and most importantly the trust and support of the community being serviced. Maintaining programming and staff continuity in this way not only helped to cut down the unnecessary reproduction of (in short supply) labour, by not having to forge connections anew each time a program ceased, but also helped to establish and build up a strong clientship, which interviewees felt was most readily forged by maintaining enduring personal relations with youth and other members of the community being served. The importance of maintaining such personal bonds was explained by Alana, project co-ordinator of the girlfriend’s program at FYI:

I can draw on my experiences as a volunteer and a participant in the program and how it affected me when I came and the next day someone is gone. For me, if Kwame [former youth worker] wasn’t here as a youth worker and if I hadn’t formed some bond with him, I would have never come back...I did a lot of work with him and when he was gone it was like all that work went down the drain. It made me feel almost hopeless and ‘why am I at an organization that really doesn’t care about youth. Because if they cared about youth they would be doing everything in their best efforts to help me out.’ It loses credibility with youth and it takes a lot of time to build that up. Once you lose credibility with youth then no one is coming back.

For such reasons Adonis Huggins, Program Co-ordinator at Regent Park Focus, felt it imperative that projects remain sustained over time. As he explained:

One of the things I try to do is sustain every position that we have. My thing is that I don’t believe in having to end and then start old projects again...I don’t believe in starting a project and then it’s over. I believe in sustaining old projects. You get young people engaging in projects and they want to continue to be involved and that’s our goal...It’s a real challenge [because] if we only get six months of funding to have someone coordinate the program, it falls apart. So my goal is always to think about sustainability.

Amina Yassin, Executive Director of SOYAT similarly felt that it was crucial that “we don’t just take service away and disappear.” “SOYAT is always open and working on a volunteer basis”, SOYAT Youth Worker, Ali Farah, hence explained, “which is why we are respected by the community. Because we have always been around.”

Recognizing the relation between personal mentorship and familiarity with and between clients and staff, CANTYD Program Co-ordinator Vathany Uthayasundaram made a conscious effort to maintain youth staff in the organisation after their completion of term:

The majority of our outreach workers were volunteers with CANTYD and now they moved on to be outreach workers and hopefully when they are done with that they will move on to become board

members...Our outreach workers are the heart of the organization. Through outreach workers, kids come to know about the project... then they come and they're like okay I want join the acting team or the artwork team...

Darshika Selvasivam, a former CANTYD youth participant, volunteer and now outreach

## Diversified Revenue Streams

One alternative means of maintaining programming continuity, in addition to rather than in replacement of core funding, Gavin Sheppard and Derek Jancar of IC Visions contended, was by diversifying revenue streams, for example, through crossing over into the commercial sphere. One of the projects IC Visions started called 'Face to the Sun', for instance, involved the establishment of an ICVisions clothing division and label, the commercial proceeds of which, as a 'social entrepreneurial venture', are successfully used as a fundraiser for the organisation. Another core program of IC Visions, entitled 'Soundworks', which offers free recording time for marginalized youth on a bi-weekly basis, is partially self-sustaining through income generated by renting out the recording studio and engineering services on occasion to aspiring and commercial recording artists, the proceeds of which pay for 50% of IC Visions office and studio rent each month. As Gavin explains of what propelled them into such fundraising alternatives:

**we have look at potentially having revenues streams... because like if we are looking at having grants all the time then say that funding falls away from something constant you've had for three years straight... and all of a sudden one day, you're like oops, we didn't get that grant... and then the whole part of your project just falls apart...and that's what happens with a lot of really cool grass-roots organizations that only rely on public funds...Once that grant that your used to getting falls away or you don't get it that one time, your whole project could fall to pieces because you are so dependent on just that stream...**

worker, revealed how important establishing bonds with an outreach worker was for her personally: "the actually life long or therapeutically rapport that we have with [the youth is key]...Even myself when I was a youth... like when that outreach worker came down and sat down and was able to talk to me... that's what made the difference in my life."

Another advantage of crossing over into what Gavin and Derek describe as 'social entrepreneurialism' is because the job creation and tangible economic improvements such ventures can bring about in the lives of marginalized youth. As Gavin explained:

The reason why I'm excited by these profit-driven streams is not only because it is self-sustaining...but because youth involved can start to earn money as well... We can start to bring them in as event coordinators and other people as street team... and we are starting to do job creation which is a huge thing...I mean the opportunity to change people's economic [state] and also give them valuable life experiences that they can take to other professions.

Regent Park Focus was also able to generate income for its service users by hiring out its video services for other organisations. "CUPE hired us to do a video for them. So we have a CD program where an organization can hire our young people and then we hire young people on a contract basis to produce videos for other people."

## Building through Partnership

Another 'best practice' frequently mentioned by staff members of the youth-led organisation's interviewed concerned establishing and fostering partnerships with organisations and institutions in the community, from families to larger, more established organisations with greater social and economic capital and capacity in the larger society. The benefits perceivedly accruing from such partnerships were numerous and varied. At a more local level, Amina, Executive Director of SOYAT, felt part of their organisational success stemmed from their reaching out to, and involvement of, the families of the youth making use of their services, as exemplified in their annual summer camp and barbecue activities which involve the extended family. "I think through our camp and our barbecue we are trying to engage parents... We don't want to have all these kids who are engaged without support at home, support coming from all directions. That is an example that

when we work with youth, we try to get the family involved as much as we can." Involving the family as such, SOYAT staff felt, increased parental confidence and trust in their organisation whilst extending the sphere of support for youth whose immediate and oft most influential environment is the family and home.

FYI likewise stressed the importance of engaging and working with existing community institutions, such as a neighbourhood convenience store ('Bob's) on the Eglinton strip, which had become a communal institution of sorts among youth and gatekeeper of local news and happenings. As Shahina, ED at FYI observed:

in terms of best practices, you need to involve the community, you need to involve local businesses, you need to involve other organizations... You have to build partnerships in order to be effective... Like the woman at Bob's convenience knows everything about the youth and what's going on. She's West Indian and they have so much respect for her and she respects them.

Key to the shopkeeper's great respect among area youth, including the most marginalized and criminalized among them, was her enduring and trustworthy presence and ability to

communicate with them in a non-judgemental, unafraid, sincere and candid manner, practices that any organisation could learn from in their dealings with 'at risk youth'.

Another perhaps more immediately tangible benefit from partnering with already established and 'reputable' organisations was increased access to public space and resources. As FYI Program Director, Chris Banton,

observed: "A lot of time if you are not a part of the organizations that are 'reputable', they'll give you a harder time to get space." Organisation's without charitable or incorporated status, Regent Park Focus Program Co-ordinator, Adonis Huggins, advised, could also benefit by partnering with larger charitable organizations by potentially making use of their partner's charitable, incorporated status to access and apply for an increased sphere of project funding. Larger partner organisations could also provide much needed administrative assistance with such things as financial auditing and administrative support.

Such organisational practices were endorsed and embraced by all GYC member



organizations. IC Visions for instance was currently in the process of cementing a partnership with a major for-profit promotions company in order to put on an international hip-hop film festival in the Fall. "We really are starting to build partnerships now in hopes of doing bigger initiatives [and] we are really starting to extend our services that way." Whilst all for youth-led programming and organizing, Gavin and Derek were also aware of the benefits of partnering with more experienced adults. "These older people have experience and they are there for a reason and while some of the practices might be outdated, they do understand what works on different levels" Gavin acknowledged. "They have seen more successes and failures than we have. They have been there longer" Derek added, before concluding: "we need to work together....We can't do it without them but they can't do it without us."

Partnerships, it was nevertheless generally agreed, should not come at the expense of democratic accountability and youth stewardship of youth organizing and programming. In this respect, Regent Park Focus's partnership with the Center for Addiction and Mental Health was ideal, in Adonis's view, since such partnering did not come at the expense of Regent Focus' youth-led, organizational autonomy: "One of the things that is really good about [our partnership with CAMH] is that CAMH supports the notion of community making decisions for itself. As a result of that support, they don't take the decision-making away from the organization. So instead of a board, we have an advisory group<sup>1</sup> and in terms of the work I do there is an accountability to all the stakeholders, but I would say that my accountability is far more to the community than it is to CAMH."

## Skills Transference: From & Between Adults, Youth Staff & Service Users

Building partnerships with other organisation's and agencies also oft facilitated the transference of skills and expertise to youth staff and program participants. Many of Regent Park Focus's programs were facilitated and/or initiated in this way, whether the 'Catch Da Flava Radio' show

that was established with programming support from CKLN staff and transmitted on Ryerson's CKLN (88.1 FM) radio frequency, 'The New



Media Lab' multimedia program, which teaches web design and facilitates creative media projects with support from the Citizen Lab (an interdisciplinary laboratory at the Munk Centre for International Studies at the University of Toronto), or the 'Zapparoli Studio for Photography Arts' program which, inspired by the work of professional artist and former

Regent Park resident David Zapparoli, provides young people with opportunities to work with, and learn from, professional photographers, with organisational support from Gallery 44 at 401 Richmond (Gallery 44 also granting IC Visions access to their dark room for their photography program). The beauty of such partnerships, Adonis Huggins maintained, was that "by bringing in instructors that teach the skills that we don't have...on short term contracts...[they] transfer their skills to young people who can then take over." He gave numerous examples. "Like Emmanuel [the current video arts instructor for Regent Focus] here is passing on skills from the first [video editing] instructor that taught us [Final Cut Pro etc]. Now he is the one teaching other people. The Catch Da Flava newspaper is another really good example. The instructor that came here to teach how to do the layout for that gave [the skills] to one youth and that youth gave it to another youth and that youth gave it to another youth and so on. We are nurturing people's skills."

## BEST PRACTICES ENGAGING 'AT RISK' YOUTH

# 2

All of the best practices discussed in the above 'overall best practices' section applied to best practices when seeking to engage 'at risk' youth. Indeed, as a general rule, the above best

practices were that much more important and crucial when trying to engage 'at risk' youth populations.

### Views and Concerns Regarding 'At Risk' Terminology

Prior to engaging in discussions around best practices at engaging 'at risk youth' more specifically, forum participants shared their views on the 'at risk youth' terminology, in the process elaborating their own understandings and problematizations of the term as well as suggestions for how one might best conceive of 'risk factors'. "When I say at-risk," Project Co-ordinator at Rathburn Area Youth, Cutty Duncan, commented, "I mean at-risk for being



involved in criminal activities...At-risk for not being able to achieve as much at school based on what's going on in the family, what's going on with expectations with them at school or from teachers" he explained. Darshika Selvasivam, Youth Outreach Worker at CANTYD offered a general definition of 'at risk youth' as referring to youth who were "educationally, behaviourally, and socially a harm to themselves or others". Derek Jancar at IC Visions saw 'at-risk youth' as referring to youth who were "a witness to our society at an early age... and they have not had the right people to guide them to make the right decisions... Financially, they may not be

able to make the right decisions, they might have problem with the law, problems with their living situation, with education [etc]." Despite having his own working definition ("right now, I make up these measurements in my head..."), Cutty nevertheless felt their needed to be greater definitional clarity and precision around the meaning and deployment of 'at risk' vocabulary:

to me "at-risk" is an incomplete statement. When we say at risk, we have to ask at risk of what? There needs to be some definition there because I always feel that there are certain risk factors ... If we could [only] do some kind of measurement to figure out what would be the normal expectations of a youth... We need a universal definition of what 'at-risk' is... something that we can look to see that one community is at risk because they have these factors and another community is not at risk because they have these factors and I don't think we have come up with that set of factors... We have to say that a healthy youth will have this at home, will have this in his community etc. etc. I think until we do that it is hard for us to determine who is at risk...

One of the younger teenage youth participants at RAY gave her own first person understanding of what constitutes 'at risk youth', which laid emphasis on the social, environmental constituents of at risk-ness: "I think 'at-risk' [youth] are kids who have drugs and violence in their area... like when you go outside you see the drugs and you go around and you see the violence." Adonis Huggins, Project Co-ordinator

at Regent Park Focus, and Andrea Zammit of FYI similarly stressed the social-institutional ingredients making youth more at risk. As Andrea Zammit argued:

I see our community as at-risk because it lacks social infrastructure that communities need in order to be healthy. I don't know if I see the youth themselves as at-risk. I feel that that label stigmatizes youth as putting individual blame on them for not living to their full potential. The reason why not all youth reach their full potential is because our society doesn't create an environment where they are able to.

"Instead of being at risk" FYI Project Co-ordinator, Alana similarly opined, "they are more being targeted by the society that we live in who doesn't want to see them [because of] racism, classism, sexism..." Adonis Huggins of Regent Park Focus voiced similar concerns with conventional understandings and deployments of 'at risk' terminology:

**My problem is with the basic assumption implied by at-risk...in terms of narrowing it down. I personally think that there are a lot of institutional barriers that prevent young people in general from participating fully in society. This whole category of at-risk is a way of not facing those barriers... not facing barriers of institutional racism, not facing barrier of poverty, not facing barriers relating to housing ... those are the real issues. The at-risk terminology hides those issues because they say, we can't face these systemic barriers, we only want to focus on programming to those youth in the community who are unable to cope with the barriers that we put up. Youth who react to those barriers in ways that are destructive to themselves and to others.**

In using such terminology, Adonis felt, agencies "are saying that [the youth] make this category 'at-risk' instead of dealing with those societal barriers." "That's why I don't like the term at-risk" Adonis concluded, "because it equates that if we can isolate those small groups of young people, to give them the support that they need, then they won't be at-risk anymore. But it really hides those other issues in society that they

don't want to talk about, like why aren't more young people of colour more politically engaged?"

Whilst acknowledging the social, institutional determinants of at-risk-ness, other focus group participants thought it important that the more meso and micro determinants, such as family situation and individual experience and psychology, be factored into the equation. As CANTYD Outreach Worker, Darshika Selvasivam, explained of her experience: "I find that class does have something to do with it... but child abuse and child neglect is all around.... Most of your clients are in the lower to middle class area but we have also had upper class clients where parents are too busy and there is a lot of neglect and they just want to be able to find that acceptance. It ranges." Gavin of ICVisions similarly argued:

At-risk youth generally come from a lower income bracket, from areas that are labelled as target areas or at-risk areas. Not all of them but generally speaking...[However] we define it very differently...I mean you can come from a billionaire background and still be completely at-risk because you don't have anyone there to be a positive role model... You have too much money and not enough love... and then you get into trouble with drugs... So the vast majority of our kids do come from lower income, marginalized backgrounds but we try not to assume.

"There are a lot of kids [from poor backgrounds] that study hard and have good moms and dads and are not really at-risk. I mean maybe they don't have a lot money... but they get a scholarship because they are really smart... and might have good families" Derek for instance explained, giving a counter-example to the conventional 'ghetto, at risk youth' depiction. "I think that anyone could be a youth at-risk" a young teenage youth added at the RAY forum. "It is a mind set." When an analogous point was made at the Regent Park Focus forum, I put the question back to the youth participant: "Are you at risk?" I inquired, to which Vihn Duong, Network Technician and Audio Arts Co-ordinator at

Regent Focus replied: "Am I at risk? I am not at-risk because I think at-risk is just how you think as a person, yourself. For me, I don't think that I am ever at risk, even though others might consider me at risk, I would never think of myself that way."

Amina Yassin, Executive Director at SOYAT, defined 'at risk' in terms of "factors that lead to [youth] getting involved in either dropping out of school or crime." "If you are defining at-risk in that way then, yes, we do really serve marginalized, racialized kids who don't have a lot going for them", Amina stated. "Having said that" she clarified, "it doesn't mean that just because you live in Rexdale or Jane & Finch or Jamestown, for that matter, that you are not going to amount to anything or that that's your downfall." Amina was wary of the labelling dangers inhering in the use of at risk terminology. "The term "at-risk" can become limiting" she argued. Regent Park Focus Youth Outreach Worker, Dwayne, concurred, and spoke of his organisation's efforts to counter such limiting characterisations in the media, with their counter-media:

Now-a-days the media is often portraying lower income communities in negative ways... That's all they do is put down the communities. I think one of the visions for Regent Park is to help the community change their image. That's why we work with young people because young people live in this community and are going to be the future tenants.

Like all GYC member organisational staff, Guled Warsame, SOYAT Youth Support Worker and Programs Co-ordinator, was highly cognisant of and sensitive to the dangers of labelling youth as 'at risk': "We don't refer to them in that way" he

insisted, explaining his reasoned rationale: "We don't call them youth at risk. We try to make them feel comfortable...We encourage them before anything...We don't want them to feel that they don't belong with other youth. That they are separate. It's a point of early prevention." Pirathep Gnanasuntharam, a Youth Worker at CANTYD, similarly reasoned: "From the outside, when you are looking at these kids from some of the drop ins that we hold, you can say that they are at-risk but once we start working with them on an individual basis that terms breaks down...That's why we want to work with them on a face to face basis...not putting at-risk on them before getting to know them...like a mask or something. We try to distance ourselves from that wording... and how we do that is to get close to the youth on an individual basis."

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***"The term "at-risk can become limiting..."***

*- Amina Yassin, Executive Director,  
SOYAT*

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Another danger attending from the deployment of 'at risk' in youth programming and organizational terms of reference concerned the potential negative impact this had on prospective parents of youth service users, particularly as concerns their perceptions of such youth-led programming and its suitability for their children. Parents, one young Rathburn Area Youth Council member for instance opined, may discourage their children from attending youth programming due to concerns over the 'at risk' composition and demographics of the youth service users described or referenced in program material, and consequent fears of 'negative influence' on their children through peer association.

## Sustaining Ongoing Personal Rapport

The importance of “getting close to the youth on an individual basis,” without prejudice, fear or judgement was deemed particularly crucial to successful outreach work to marginalized youth, in turn, reinforcing the need for the maintenance of ongoing personal and communal relations and rapport through program and staff continuity. “We try to get to know [marginalized youth] on a personal level” Pirathep Gnanasuntharam, Youth Outreach Worker at CANTYD stressed. “That way we can advocate for them better because those are the kids that we really want to know a personal level. Other kids we know that they are going to do fine...but these kids need the most attention. Most of them are just lacking in attention.” “And they need us to make up for it” Vathany, CANTYD’s Program Co-ordinator added. “In terms of what we can give them,” Vathany continued, “it’s support, guidance...someone to just talk to...They need that.”



CANTYD’s Outreach Worker, Darshika Selvasivam, similarly stressed the importance of establishing such personal rapport: “after the drop in you have to take a couple of hours to go find those kids...Go sit down and then talk to them, one on one... That way you build that relationship with them” – a relationship that was all too often imperilled as one-off projects drew to a close. “That’s the thing here,” Alana (former

FYI volunteer and present Project Coordinator of their Girlfriends Program) explained of the difficulty of maintaining links with such youth once staff and programming end or change. “They have to know you or actually know your friends...to say ‘yeah, I’m actually going to come and hang out here.” Indeed, Gavin Sheppard of ICVisions saw part of their success as a youth organisation as stemming from their personal familiarity with area youth and the community. “I mean there is trust there... Half the people that come to the program are our friends...and now that we have grown older some of them have moved on or whatever...but we have little brothers, cousins, or people that we just knew from around the way, like from summer camps and stuff like that in the area.”

All of the organisational staff interviewed related stories of links with at risk youth forged, often with much time and considerable difficulty, and then broken as a result of project closure. CANTYD staff for instance described the great success of one of their projects (Project Impact) in reaching at risk youth in Jamestown and the subsequent alienation of the youth after the funding and program came to a close. As Pirathep related, of the impact of the severance of the program and the close relationship forged between the Outreach Worker running it and area youth: “After Project Impact was over they were really pissed....Why did he leave and stuff like that...” A similar fate also met the ‘at risk’ youth who for a time frequented FYI, as Alana (former FYI volunteer and present Project Coordinator of their Girlfriends Program) recalled: “FYI had these at-risk youth... These guys were gang bangers...I mean two weeks after I came here their boy was shot. They came to FYI talking about murdering this guy and getting their revenge and we sat down and just talked about it. It was so strong. Then I remember leaving for a couple of months and coming back and they weren’t here anymore...They were right back standing out in front of Bob’s (a convenience store).”

## Open-minded, Non-judgemental, Supportive Attitude & Approach

All GYC member staff likewise stressed the importance of remaining open-minded and non-judgemental in their relations with highly marginalized youth. “We don’t try to be preachy

or interfere with your life and try to change your clothes or your music” Amina Yassin of SOYAT for instance stressed. “We just try to say ‘What else can we do to make you better.’ As she further explained, hypothetically speaking to a troubled youth:

‘Okay yah you were a highschool drop out last year but what are you doing this year. Are you back in school?’ We see that... and we support them. We don’t try to preach them...we don’t say ‘You should go back to school or you are going to die now’...It’s more like ‘what can we do to help you succeed or achieve your goals...Maybe school is not one of your goals.. Maybe you want to go somewhere else...How can we make that dream happen for you?’

FYI Youth Program Worker, Jerome Grant, similarly stressed the importance of making

marginalized youth feel comfortable, in his description of what has best worked for him in reaching ‘at risk youth’:

Just being open minded... not judging them because they look a certain way.... Getting to know the participants that come here... encouraging them to bring others or any new people that come and just making sure that they are comfortable... showing them that this is a place they are welcome to come to.

Such an approach, nonetheless, did not entail simply ceding to the wishes and desires of the youth. “We REQUIRE that they think” Amina for instance added. “We ask them why they do this and do that. ‘Okay so you want to go get high... That’s fine, but why do you do that?’ When you starting asking why and they start answering the why, that’s when they want to get involved because they believe that they can make a difference....That is how we engage youth by getting them to think about why. That’s why we are as successful as we are because we get them to think outside their own boxes and say why, and get their input on what they’d like to do about it.”

## ‘Fun’ Programming & Engagement with Popular Culture

All GYC member staff agreed that programming had to have a fun component in order to be attractive and engaging to youth. Popular culture, as discussed in previous sections, was deemed particularly effective at gaining the attention of marginalized youth. Some GYC member staff nevertheless were weary of the fact that marginalized youth often gravitated one-sidedly to programs revolving around music. As Adonis Huggins of Regent Park Focus, for instance, observed of the success of the hiphop-based programming in attracting ‘at risk’ youth whom might not otherwise attend Regent Park Focus:

Our break dancing and DJ-ing program has been successful in that we outreach to

youth who we haven’t been able to catch through the video and radio programs.... I think that it’s really popular and it’s using popular culture to attract youth....I guess what is a concern to me however is that the Caribbean background youth aren’t [going into] other career skills development programs... They are getting involved in music production and DJ-ing, anything around music...and I think the music industry has targeted [Black] youth as well [i.e. by reproducing the Blacks as entertainers and entertainers only stereotype]. That’s what concerns me about that.

"Ultimately," Adonis explained, "we are hoping that they will eventually come here not only for hip hop but then say I would like to make a video or I would like to get into the new media program as well." CANTYD staff engineered a particularly effective means of ensuring that the fun programming components not be divorced from more educational, life and career-building program aspects. They for instance temporarily

situated their discussion forums right in the middle of the basket-ball drop-in programming so as to attract and ensure the attention of youth whom might not otherwise participate in such educational and informative dialogue. "Once you get started" CANTYD Youth Outreach Worker, Pirathep Gnanasuntharam however observed of the success of this tactic, "the discussions start growing and growing."

## Empowering Youth, Raising Expectations: Democratic, Open Structure & Space

Marginalized youth, many of whom had experience in the criminal justice system and its rigid authoritarian institutions of reform, were often the most resistant to having programs pre-packaged and designed for them by adults (or youth) in positions of authority. As Derek Jancar of ICVisions earlier articulated in a statement that had added resonance for the most marginalized youth: "[Youth] are in authority situations all the time like from 9 to 3 at school and at home...To have recreational programs that are also in that rigid authority structure of adult and youth... it's just that that we are trying to get away from."

Shahina of FYI related how she had come to learn of the very simple and basic requests of area 'at risk' youth after directly consulting with them, after several unsuccessful attempts to gain their clientship:

there was this one pocket of [particularly 'at risk'] youth that we hadn't been able to reach out to... so I tried to work with one of them to write a grant application based on their ideas. They just wanted a space where they could feel comfortable coming because they don't get that anywhere else in the community. These are the ones that are most marginalized... When I asked what they want... it was just space, a room like this where they can just have to themselves to hang out and talk or whatever.

Speaking on the outcome of this dialogue, Shahina opined: "We are successful because we ask youth what they want and we ask them to

help develop it and then implement it...That is the most important thing, that bottom-up approach." When I asked Andrea Zammit of FYI why the most marginalized youth were often the most resistant to having more tightly scripted and planned programming, she revealingly replied: "because they don't want us to emulate the family, the church, the school, the police. FYI is not about that. We are all youth and it's a non-hierarchical agency..."

CANTYD focus group participants were particularly pleased with the great success of CANTYD's 'Project Impact' at engaging the most marginalized youth in the Jamestown area. Pirathep Gnanasuntharam who grew up in Jamestown for some 12 years was familiar with many of the area youth and the difficulties in reaching out to them. "These kids are like grimy... they live day-to-day on the streets" he explained, describing Project Impact's service users. "You know drugs...they have problems at home, relationship problems... gang violence to the max ...I think about 80% of the kids there have dropped out...and all they can turn to is the street...but putting him [Project Impact's outreach worker, Gopie] in the street was a huge help." Much of the success of Project Impact, Pirathep opined, describing its location and structure, stemmed from its democratic, free-form program structure:

The Rose Avenue Recreation Centre – that's the hub. That's where all the Tamil youth come to hang out...so you catch them there and then you hang out with them and chill out with them... It's really open and unstructured. And that's part of

its success...They are not controlled...They won't live that life...They can't live time lines really....[Gopie] will just sit in the middle of the park or something... and they know that he will be there and within the next twenty minutes there are 30-40 guys around him. They just sit there and talk. He connects with them and then those kids literally run the show... Guys that usually sit there and cause a ruckus are showing leadership...I was surprised...They put together an amazing cultural show - the youth themselves did that... It was really amazing to see such a difference in one year. That one year of difference for 15 years of going the wrong way for youth.

By putting trust in the youth to 'run the show' as such, and by so doing cultivating youth ownership of the program, Project Impact's youth exceeded everyone's expectations, gaining immeasurable self-confidence and esteem in the process. "Those guys came to me and were like 'you know what, we were really thankful that CANTYD has taken this kind of focus' as they felt nobody else had been helping them out," Pirathep explained.

A strategy Darshika Selvasivam, Youth Outreach Worker at CANTYD thus found particularly effective in dealing with difficult youth essentially amounted to empowering them in leadership positions, and heightening expectations. As

## Representative Outreach Workers

GYC member staff felt it especially important for outreach workers working with highly 'at risk youth' populations to have had some familiarity and experiential knowledge of, if not background in, the kinds of environments lived in by at risk youth on a daily basis. Indeed, much of the success of CANTYD's Project Impact described in the above heading hinged on the respect accorded to the project youth worker (Gopie), as a former 'at risk youth' and gang member himself. As Darshika related: "the way those kids look up to their outreach worker, I was shocked. Because these kids would be walking down the street and be like who you, oh CANTYD, and then they'll give mouth...But they

Darshika explained, elaborating how this departed from conventional educational practice:

In a classroom, to maintain the order, often those kids get sent out...but in our drop in what we try to enforce is okay you want to act out, you go right ahead...For example, there are some kids in my drop in...they will go crazy because it's after school and they are trying to let out some steam...so I try to get them to the gym, but if I can't, I have them in a classroom and I take them out...and I ask them what they think I should do next...So you take that kid that would normally be sent down to detention and then put him in a leadership role and he feels like he has authority. You want to channel that energy into leadership... It really works!

Darshika went on to provide numerous concrete examples of the transformative effects of such youth empowerment tactics in terms of the confidence it instilled in the youth: "I was looking at the pictures on the wall and one was a youth who used to come into one of the drop-ins and he was the kid who created the ruckus ... Now he his at University in Ottawa... I mean he is the same goof...but he got that motivation... He has gone to jail, has had a gun in his hand, has dealt with the law ... but his outreach worker did not give up on him."

respect him and he builds that...the outreach worker - Gopie." When Pirathep (CANTYD Youth Outreach Worker) explained Gopie's personal life history, it became immediately evident why these youth found him so easy to relate to. "He came here young and lived by himself and struggled through to make his way in life"

Pirathep explained. "He has a history too. He was [once] a part of the whole gang culture, and now he in university." Gopie's familiarity with the life of the youth he served was a major reason why he was so esteemed by the Jamestown youth. "When I went down" Pirathep exclaimed, "I can tell you that he can relate to them ...He knows the rules of the street... and

the kids know that... and if something is going down he knows how to handle it...They feel safe with him." "Whereas myself," Darshika interjected, "I couldn't go into a setting like that...I am more of an administrative person ... There is a whole upper level of people that influence these kids, but won't be able to relate to them..." "It's hard if you can't connect to the kind of mentality there" Pirathep further explained, "the whole gang culture...If you haven't experienced that kind of thing first hand

you wouldn't know how to handle situations like that. It can be really intimidating for you also." Unfortunately Project Impact ceased to exist after the funding ran out, alienating many of the youth who had begun to establish a rapport with Gopie, as Pirathep related: "After Project Impact was over they were really pissed....Why did he leave and stuff like that..."

## ON USE OF THE ARTS

# 3

*"I think the GYC is important just to prove to the funders and the people in government that youth-led programs work and they work better than non-youth-led programs."*

*-Derek Jancair, ICVisions Project Coordinator*

### Popularity of Media Arts among Youth

All of the GYC-member organisations employed the arts in one capacity or another, albeit some more than others. One common bind among the GYC member organizations was their use (or aspired use) of media-related arts in particular. Where programs involving the latter did not exist, this was the most popular and demanded art form requested by youth service users, most often in the form of digital audio/ video production and/or photography. The success of Regent Park Focus' programs was testament to the popularity of such programming.

When I asked the kids at Rathburn Area Youth what arts they would like to see employed in programming at their organisation, the youth replied: "Media arts...Maybe acting too, or documentaries. Start making some videos." "Yeah, videos would be great too!" another youth added, "and mix tapes too". "You can't just get pink bracelets and [think] girls will come" one young female youth humorously and presciently interjected. "You need other things like digital cameras or videotape...so we could go around take pictures or make a documentary."

Amina Yassin, Executive Director at SOYAT, likewise spoke about the demand for more arts programming at SOYAT, and media arts in specific. Responding to my question regarding the types of programming most requested by youth, she replied: "We have had requests for more arts...If we had more support we would try to do more media projects. That is something we are often approached about... doing radio... just to

have an hour or two hours out there for youth to express themselves, and listen and be heard....We have kids who come in and want to do TV programs... on OMNI [etc]."

Resources were SOYAT's major impediment at the moment, though other requests for arts programming – such as for culture and fashion shows – were soon to be fulfilled.

"Somalis in general, as a people, are quite artistic and we are very creative in different forms, poetry" Amina explained. "Coming from a place like that and then here not doing much...Now I find that these kids...this is what they want to go back and do...We are putting on a Multicultural show at the end of June because we have had such a demand for artistic expression in different means of art. So definitely the demand for arts has risen and we are trying to meet that."

Vinh Duong, Regent Park Focus's Audio Arts Co-ordinator and Network technician cogently explained the media arts particularly strong appeal among youth as follows: "Media is an outlet that is different because a lot of youth don't have outlets where you can express how you feel and have people actually listen to you. So when you are on the radio or on video you just feel more important." Adonis Huggins further discussed the potential of media arts to act as an educational tool and advocacy medium, amplifying the voice and concerns of those rarely heard, whilst doing so in a fun and life-skill building way. "We try to encourage this through the video and radio show, to identify issues that relate to youth. We hope that they are making videos about real issues that they are facing in their lives."

## Effectivity of Popular Arts & Culture as Medium of Youth Engagement

Popular cultural art forms were deemed particularly effective in attracting the attention of Toronto youth, as evidenced in the great success of Inner City Visions innovative hiphop-based youth programming which employs urban music and culture to foster and further civic engagement, technical artistic production skills, as well as life and leadership skills. Awarded by Municipal Councillor Olivia Chow for "leadership in youth advocacy and innovation", and celebrated as the first government funded hip-hop recreational centre in North America, the I.C. Visions project has proven particularly effective at engaging marginalized youth who are disengaged from and/or not being reached by more formal educational institutions and means. "A lot of this project came from this distaste with the formal education system", Project Co-ordinator, Gavin Sheppard explained. "We wanted to attract at-risk youth and we wanted to attract a lot of youth and hip-hop was something that all the youth were getting into at the time" Derek added, "and as soon as we opened the program, within the first month we had like 30 kids in here. It was packed!" "It's crazy what these kids with no real academic training are able to accomplish" Gavin further observed: "But again they might not have an outlet to do it... or access." Reflecting popular youth demand for engagement with hiphop culture in particular, Regent Park Focus and Rathburn Area Youth were both currently in the process of creating their own recording studio facilities in response to the great demand for such programming coming from their respective constituencies.

Just as important as the artistic skills honed in their studios, Gavin and Derek opined, were the tangible and intangible career and life skills picked up along the way in the creative process. "Our programming is not just about learning how to express yourself through the arts. It's about mentoring...learning to better yourself," Gavin explained. "There is a lot of

bigger things we are trying to accomplish", Derek added. "We teach them more life skills and experiences and dealing with business situations and dealing with people and overall communication skills and leadership skills. That's more important than them becoming a better rapper because the chances of being a rapper is slim (Derek)." Adonis Huggins, Project Co-ordinator at Regent Park Focus similarly discussed the more indirect benefits of their organisation's media arts focus: "It's also an opportunity to gain life skills, like problem solving, working together, creativity, decision-making...employment, setting goals."

FYI similarly saw the arts and popular culture as a potential pedagogical tool and medium to encourage and attract youth engagement. "It's an attraction. It really brings in the youth" FYI Program Director, Chris Banton, for instance explained in relation to FYI's successful use of such mediums. "The goal of FYI is to use popular urban culture, like the arts, to bring social systemic change to the streets of the former City of York, North Etobicoke and West Toronto areas," former FYI program worker and youth volunteer, Andrea Zammit, elaborated. "FYI has really nurtured that as a kind of teaching tool" she explained, giving the example (discussed above; see Grassroots Democratic Decision-Making subsection) of the kinds of discussions generated around depictions of women in popular culture in their drop in and media literacy sessions. Gavin of ICVisions likewise gave numerous examples of how dialogues that began around hiphop in the IC Visions studio turned into "dialogues about the bigger picture", such as the potential role and place of youth in society. "That's how we do it," he exclaimed, drawing attention to the potential of the arts to trigger youth's imagination, critical faculties and contribute to their conscientization, in the process nurturing more active forms of civic engagement and participation in society.

## Expanding Youth Expressive Outlets, Building Youth Self-Esteem and Nurturing Psychological-Emotional health

The self-expressive qualities of the arts was one of its defining and most alluring features to youth, particularly in a society that often marginalizes youth perspectives and concerns. "Art is just so expressive" FYI Youth Program Worker, Jerome Grant observed. "It allows youth to express themselves, to create their own identity instead of having it shaped by the mainstream institutions," FYI youth volunteer, Andrea Zammit further explained. The relatively free and open format of artistic expression thus had much to do with its appeal. "[Art] builds self-esteem too because when they are using art to express themselves in their own unique way, they are free for the most part to do what they want. Art really brings that out", FYI Program Co-ordinator, Alana commented. "There is no expected outcome or no right or wrong", Andrea added, with Jerome Grant further stressing the point: "In art there is something for everybody. Every expression and every emotion. People can relate to it."



Many felt that the youth social service sector had an additional responsibility and onus to take up the expressive arts in light of the dwindling of support for the arts in the formal education system which many felt was increasing youth demand for artistic expressive outlets outside the education system. "It's not being used in the schools, which is horrible," Andrea Zammit representatively exclaimed. Gavin Sheppard

further explained how his own artistic sensibilities, like many of his contemporaries, were nurtured in his younger schooling days, and linked the increasing absence of the arts in the schools to the popularity of IC Visions current arts-based programming:

We were having a conversation with someone the other day... and it seems there is this generation that has cropped up using the arts as programs, whether its hip hop or the arts in general...It seems to be a part of this generation... people in their mid-twenties who are doing this...I think it's because we're the generation that saw the arts thrive in the school system...When we were in school they were just beginning to slash arts budgets...The younger people [now] never really knew the difference... They didn't have [arts programs] in the first place...so they are looking for an outlet...and they are using this program to express their energy, their emotions.

Many stressed the ability of the arts to nurture the talents of youth who may not be inclined to traditional school curriculum and/or recreational programming. As Pirathep Gnanasuntharam, Youth Outreach Worker at CANTYD, explained of his organisational experience in this respect, drawing attention furthermore to the arts potential therapeutic value:

We know that a lot of kids can talk, but some just can't communicate through that means...When we do outreach work some are articulate and then there are some who would rather write poems. I know this one girl who doesn't speak at all in one of my outreach programs but her poems are amazing. She suffered through a lot too...Her brother was involved in a gang and she had two or three deaths in her family due to gang violence...Her actions don't show that she is going through it -she is very strong on the outside [and] looks

very happy - but she expresses that through her poems.

"We want to release their energy inside by any means possible, and give them options", Pirathep concluded.

## Arts Gender Inclusivity

Another related benefit of arts programming, particularly vis-à-vis more traditional youth

recreational programming which often centers around competitive sporting activities, is the ability of the arts to attract both genders, in a youth recreational field oft dominated by males and male activities. CANTYD Youth Worker, Pirathep Gnanasuntharam, for instance spoke of the appeal and ability of the visual and poetic arts – particularly when produced in more privatised, individualised modes - to attract female youth service users whom might

otherwise be uncomfortable or lacking in confidence for various reasons to express themselves in a more collective public setting. As Pirathep explained: "Guys can be vocal and be heard at the same time...When girls are vocal, they [are often treated like] 'okay who is she talking to, she is just a girl in society' ...So they actually choose okay, if I can't talk then I'll do this art work...We encourage art for girls because we want them to come out and speak their minds through this other medium...That's why we provide them with different programs to express themselves."

## Artful Negotiations of Culture and Difference

Gavin and Derek of IC Visions also drew attention to the ability of the arts, and hiphop in particular, to bring together and unite a wide spectrum of youth in their neighbourhood from varying ethnic and racial backgrounds, in a shared aesthetic taste and pursuit. As Gavin described of hiphop's cross-cutting demographic appeal:

**Lakeshore-South Etobicoke is one of the most culturally diverse areas in the city...It is known for its cultural diversity...But the one thing that was uniting youth in the area was its love for urban music and culture. That was one of the original reasons why we founded this project.**

Darshika Selvasivam, Youth Outreach Worker at CANTYD, similarly drew attention to the ways in which Tamil youth participation in hiphop allowed them to realise and negotiate, in sound and movement, the fusion they sought socially and culturally between East and West, their generation and their parents: "I choreographed a youth hip-hop group...doing an east meets west fusion...putting cultural music into the whole hip hop and western music [into our cultural music]... showing that that is what represents youth... East meets west fusion...It's a

good message to parents and community to demonstrate that we can coexist...It just reinforces that feeling."

Amina Yassin, Executive Director at SOYAT, made further parallels with respect to the ability of art to provide a medium for negotiating cultural identity for young Somali Canadians, noting the changing demographics of Somali-

Canadian youth as this impacted on SOYAT programming, along a generational continuum. "Right now as it stands, because of the way SOYAT was founded, its roots, we have not been that involved in the arts," Amina explained, elaborating upon SOYAT's traditional service delivery focus on meeting more immediate and basic needs for immigrant newcomers. She however saw this SOYAT focus as currently and necessarily changing to meet the evolving needs and interests of an increasing number of second-generation Somali-Canadian youth:

The needs [are becoming] different and the program demands have shifted. I mean the kids or people that started 13 years ago were in the middle of coming from war so it was about their immediate needs around settlement. Now that the community is more settled than they were,

and now that we have kids that came when they were 3, 4, 5 and have grown up here, the need has become less about 'where am I going to sleep' and 'how am I going to eat' and more about 'how am I going to express myself.' ...

CANTYD Youth Outreach Worker, Pirathep Gnanasuntharam, anticipated a similar shift in the programming needs of the youth they serviced in the coming years. "We will probably be changing our focus in the years to come" Pirathep opined, "because of the fact that [with] the new batch...we are

probably going to be dealing with a whole bunch of kids that are going to be in the mentality of the Canadian-Tamil society", potentially increasing the need for arts as a medium of cultural negotiation. Such a shift in orientation, of course, would depend on arts funding, as Amina made clear: "We are trying to make a whole lot of projects happen in the arts because we realize that has been really successful in engaging youth and it's a good way for them to express themselves...But like I said, with limited staff and limited resources...and depending on funding, we are trying to meet as much of this as we can."

## Challenges Using the Arts as a Medium of Engagement

### *Arts not valued by parents/youth as life/career-building activity*

One difficulty faced by organisations deploying the arts as a medium of youth engagement concerned the devaluation of art as a worthwhile activity, based primarily on its perceived inability to in any way further the career potential and/or marketable skills of youth. Parents and youth "don't think of the arts as a way to continue their schooling", Adonis Huggins, Program Co-ordinator at Regent Park Focus for instance contended of the challenges of using arts as a youth engagement tool. Staff working in communities with high concentration's of immigrant and/or working class youth also spoke of the tendency of immigrant/working-class parents to prioritize and support more traditional educational forms of programming with seemingly more fungible skills transfer, over the arts, which was sometimes perceived as a luxury ill afforded to those already facing systemic barriers to full entry into the Canadian workforce. As CANTYD Youth Outreach Worker, Darshika Selvasivam, explained of her organisational experience:

Sometimes I find the [art's] under valued...not seen seriously. Parents see it as ...you are an entertainer, a performer...I choreographed a youth hiphop-group...and parents are like, 'are you going to be a dancer in five years'?...The elders come here and they have had to

work those factory jobs for twelve hours and they know... they have gone through that and they don't want their kids going through it...

Like Adonis, Darshika of CANTYD nevertheless stressed the importance of expanding youth's potential career options by demonstrating the potential and oft overlooked viability of the arts as a career path. As Darshika argued, giving several examples of former CANTYD youth service users who had gone on to successfully build careers on the arts: "I will give you an example. There was a youth here about four years ago...recording a documentary here...and now he is at Trebus [a reputed Toronto school for the recording arts] doing film studies and he's gotten an offer. He has put all of his skills towards arts... Where does that take you in the long run? If you keep dedicated to it ... It is going to take you somewhere just like any other kind of education."

### *Insufficient Support for 'Urban Arts'*

As an organisation basing its programming primarily on hiphop, Gavin Sheppard, Project Co-ordinator and founder of Inner City Visions spoke of what he felt was a bias in arts-funding in favour of more traditional 'classical' forms of art

to the detriment of the public sponsorship of more contemporary, urban art forms such as his organisation supports. "There are a lot of arts grants" Gavin observed, "but a lot of these grants are very geared to dance or vocal recording...A lot of programs don't recognize urban music as an applicable stream." The reason why public funding agencies will "[support] world music, classical music, pop, rock and folk music but they won't fund urban music" in Gavin's estimation, was "because they view it

as a commercial culture ... and there are commercial music company's out there that can be support systems...But the truth of the matter" Gavin opined, "is world music, classical music and folk music" also cross over into the commercial sphere. This bias against urban arts in government arts funding – though not articulated by Gavin – could further be seen as a form of institutional racism and/or ageism, given the demographic make-up of those often participating in 'urban' art forms.

## POSITIVE IMPACT & BENEFITS OF YOUTH-LED ORGANIZING

# 4

*“When you come together, you find out that you are facing the same problems - that there are a lot of similar problems in each of the communities that are out there. And by doing that and approaching [these problems] in a similar manner, you are going to create a society that will be meshed in the future... People have come together because of youth groups, and they will work together and they'll interconnect and network in the future, so you will create a better multicultural society as a whole, by coming together and building bridges.”*

*-Pirathep Gnanasuntharam, Youth Outreach Worker, CANTYD*

The benefits and impact of youth-led community organizing were many and varied, tangible and intangible. Indeed, a common complaint of forum participants was the inability of conventional quantitative research and evaluation methods to adequately capture the fullness of the fruits of youth-led community work. Such concerns in part motivated the current

study, informing its qualitative, ethnographic format and methodology. Whilst by no means comprehensively engaging the subject, the following section will begin to highlight some of the most oft mentioned positive impacts and merits of youth led organizing as recurrently mentioned by focus group participants.

### Providing 'Safe Space' & Social-Recreational Alternatives to High Risk Activity

One of the most basic and fundamental positive impacts of GYC member organisation's extensive and laudable work in the generally under-serviced community's they served was the provision of 'safe space' and positive programming for area youth, which had the effect of fortifying their short and long-term social, psychological, and economic health and well-being. Time and time again, youth participants related, as did one young teenage service user (Amina) at RAY, how "if there wasn't this program, who knows... We wouldn't have anything to do. We would probably see people doing bad stuff." For some, such leisure space away from the home meant escaping an unhealthy environment. As Elana of FYI shared of her own experience in coming to the organisation:

The reason why I came here was because I couldn't stand being at home and I had a whole bunch of issues going on at home and being able to come here and not only hang out and be in a respectful

space. I was allowed to initiate projects and run them on my own. It was just so free... and look where I am right now. This job is paying for my tuition. I am not worrying about things so much right now because FYI provides some security for me.

Elana gave another example of a sixteen year-old girl who was "getting abused by her boyfriend", who "came [to FYI] all the time and [Elana] and her would talk and [she] would go with her to certain agencies and help her out." Reflecting on the impact of the cessation of the project, Elana empathetically commented "I can only imagine where she may be right now."

Emmanuel Kedini, Youth Video Instructor at Regent Park Focus felt their programming, which served over 80 kids a week, was "very successful" in terms of "keeping[youth] out of the streets, keeping them from doing stupid things." Reflecting on the inaccessibility of recreational facilities for many youth in his area, Diini Hashi, 19 year-old Administrative Assistant at SOYAT,

similarly drew attention to the serious consequences of the absence of such free and accessible youth programming for area youth: "[Without these programs]...you are going to go out and do something else with your time and that's how youth get involved in drugs or crime or anything like that because they don't have recreational facilities to actually occupy their time with."

Brian, a young visual artist who did much of the graphic design and event promotions art for FYI and whom did an ever growing number of high profile promotions for individuals and organizations through the City, shared his

personal experience of the impact of his participation in IC Visions: "[IC Visions] definitely [had a positive impact on me]. I know I was going towards the negative route...The program gives you a sense of importance. It makes you feel like you're more than what society may look at you as...Everyone is real supportive of each other... You see a lot of youth that come



here... and if you were to see them on the street you would not think anything good about them... but when they are here and they are in the context of needing help with such and such... and they see that you are trying to help them, they are some humble people... It's a good to see."

Darshika Selvasivam and Pirathep Gnanasuntharam, Youth Outreach Workers at CANTYD, drew a direct connection between CANTYD programming activities and efforts and

the decrease of Tamil gang associations. "Since CANTYD, you see Tamil gang or Tamil youth...you don't see that any more", Darshika exclaimed. "In our first year alone, we helped out 14 kids who kicked out of school...expelled, arrested, suspended...to go onto secondary education...Now some of them are in full-time university...The second year it was 16...It's almost exponential growth...more and more kids are getting involved," she explained of CANTYD's longer-term impact on formerly 'at risk youth' in particular.

### Developing Organizational Skills

Aside from being more appealing to youth service users, having youth community service organisations led and run by youth, whether in terms of staffing or in terms of the programming voice and authority invested in the youth service users, had the additional benefit of giving youth valuable firsthand organisational experience. As a young member of the Youth Council at RAY

commented, highlighting what she saw as one of the primary benefits of youth-led organizing and youth-led initiatives in her organization: "Experience. Experience in organizing. The experience of working and taking care of things and being responsible... Organizational skills. That's some of things I've learned here."

### Providing Youth Role Models

Forum participants moreover unanimously agreed that having youth as staff leaders provided youth service users with particularly effective and influential role models - an

effectivity due primarily to close social proximity between service users and providers, which made bonds of identification and emulation much more readily forthcoming. "Like when I

saw Ali, Diini, Gouled and them” SOYAT co-op student, Mustapha, commented of his early and enduring impressions of SOYAT staff members, “I always looked up to them saying ‘yeah, I would love to be in your shoes one day’...I saw how they worked with youth and everyone seemed like good role models. It has been positive working with them and it’s helping me accomplish a lot of things in my life.” Gouled Warsame, SOYAT youth support worker &

Programs Co-ordinator felt SOYAT’s Big Brother/Big Sister mentoring Programs were particularly powerful in their impact as a consequence of the positive role modelling they provide: “In a lot of ways our programs, like the big brother/ big sister program...have young people that need that positive role model in their life and when we partner them up with the right people we see a dramatic improvement in their school work and their behaviour at home.”

## Increasing Civic Engagement & Democratic Citizenship

Having youth run their own affairs as staff and participants also had a much discussed and raised impact of increasing youth self-confidence, outspoken-ness, social minded-ness and, ultimately, civic engagement. Members of the Youth Council at RAY, for instance, spoke highly of the Council institution for providing them with a forum to assert and express themselves: **“It is positive because we all come together and we all talk. This is the only place where we can say stuff and anything we want without people saying something you know...Also, it expresses me as a person. I can open up and show the true me”** (Amina Muhammad, RAY Youth Council member).

Vathany Uthayasundaram, CANTYD’s Program Co-ordinator also gave numerous examples of the transformative impact of their arts programming in particular on youth who might not otherwise have become socially engaged: “There is one of the kids coming to the drop in, he will sit there in silence, won’t even lift a pen, but now he coordinates all the art work through all the high schools... I mean if that is not civic engagement I don’t know what is.” Jerome Grant, Youth Program Worker at FYI similarly observed of the impact of FYI’s programming: “It’s good to see the changes... how there were youth that would never say anything and now they are talking out more...They are taking on programs for themselves... making it their own.” “It’s good to see how many of these so-called at risk youth are coming back to do things again”, Amina Yassin, Executive Director of SOYAT, likewise commented. A large part of the reason for this, Amina argued, had to do with the way SOYAT empowered youth in decision-making

processes. “Youth are coming back...not because they are getting paid to [or] being bribed by bus tokens and food. No they are coming in because they really care now and they want to make change and try to take ownership over their community and it rightfully belongs to them.”

Chris Banton, Program Director at FYI, observed how his own participation in FYI ignited his social consciousness and community activism. “I think when you come to FYI, you actually embrace what is going on in FYI” he stated. “Then you start seeing things in a different light. You start to look more to your community. You look more to empowering people around you.” Members of the Youth Council at Rathburn Area Youth spoke similarly of the impact of their involvement in organizing activities, in partnership with Cutty Duncan, at RAY: “I think that it motivates a lot of us to get jobs and want to help communities get better and safer and make people grow to have better jobs and not do some other stuff”, one youth service user reasoned. ICVisions founder and Project Co-ordinator, Gavin Sheppard, likewise observed a socially engaged trajectory, as part of their organisational influence, in the career aspirations of youth who passed through IC Visions programming:

we notice that the majority of kids that come out of this whole project go into social work in university.. or community development or early childhood education...and these are people that didn’t necessarily know which way they were going to go... what they were interested in... So even though the

program is about the cultural arts, they are moving into the social realm because they have realized what they gained out of it and how much it meant to them...

As an example of IC Vision-spawned civic engagement, Gavin pointed to the recent establishment of the South Etobicoke Youth Assembly (SEYA)<sup>2</sup> which youth participants and former members of IC Visions had an instrumental role in founding.

GYC member organizations also helped to cultivate and strengthen youth advocacy, by youth service users and providers, around issues of concern to them. As Adonis Huggins of Regent Park Focus described of one incident in which a Regent Park youth, together with his friends, all of whom were young black males, was accosted by police officers who thought they were either hassling or car-jacking a woman in front of them whom they had pulled over to help:

I remember he was pissed off...and he being so pissed off we encouraged him to write an article about it [in Regent Focus' Catch Da Flava community newspaper]...So he took that incident and talked to a much larger audience about his experiences...in a society that denies that these things take place because of race.

Such under-recognized and unheard voices as are regularly featured in Catch Da Flava newspaper, which is now going into its tenth year of publication, do not fall on deaf ears, Adonis explained of his efforts to regularly and directly deliver the newspaper to City Councillors. "The newspaper [provides] an opportunity to influence decision makers about what's going on in life," Adonis thus argued, drawing a connection, furthermore, between youth's ability to articulate and have their voices heard in society, and youth's civic engagement and steering away from anti-social behaviours which often bore a relation to youth alienation from, and disempowerment in, society.

Amina Yassin, Executive Director of SOYAT viewed increased civic engagement as a hallmark of their organisational influence and success, giving the example of a recent meeting with the new Toronto Chief of Police, organised and well attended by SOYAT youth staff and youth service users:

we had a consultation with the new Chief of Police and then they had two youth forums, one organized by the Toronto Youth Cabinet held downtown, and the second one being organized by SOYAT and that was held at the Etobicoke Civic Centre. And we had 30 youth show up and they were giving their input...They were saying what they felt and how they visualized this process to be, and that is how we would measure success...civic engagement...[Youth] are disenfranchised from the whole system...That's why I say we measure civic engagement [as a measure of organisational success] because to see kids that would never in a million years even be in the same room with a police officer coming and expressing opinions. Now this is what we like to see...

Numerous other examples of youth advocacy were given by GYC member organisations. With the aid and leadership of FYI, for example, youth in the Eglinton West area had recently mounted a successful campaign petitioning members of city council to establish a recreational centre in their neighbourhood. Numerous other stories of youth activism and initiative were related by CANTYD staff members. As CANTYD youth worker, Pirathap Gnanasuntharam, for instance personally illustrated: "I got involved in the Tsunami thing. We formed this youth group focused on the distribution of aid world wide - International Committee for [...] Relief - and it is a youth based initiative...that's going global...There are huge endeavours being sparked by CANTYD...It's advocacy, it's change, its evolution...It is even amazing to see how many things have been inspired in this [meeting] room alone."

## Developing Life-Career Skills

Youth involvement in GYC member organisations also had more immediate benefits both for individual staff and service users in terms of cultivating life-lasting career skills and enhancing present and future youth social and economic well-being. Many inspiring stories were told relating the positive impact of working with GYC member organisations. "I wouldn't know where I would be without CANTYD", CANTYD Youth Worker, Pirathep, whom started with CANTYD as a volunteer in 2001, stated. "There are so many things I can do right now. I didn't even know I would end up in something even close to social work. It opened up my doors a lot in terms of where I can go pursue whatever I



want to do...CANTYD opens the door to a huge network." IC Visions founder and Project Co-ordinator, Gavin Sheppard, told a similar story of how his community work in South Etobicoke radically altered his life path: "I just came out of high school... My marks were terrible... I graduated with a 54 average [and] had no interest whatever in the education system...It just wasn't appealing to me", Gavin related to me, much to my surprise, given the maturity and complexity of his thought articulacy of his speech. "Now I'm writing grants and doing programming at the Harbourfront Centre and stuff like that." He continued: "This has been a huge personal learning experience and an evolution of self, this whole thing... If I wasn't here I'd be [messed] ... I'd be either working in a restaurant or at a Factory...My job options [were] very limited... but because of hip hop and through this project ... I have been able to

find something that I am passionate about and dedicate myself to."

Regent Park Focus related many a success story of youth whom, inspired by their participation in Regent Park Focus' programming, had moved on and taken the skills they learned there to other organisations, in the process gaining meaningful and gainful employment. "This program has been very successful in inspiring people to be involved in the media aspect", Regent Park Focus Executive Director, Adonis Huggins revealed:

We have three graduates in each [stream of programming] right now...One example is [X], who started at Regent Focus, went through the program learning how to make videos and then became a facilitator and taught people how to make videos. He went into the new media program at Ryerson and now he's working with an IT company...Then there is [Y] who came to our program at age 13 and was interested in new media and just graduated last summer out of Ryerson and now he's the editor of the Dish newspaper which is a student newspaper that goes across the City. Then there's Nigel, who is working at Much Music as an intern. He was here for three years...was interested in news media, and then went on. There are actually quite a lot of youth...In that sense [they've told me], they've learned so much more through our program then they did while they were paying tuition...It gave them an opportunity to build a portfolio to apply to universities.

Raymond, an instructor-in-training at the Regent Park Focus further related: "I wish I had something like this when I was younger. Youth are getting educated here... and anywhere else it would cost like \$2000 for a course like this. We are very impressed with the equipment that's here and provided for us." Twenty-two year-old Regent Focus Audio arts co-ordinator and Network technician, Vinh Duong, who joined Regent Focus as a participant in their summer media program over seven years ago and

cultivated his passion for computers in the Regent studios, was now gainfully employed at Job Networks, thanks to a link forged through Regent Focus.

Youth service users of GYC member organisations also gained innumerable tangible skills through participation in youth-driven programming. As Brian, a youth participant and graphic designer at IC Visions stated of the concrete social and economic benefits of his work there:

I don't remember [exactly] how I got involved...but [Gavin and Derek] had asked me to do a logo and then soon after they had me do a flyer...and at the time I was getting into a lot of trouble... Then I saw what I used to do for fun was something I could do for something positive and to get money in my pocket... And a lot of the work I get now and the money I make now from artwork, it has 85% - 90% to do with these guys putting me on...[IC Visions staff] are always looking out for people that are in here.

SOYAT also spoke of the tangible economic gains made by youth participants in their organisation. As SOYAT Administrative Assistant, Diini Hashi, related of his own beneficial experience accruing from participation in SOYAT's employment counselling program:

Our employment counsellor is always here once a week, and me personally before I got this job at SOYAT she sent me out to Job Start and if it wasn't for her I wouldn't be able to get a job...I told many people that this employment counsellor was helpful and it became kind of popular afterwards. A lot of people are coming in or dropping in to see her. You actually get some one-on-one time. Other place you'll actually go there and you sit down and like people aren't really paying attention to you...Here it's a lot easier, you feel comfortable...At risk youth do actually come into the office and use the facilities like the computer and they [can] actually ask for assistance in resume writing and stuff like that.

Diini felt such tangible material benefits of youth programming was particularly important for underprivileged youth: "That is one of the most important things for youth right now, is getting employed because they actually want change in their pocket and if they actually don't have the money...then they are going to get involved in trouble or get it by any means necessary. That is some of the ways that SOYAT as an organization and their programs impact these youth."

## PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES

# 5

*“When you come together, you find out that you are facing the same problems - that there are a lot of similar problems in each of the communities that are out there. And by doing that and approaching [these problems] in a similar manner, you are going to create a society that will be meshed in the future... People have come together because of youth groups, and they will work together and they'll interconnect and network in the future, so you will create a better multicultural society as a whole, by coming together and building bridges.”*

*-Pirathep Gnanasuntharam, Youth Outreach Worker, CANTYD*

Each of the six focus group sessions concluded with a discussion of some of the problems and challenges faced by youth-led organisations in fulfilling their mandate of effectively serving youth in their respective communities.

Qualitative coding analysis of the interview transcripts revealed a great deal of overlap in the problems and difficulties articulated, from the micro organizational setting, to the meso community and macro political and policy contexts.

### Funding Related

#### *Difficulty of Incorporating and/or Obtaining Charitable Status*

Among the more basic funding-related obstacles to the maximal performance of youth-led organisations was the prohibitive costs of applying for incorporated status for young, up and coming youth organisations. “We don't even have enough funds to incorporate if we wanted to” Gavin Sheppard exclaimed, in relation to ICVisions limited budget. The inability of youth-led organisations to attract private

sector funding due to a lack of charitable status - whether because of ineligibility deriving from association with an already existing charitable-status organisation, or because of inability to secure such status through ones own application efforts - was another impediment blocking potential revenue streams for oft resource-fragile organisations.

#### *Lack of Funding, Resources and Capacity*

The premiere difficulty faced by GYC member organisations, and number one obstacle to full youth participation in youth-led programming, concerned the lack of income and resources, both in terms of funding and/or access to public space, which severely curtailed the sphere, scope, ability and effectivity of organisational outreach to area youth. Whilst the demand for youth programming by youth service users was never at issue, the inability to meet this demand due to resource constraints was a constant one. “We could open 7 days a week and open

another program in Parkdale and Malverne and we'd still be full”, Gavin Sheppard of IC Visions contended. “Our photography program on Saturday was the first one so far and...strictly on an email basis...over 20 people showed up...and we were supposed to have 12 people max,” Gavin's partner, Derek added. “I truly believe that if we had more funding and if there was a community centre in this area that SOYAT was running” SOYAT co-op student Mustapha Ali similarly confidently articulated, “it would be PACKED everyday!...The youth would always drop by after school... and be here.” “Even right

now" SOYAT Administrative Assistant, Diini added, "there is limited resources around computers as well...You get some days where people come in to print their resumes or something like that and there is actually a big line up...and we got to limit it to 15 minutes per person because the demand is so high." "Yeah I noticed you only have that one printer," I observed, to which Mustapha added: "Yeah.... And it's old...and the photocopier stopped working 5 months ago, so you have to put in one paper at a time because it's not [even] manual any more..."

Emmanuel Kedini, Regent Park Focus's video instructor similarly spoke of a "a shortage of equipment", limiting Regent Park Focus' programming capacity. As he elaborated:

I think our biggest issue right now is lack of computers...If youth come here and there are only like three computers and it's all full then they just walk out...because they don't feel like there is space for them to work...We already experienced it last year where some groups had to sit around because we don't have the equipment to use. Then there is space issues too...We can't have all the groups in the video room because of the ventilation.

"We don't get enough money – that is the bottom line!" Project Co-ordinator, Adonis Huggins, synopsised of Regent Park Focus's many resource-related difficulties. Like Regent Focus staff, and indeed all of the GYC member organisations, Darshika Selvasivam, Youth Outreach Worker at CANTYD spoke of her organisation as being continually, and sometimes at the risk of unsustainability, forced to "take one resource and stretch it in every single direction we can."

Accessing public space was a recurring difficulty voiced by GYC member organisations. "We pretty much serve all of Central Etobicoke" Cutty Duncan explained of his difficulties in achieving his organisational mission and mandate at Rathburn Area Youth, which is housed in a one bedroom Metro Toronto Housing Complex townhouse in the Central Etobicoke area:

There is nothing [in terms of youth led programming and services] in Central Etobicoke from Eglinton all the way down to Bloor, from Renforth to West Mall to Kipling. So it's a big area [we're supposed to service] and there is not an agency here... So the space that you see downstairs is the only space that we have for community space, so we can't even promote it and stuff because then we would have too many people here...and we just don't have the space and facilities.

Alluding to some of the institutional barriers that his organisation faces, Gavin Sheppard of IC Visions similarly opined that "space is a huge problem...Finding space that is youth friendly". As he explained of his organisation's experience: "It was a real problem getting space...People might rent out the space to us no problem but as soon as they find out it's for a community centre, the price either doubles or they don't even want us here."

Vathany Uthayasundaram, Program Co-ordinator at CANTYD likewise articulated how **"getting space for the kids...is a huge issue for us"**, elaborating the long, drawn out and oft unsuccessful bureaucratic process endured by staff members just to secure public space for a basketball drop-in:

Even in trying to run a basketball drop in we have to run around asking all the community centres for a gym...some [of which] are prebooked a year ahead of time...And then there's funding for permits...There is a whole process you have to go through... You call a certain department and then you fill out an application and then take it to another department ... but you don't have that time...and are often unsuccessful, and youth don't understand the process... We have money issues, space issues, permit issues!

SOYAT's staff also commented extensively about the difficulties they faced, sometimes due to racism, in getting access to public recreational facilities, which severely limited their hugely

popular and successful basketball drop-in program and annual basketball tournament which attracted crowds from near and far:

**There is quite a bit of [recreational spaces] around but accessibility is a problem. I mean we have a ton of schools that have lots of gyms but they don't want to open cuz that's where the whole at-risk youth comes into play, because they don't want to have all these kids hanging around their school after hours and we can't afford to pay the custodians (or whoever) money to open those gyms because someone has to stay in there...**

SOYAT youth worker, Ali Farah, also discussed the continuous difficulties he's encountered in trying

### *Absence of Core Funding & Its Multiple Consequences*

Perhaps the greatest and most oft referred to challenge facing youth led organizing concerned the lack of core and multi-year funding support for youth-led organizations, and a consequent over-dependence on short-term project funding which – testimony after testimony - translated into a lack of

to secure gym space from Toronto Parks and Recreation for SOYAT's annual basketball tournament ("it's a really gruelling process and you will rarely get the gym"),<sup>3</sup> whilst Amina spoke of problems of overcrowding endemic to the public spaces laudably provided by Toronto Community Housing: "they are the ones opening space, and we are really excited to have it yet because there is such a high demand for space and because there is such limited amount of space that we have to share with other good programs...these spaces [have become] overly crowded because the schools aren't open and because the recreational facilities are hard to get into."

organisational and program stability, sustainability, and capacity. The implications of this dearth in core revenue support for basic organizational operating costs were deep-set, multiple and varied.

### *Program Discontinuity: Breaking the ties that bind*

All of the research findings around best practices, most especially in relation to outreach to highly marginalized (or 'at risk') youth, suggest and emphasize the critical importance of establishing and maintaining individual and communal rapport and trust over time, which is most readily built and sustained through and by building on the strengths of successful programs, and the personal relations fostered between service users and providers in the process of service provision. Staff member after staff member however spoke of the heart-rending severing of critical relationships forged in the community – with great time and effort expended - after the cessation of project-funding and consequent withdrawal and release of programming and staff. As Shahina Sayani, Executive Director for For Youth Initiative, cogently and representatively explained of the predicament of FYI and the vast majority of youth led organisations:

**What we find is that most funders or foundations won't give you any type of core funding. Most...tend to give you project funding. We are basically living project to project. So the impact that has on the organization is the fact that you have a lot of different programs but they are very time specific. They are normally short in duration and they end and then you have a whole new set of programs...There is no continuity in programs. The programs keep changing so it is difficult to maintain any type of core programming. This makes building the trust of youth very difficult.**

Shahina went on to discuss some of the major impediments to longer-term, sustained funding commitments for youth-led, community-building initiatives, much of which had to do with the myopic interests of funders:

Even if funders fund you for more than one year, they want to have their name on a new innovative project...and the next year they won't want to fund the same program because it is no longer new and exciting...They don't want your organization to rely on them for long term sustainable funding. They will give you here and there but not enough to rely on them. They don't want to sustain their commitments to all the agencies they are funding... It is because who wants to say they funded an organization so that they could pay their rent. Or wants to pay an organization to do book-keeping. They want to fund an organization to do an amazing project and not to pay youth to fulfill administrative functions.

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***"We would really like some more core funding, something sustainable that we can actually say is going to be around for more than 6 months."***

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Such short-sightedness and self-interestedness, however, had grave consequences for the maintenance of community trust and rapport and organisational sustainability. As IC Visions Project Co-ordinator, Gavin Sheppard, and Derek Jancar related of their frustrations and those of their service users as a result of the ephemerality of their project funded programs:

Derek: I mean there are some youth that are really frustrated with the [music studio recording] program because they were given a certain amount of time to record during the week and then we didn't have any more funding to give them the hours...We had to take it away from them, not because we wanted to but because there was no more money. They felt like we were taking it away from them unfairly...It is kind of frustrating because they get frustrated with us...

Gavin: They just see us taking their studio time away...So we need to make sure that there is follow up. And that's what half the problem is - why kids don't trust these

programs because the following up is lacking...People come in and get their results and leave...and the kids are like 'Fuck that, I'm not coming back next time... because what did I get out of that...I got something but right when I was about to reach the next level someone just closed the door and walked away'...

"It's like cheque after cheque or contract after contract is what we are chasing," Gavin explained of their frustrations, before concluding: "We would really like some more core funding, something sustainable that we can actually say is going to be around for more than 6 months."

The discontinuation of programs due to short-term project funding frequently translated into high staff turnover, on the one hand, and the severing of arduously paved and time-worn links, on the other hand, forged between staff members and individuals and organisations and institutions in the community. In the first respect, Guled Warsame, SOYAT's Program Co-ordinator related: "you worry about the money running out and keeping these good workers here because once the money runs out then you can't keep staff." SOYAT Executive Director, Amina Yassin further lamented: "Being project-based, sometimes you lose really good people. And it's frustrating because when the project ends and you don't have money to keep staff around...they will move on to another job. Project discontinuation, as such, thus not only weakened organisational functioning through loss of skilled staff, but also jeopardized, often with lasting consequences, the relationships and trust formed with members of the community serviced over the duration of the program's provision. As Cutty Duncan described of his experience of the variegated consequences of project discontinuation:

The trust factor is really important...I mean, we depend on schools for permits and those kinds of things. When you start something and then you stop something, they don't think that you're serious so you don't get that respect like you would if you've been around for a long time. I feel like it takes us a lot of time to build up

respect in the community...Also, when the parents see you as temporary so they don't buy into what you're doing because you are going to be gone in a few months anyways. So no one will invest emotionally because you might be gone.

When I asked the kids in attendance at the RAY focus group for their parting words for those who may eventually read this report, two youth immediately and simultaneously replied: "We don't want it to close next year. We want it to keep going"; the other adding: "Just if the programs could keep running...Make the programs stay to keep the youth going."

Andrea Zammit of FYI woefully reflected on the impact of the discontinuation of a pre/post-charge diversion program<sup>4</sup> she laboriously worked on, with aid from the United Way, in partnership with the Youth Criminal Justice system:

It was an amazing program...I started the project and I had to make all sorts of connections with legal organizations such as the courts, the police headquarters and

all different types of organizations like Operation Springboard to try to get referrals. I had to try to get the organizations to trust me as a youth... because this was like 2 to 3 years ago when I was very young... and I really never had the full experience of running my own project. So I only had about 4-5 people in the program and the project funding ended. So it was a complete disaster. The people I was able to help, it really worked well with but unfortunately after I had established those ties, I couldn't continue.

Numerous other similar stories were related of projects and ties started and cemented and then prematurely aborted, moving FYI Executive Director, Shahina Sayani to comment: "This is another major obstacle. How do you develop these amazing innovative programs when it takes almost six to eight months to go through the development stage. Not even taking into account the actual implementation and then evaluation. Funders do not take that into consideration..."

### *Problems of Sustainability: Lack of Administrative Support, High Program/Staff Turnover & Its Consequences*

As a result of a lack of core funding and an over-reliance on project funds - which generally allocated minimal and insufficient funds (10%) to basic operational and administrative costs whilst being administratively taxing on organisational staff in terms of terse application and evaluation procedures and deadlines - GYC member staff unanimously felt overwhelmed by, and under-supported in, their administrative duties and functions and unable to sufficiently cope with the time and money required to effectively recruit, hire, train and supervise new and existing staff members. FYI Executive Director, Shahina Sayana, cogently and compellingly summed up a day in the life of an E.D. in a youth-run community organisation:

[Much time is expended] juggling these small little amounts [of project funds] and trying to manage 15 to 20 funders, and

with that comes your reporting requirements. We have progress reports, we have final reports, on top of grant applications that you have to do for each funder and if you have 15 to 20 [gasps]...and then you might be writing grant applications and getting rejected. This is very time consuming for me as the ED. Then you are asked to speak at forums, which are other responsibilities of the ED. On top of writing every single grant and report, you also have to manage the board of directors, manage staff (in two locations), and programs (in two locations)... Managing all the financial aspects of the agency... all the budgeting and book-keeping, the drama that goes on in the agency at times. *As well as* maintain relationships and building

partnerships with other community organizations.

“The result of a lack of [core] funding” Shahina thus concluded, pointing to the incredibly high burnout rate among those in similar positions as a consequence of the work overload, “is that it puts all the pressure on one or two particular people...It also stresses out and overloads [the rest of the staff] because there isn’t enough funding to hire more staff to run programs.” Amina Yassin, Executive Director of SOYAT similarly voiced her perplexity with the rationale of project funders: “The bizarre thing is that they will fund a project and maybe they will give money for one outreach worker... but most of the money has to go to the program...but who is going to *do* this program?...If you give me one part-time staff and I need 40 hours of work to go into this thing...it’s extremely hard.”

Cutty Duncan of R.A.Y. further described the multiple tasks required of his project co-ordinator position, not all of which could be adequately fulfilled and sustained, despite evidently great efforts:

**Right now in my role, I am supposed to be doing 95% administrative work but you still need a person to work with youth, to do outreach and all these things on a regular basis but we don’t have that. So you find yourself stretched just like a lot of organizations are stretched. And with project funding it is hard continue...Right when you start the project is gone...It’s one of these things where we have to find some kind of model where we could fund these kinds of programs without worrying that the core of what we do will disappear.**

When I asked Regent Park Focus’ Project Co-ordinator, Adonis Huggins, whether his organisation’s reliance on temporary project funding in any way posed him and/or Regent Park Focus organisational difficulties, he sardonically replied: “My wife would say so! It is a problem in that it ties up a lot of my time. It makes it challenging in terms of trying to balance my work as coordinator of programming as well as the administration. That is the challenge. There is still a need to have

someone help coordinate projects even with project staff.”

Due in part to the under-support of FYI Administrative staff, FYI Program Co-ordinator, Chris Banton felt he had insufficient structural support in terms of the scope and execution of his multiple roles and duties, which moved Shahina to explain:

When you are trying to juggle making links to the community and supervising staff, and this is the Program Director’s role, you have a lot of really diverse responsibilities...not just to the youth that you are working with and developing the right types of programs but then you also have to represent the agency and the community... You have to be the face of the organization...That is a very stressful role to be in without a lot of support in terms of pay and not everyone is able to fulfill all those different types of roles.

“When the job title says one thing,” Ali Farah similarly maintained, “it generally comes with five or six other responsibilities...support, counselling, administration, mediation, translation even.” “In general all the people that are in this - the GYC”, Ali related, “we do so much work in the grassroots and out there and then, really as qualified people, as post-secondary graduates that are doing these jobs, the pay is well below the norm for a person that’s in this kind of work.” Intent on soon starting a family himself, Ali was unsure how long he could sustain his occupation: “The resources are not there and also people are sacrificing their personal financial well-being.”

“Everyone is saying that they don’t do it for the money and it’s true, I was with the program for 7 years now and I started doing it for the love and for the kids and you want to give back because you gained a lot of knowledge yourself, but after seven years,” 22 year-old Vinh Duong of Regent Focus similarly honestly confessed, “you grow up and you have bills to pay and when you move out...it’s difficult.” Responding to Vinh Duong’s testimony, Regent Park Focus’ Program Director, Adonis Huggins, went on to draw a connection between high project and staff turnover, and a

kind of ageism that contents itself with paying youth less than an adequate, living wage: "I think [high turnover of projects and staff] affects young people around their housing because there are young people here who have rent to pay...There is an assumption around that youth are not living on their own and are thus not *relying* on a job like this [and] when they lose that support in a lot of ways they go backwards...They have to take a meaningless job at McDonald's which is not giving them the skills to get into school to make it to the next stage."

Due in large part to the insufficient financial support forthcoming from funders and agencies for staff and administration, many GYC member organisations were forced to rely heavily, indeed disproportionately and potentially unsustainably, on voluntary staff and hours, whether as put in by co-op students or full and part-time staff. As Amina of SOYAT contended of her organisation's functioning:

We take a lot of Co-op students because we need to supplement the time and, because we can't afford to have everyone hired and working, we get them to put in volunteer hours...Staff that work part-time and get paid for part-time actually really really work full-time. I'm only supposed to be here three days but it's a seven-day-a-week kind of job because you need to sustain the whole thing and keep it going. So we should mention that we have a lot volunteer support or otherwise we would sink.

Chris Banton of FYI similarly observed how "There are more non-staff running programs like volunteers or placement students" than paid staff in their organisation. "And then do funders provide funding to support volunteers?" FYI Executive Director asked, well knowing the answer: "NO. Do they give any money to give volunteers honorariums? NO. Or even to have a volunteer coordinator?"

High staff turn-over, most often as a result of project cessation and/or work overload, under-pay and under support, in turn generated a host of other administrative burdens and difficulties

for already taxed community organisations, as explicated by FYI Executive Director, Shahina Sayani, whom had recently hired their third Program Director in three years:

High turn over also has structural impacts...Every time you have a person leave you have to do the whole hiring process again, you have to put job postings out and we can't even afford to post on charity village because its too expensive...[In addition] hiring usually falls on me [and] after posting you may have up to 400 resumes to go through, to bring it down to ten...narrowing that down to the ones you plan to interview, [then] have the interviews which requires a hiring committee which takes up to 4 people at a time...[Furthermore] you have to do the reference checks, have the discussions, make the decision, hire the person. Then when you hire them you have to train them and provide a certain amount of support to them for the first week or two.

Another difficulty created by high staff turnover often mentioned was the loss of skills and/or inability to effectively transfer the skills of former staff members to succeeding job applicants. As Regent Focus Network technician, Vinh Duong, expressed, in relation to the inevitability of his own eminent departure from Regent Focus, due to financial constraints: "It's sad that eventually I will have to go and the fact that I am maintaining the system here, to transfer to someone else is a real difficulty because they will need to know the password and how I have it set up." Though Vinh was currently trying, and being encouraged, to pass on his skills to other existing staff members, he noted:

It's tough to train someone when you have a lot to do yourself and it's not like you can just train anybody... They need to have the knowledge already because a lot of things that come up, you just have to trouble shoot through your own knowledge...Normally you don't want to let go of your I.T. person, your network administrator because they set it up and they know how the system works. This is a system you created and it's a pain but...

“That’s our challenge,” Adonis Huggins concluded, of the consequences of minimal funding and high staff turnover. “It’s just trying to sustain what we are doing [that is our primary issue].”

To address such recurring issues of sustainability, Adonis felt it imperative that funders recognize the added administrative challenges of youth run and youth-led organizations:

Bigger organizations, especially other organizations that are funded more like YMCA, don’t have the same kind of challenges that youth driven organizations do...What is unique about our organization is that it is youth driven and that all of our staff are young people. There are challenges with that as well in terms of what kinds of supports that these young people as staff need. [Though] part of my job is providing that support and direction...there needs to be more structural support for youth who are staff...Training opportunities, for instance, to raise the skills for the staff to deal with conflicts and just handle things that come up. So that’s a challenge because we don’t often have the time or support and

resources to do that... and also opportunities for staff to raise up their skills.

To address this problem, Adonis argued, as did numerous others, that funding agencies needed to allow for greater allocation of resources to staff support and training, for reasons he further explained:

I think [funders/agencies] have to recognize capacity building as part of their framework...They often say only 10% can be put towards administration or they don’t want to see administration as part of it but they need to recognize that for a program to succeed that there needs to be supports to youth around administration...If we could say that as part of running the photography program, for instance, we are going to teach one of the youth not only to run the program itself but to do the book-keeping...maintain all the administrative petty cash [etc]...- that could be the skills development, the capacity part of the program. But there is this expectation that these things should be done through the administration and we don’t provide enough administration for youth-driven organizations to succeed.

### *Funding Agencies Lack of First-Hand Contact & Communication with Fundees*

One of the most often voiced grievances of GYC member organisation staff concerned the distant or lack of qualitative, first-person relationships maintained by funders and agencies with the organisations they support. “Funders don’t come here,” CANTYD Program Co-ordinator, Vathany maintained, in concert with numerous other GYC member organisation staff. “In terms of the City, I only remember seeing the City officer once,” she continued. “They don’t call in either. They just want to see how many students were served and how many individual clients.” One consequence of this, CANTYD Youth Outreach Worker, Pirathep Gnanasuntharam, opined was that:

they don’t see the intangibles...How much people have changed during the process, in the [program] journey...and that’s the biggest part of youth work. They should come here, and see the history, see the projects...They don’t even have to be working with our organization. They can work with third parties... like the schools that we are in...Those people will talk about it first hand because that is where the work is being done so they can see that change...I would like a closer relationship.

Chris Banton, Program Director at FYI similarly testified: "Personally, I haven't seen any funders come in and visit the program. I would like funders to come and see what type of programs we have and then maybe they can speak to some of the youth and workers... and share stories that are not well captured on paper. They could see the community and environment and see how much the youth need the program."

Like numerous other GYC members, Adonis Huggins Program Co-ordinator at Regent Park Focus also felt that a closer relationship between funders and fundees would strengthen the resolve of the former in their support for youth led programming. As he argued:

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*"Funders rarely visit us... They only hear from us through the applications process and it's the application process that becomes the basis of how well and if they will fund us... but they rarely come in here and see the work for themselves."*

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"Funders rarely visit us... They only hear from us through the applications process and it's the application process that becomes the basis of how well and if they will fund us... but they rarely come in here and see the work for themselves. I think that if they did that they would be more likely to think about ways that we could save these kinds of [programs]..." Ali, Youth Outreach Worker at SOYAT likewise argued: "if they came and saw the actual place that they are funding or the youth-led agencies then they would see the work that's being done. They can interview and research."

## Policy Context

*“With GYC we have that opportunity to build relationships with partners around the table, understand how they deliver programs, and find ways to deliver programs better...So it's those networking opportunities and finding best practices and best ways to deliver programs, and coming up with different strategies for funding [that GYC enables]...I am happy that we started it.”*

*-Cutty Duncan, Project Co-ordinator, RAY*

### Non-Representativity of Funding Agency Staff & Policy-Makers

GYC staff members also drew attention to the lack of representativity, and great social distance, of those in decision-making positions of power in funding agencies and government bodies and the impacts this had on youth policy and program support. As Amina Yassin, Executive Director at SOYAT argued of the disconnect between the community's served and those agencies financially supporting them:

I don't think that they really pay attention to the demographics of this city or pay attention to where the needs are...because they don't understand as a funder...I mean unless you live and breathe what we live and breathe you can't really say that this sounds great...and if you are basing everything on a piece of paper and not coming to actually seeing what it is...It's just that it's old white people and they don't get it... It's not that white people are bad... It's just that they are commuting in first... I mean they don't live in Rexdale. We live here. We give service to where we live...This is us...We are home. That's why we do it well because we live and breathe everything that they live and breathe...and that's why our service, and people using our service, can relate to us...We are not driving in from God knows where...and the people who are making decisions as what to give money to don't know our reality...

Certain funding agencies – such as Laidlaw - were nevertheless praised by Amina, and others, for “trying to shift towards” a more inclusive and representative staff composition and structure.

In addition to the dearth of cultural and class diversity in funding agencies, GYC focus group

participants further voiced concerns over the lack of meaningful youth representation in, and/or consultation of youth by, government/funding agencies and staff in positions of decision-making power. As Pirathep Gnanasuntharam, Youth Outreach Worker at CANTYD commented, critiquing what he saw as an all too frequent upper echelon practice of youth tokenism: “It's like they'll say, 'you know what we value youth because we have one youth advisor in all of our organization and he speaks for the whole youth population.' When the public sees that – 'they have this one youth advisor and so they must know what the youth are experiencing right now'”, Pirathep continued, a misguided belief is generated that youth concerns and constituencies are somehow actually being met and represented. Gavin Sheppard, Project Co-ordinator at ICVisions further articulated the difficulties he's encountered in trying to garner support for his hiphop-based programming from funding agencies and bodies due to the great social distance between those staffing the latter organisations and the hiphop constituency he serves. “That's a huge road block for people who are trying to work at the ground level in securing funding for the program” Gavin explained. **“There is definitely not equal representation in these large funding organizations. There is some progressive people in different places but it's not to the point where there is an accurate representation of the public that these public funders are supposed to serve. How many of these organizations have youth boards or youth advisory committees that actually make decisions?...It is definitely a lot of older, white, suburban people that don't understand the culture. They might even fear the culture because of the population representation of it.”**

## Insufficient Commitment to Youth-led Organizing

Many of the focus group participants felt that the recent embrace of youth issues and youth-led organizing in the discourse of government and funding agencies and bodies was often more rhetorical than actual, judging from the actual commitment of tangible resources to youth-led organisations by the latter in the experience of GYC member organisations. As SOYAT Executive Director, Amina Yassin observed:

It was not the trendy thing to really support youth and youth-led agencies - and the at-risk thing - until the last few years...[though] we have been preaching this for 13 years...The United Way came out with a Report at the end of 2003 indicating that the greatest need in the City of Toronto was youth programs and youth having disadvantages, and that most of the funding should go to youth...

Gavin Sheppard of IC Visions voiced concerns over the lack of actual financial commitment of funding agencies to youth and youth-led organisations.

A lot of people mouth platitudes...Funders who could be huge and give ridiculous amounts of money to people...are not very supportive of youth-led and youth based initiatives. I don't think that they feel that youth can make those kinds of decisions for themselves, no matter how much has been proven.

Such realities moved many focus group participants to concur with the conclusions of Darshika Selvasivam of CANTYD who opined of the recent embrace of youth led initiatives: "It is valued on the surface."

CANTYD's Youth Outreach Worker, Pirathep Gnanasuntharam, similarly questioned the commitment of government agencies and funding bodies to youth as a priority on the basis of his observations at a recent gathering of

youth-led community organisations at Ryerson University:

One of things I noticed from all of the youth organizations involved at the conference at Ryerson - youth groups from Regent Parks, Rexdale - ... all of them voiced the fact that there is no funding. None of these groups came out to say that we have been funded amazingly...and when you see that you can say that maybe they are not paying as much attention as they say they are.

When I asked Cutty Duncan whether he found much support for and recognition of the value and importance of youth-led organizations among agencies and funders in his experience, he likewise opined:

No, I don't think the larger funding bodies do... and even in the community itself...I mean they like the idea of youth-led, they like how it sounds...but when it comes to the reality, I'm not sure how serious people take it...I get a sense that funders like to deal with organizations that have a long history with them...so when you see new emerging organizations there is not a lot of support unless you partner with a larger [adult-staffed] organization and once you do that there is all their practices that they use to deliver services and you kind of have to fit into the way that they do things.

Derek Jancar, Project Co-ordinator at IC Visions, who like RAY was partnered with (as a subsidiary of) the Lakeshore Area Multi-Services Project (L.A.M.P.), also observed how, despite often good partner working relationships (as in his organisation's experience and case), "most of these youth programs are not completely independent and if they are they still have a board" often composed of an adult majority.

## Absence of Integrated, Holistic, Long-term Community Development Vision

GYC member organisation staff unanimously endorsed a prevention-focussed, community development approach to youth-led organizing, an approach they felt was sorely lacking in the vision and/or mandate of government agencies and funding bodies whom tended to work on a short time scale, project by project, with little integration within, or support of, a broader long-term, holistic strategy. Ultimately, it was widely argued, youth health and well-being needed to be connected to the health and well-being of the wider communities in which they lived. As such, a youth policy focus needed to be part and parcel of a larger vision and strategy aimed at increasing the health, strength, and social infrastructure of communities. "Ideally what you want with these kinds of programs", Cutty Duncan, Project Co-ordinator of RAY for instance



opined, "is to see it as a partnership with the community, with parents and they all kind of raise these kids together." The lack of social infrastructure and services in the community RAY served, Cutty noted, substantially limited his own organisation's effectivity at turning the tide around for 'at risk youth', whose issues and obstacles were many and varied. "We are here to provide services for youth and we work with them", Cutty explained yet it is difficult, he further maintained, because "there is a complete lack of services in the neighbourhood, for youth in particular... There is no community centre in central Etobicoke... There is no health centre in central Etobicoke... So it just shows you that, how much of the community we need to support. Those kids, we're not really supporting them", Cutty concluded, from the perspective of the community as a whole (despite RAY's valiant efforts).

Gavin Sheppard, founder and Project Co-ordinator at Inner City Visions also drew attention to the inability of isolated community projects to fundamentally alter the prospects of 'at risk' youth, independent of a broader community development approach:

People aren't going to stop that shit [i.e. 'at risk' activities like narcotics traffic]. It's all economics right? People aren't going

to stop selling drugs until they have a way to make real money. If we are not providing opportunities for them to make money or least to learn to advance themselves then it's not going to stop. And if we don't invest in our communities or invest in our people there... then all that shit on the grassroots level isn't going to be able to change [much].

Adonis Huggins, Project Co-ordinator at Regent Focus similarly wondered how effective their programming could be, in transforming at-risk youth, independent of broader institutional reform and amelioration: "Do we provide programming to at-risk youth? I would say yes, but I don't how effective they are in terms of addressing the real institutional needs... Yes we provide a space where they can hang out and do recreation. But are those programs actually addressing those institutional barriers in their lives... I don't know," Adonis questioned, again drawing attention to the need for a more holistic approach to the whole 'at risk youth' problematic and discourse.

Cutty Duncan of Rathburn Area Youth further noted a disproportionate emphasis on individual-focused, clinical-styled, crisis-intervention strategies and approaches among the few social services on offer in Central Etobicoke. Amina Yassin of SOYAT likewise highlighted the inversion of priorities among contemporary policy decision makers as manifested in the recent building of a new provincial 'super jail' in Ontario:

**When you see funding going to a super jail for youth and the provincial government giving \$80 million to build a super jail instead of giving money to programs that are keeping them out of jail, who else is teaching them to ask these questions... to say what else am I?... Am I more than just the guy selling weed... Am I worth more than that?... Why not fund ways that make kids be the next generation...Why are you funding a jail?**

Expressing the general sentiments of GYC members, Amina thus felt it imperative that there be “a greater investment in youth in general,” further gesturing towards the necessity of more holistic frameworks and forms of support for youth in their multiple, individual, family, school and community environments. “It costs less in the long-term to fund a preventative method,” SOYAT Administrative Assistant, Diini Hashimi, prudently added.

Much of the reason for the lack of a more integrated, long-term vision and strategy, staff members opined, again revolved around the *form* of funding commitments, which militated against the kinds of organisational sustainability

### *Vulnerability of Non-profit Organisations to Political Changes in Government and Policy Context*

Adonis Huggins of Regent Park Focus further noted, as did several other GYC member organisation staff, the vulnerability of publicly funded community-based organisations, youth-led or otherwise, to changes in the political, policy environ, often attendant upon changes in governance. “Certainly, each government had an impact on our work”, he observed. “Certainly, the Harris government had a major impact on what we do and how we do it. Not only in terms of decreased funding, but by forcing the organization into giving up its incorporation status in order to continue to receive funding from the Ministry of Health.” This change in status of Regent Focus in the year

that a community development approach necessarily demands. “Longer term does not mean one or two years,” Shahina Sayani, Executive Director at FYI, for instance explained of the ideal temporal parameters of funding to effectively implement such a larger vision. “It should be like 5-year funding to build really comprehensive larger level programs.” Several examples were nevertheless given of exemplary funders and support from government and funding agencies by Shahina (whom praised Laidlaw Foundation, National Crime Prevention Centre, Canadian Heritage, Ontario Trillium Foundation) and others. Adonis Huggins, Project Co-ordinator at Regent Focus, for instance held up The Tippet Foundation as an exemplary long-term committed funder, whilst further commending The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health for its support of Regent Focus’ unorthodox, community-driven, media arts programming and prevention-focused approach to the amelioration of mental health and eradication of drug addiction in the community they serve (an approach initially and commendably pioneered and supported by the 1992 Ontario Provincial Government).<sup>5</sup>

2000 precipitated their partnership, as required by the new government, with the Ministry of Health affiliated Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH). Though Regent Focus’ programming was drastically downsized in response to the decrease in the new provincial government’s funding commitments, fortunately, for Regent Focus, the re-centralization of authority intended by the required upward relocation of administrative and decision-making authority was countered by CAMH’s commendably firm commitment to keeping the decision-making process democratic and grass-roots.

## Restricted Definition of Civic Engagement & Lack of Support for Advocacy Work

Closely related to, and partially in consequence of, their embrace of a holistic, long-term, community development approach to youth organizing, many focus group participants felt it imperative that youth led organisations receive greater support for advocacy-based initiatives, as part and parcel of government and funding agencies widely embraced mission of enhancing civic engagement. Advocacy was deemed critical in order to be able to more effectively improve the health and well-being of youth and the communities in which they live. As Project Co-ordinator Adonis Huggins for instance rhetorically asked of Regent Park Focus' ability to effect change for at risk youth, independent of advocating on a more institutional, systemic level: "Do we provide programming to at-risk youth? I would say yes, but I don't how effective they are in terms of addressing the real institutional needs...those institutional barriers in their lives."

Like Adonis Huggins, who hoped to expand his organisation's advocacy work around such barriers in the near future, Andrea Zammit of For Youth Initiative was critical of the limited, and most often depoliticised, scope and vision informing and constricting funders' support of youth-led organizing and programming:

**Funders assume that youth are just out to kind do recreational type activities... but they don't notice that a lot of youth actually want to make changes in our community...A lot of funding bodies will not fund youth to do advocacy, development or research. I would really**

**like to see that change from funders' perspective. I think that youth need to be included at all levels of decision-making and that is one way to include them.**

FYI Executive Director, Shahina Sayani, elaborated the prohibitive laws and policies restricting FYI from engaging in more effective forms of civic engagement:

As an organization we are confined to certain laws and policies that say that as a non-profit or charitable organization, you are only allowed to conduct advocacy for 10% of the agency's activities. So when we go to City Hall and advocate for community centres...that's it...That is all we are allowed to do. But can I set meetings with my councillors to talk about issues for our clients? No, you're not supposed to be political. You can't affiliate yourself with any particular party or politician in government. How do you advocate for youth when there are [such] policies regulating [what] you do?...How can you have a fully functional organization that actually advocates for youth if we can't go to city hall and advocate for an issue or if we can't lobby around certain things?

Part of Shahina's concern revolved around FYI's recent lobbying efforts to get a recreation centre constructed in their neighbourhood, which in of and by itself, alone had already exhausted the 10% cap on FYI's advocacy initiatives.

## Other Obstacles for Youth-Led Organizations

*"As a new executive director, [GYC] gives me a place to go see my peers who are doing what I'm doing but a little bit longer...so I can go and get ideas and see what is happening in other places in the city.... It's a place for potential partnerships, and as far as additional capacity... it's a place for people to say 'You know what lets partner up because this is where we want to go'... We have partners in Regent, Etobicoke and with FYI, whom we do a lot of things with, and we are really lucky...That's what GYC means for SOYAT."*

*-Amina Yassin, Executive Director, SOYAT*

### Lack of Precedent to follow

A common difficulty faced by youth-led organizations is the lack of precedence for the kinds of work they are doing. "It's been a whole lot of hands on experience and five years of logs and reports and programming...", Derek Jancar explained of his work as Project Co-ordinator of Inner City Visions. "Because we are the first of our kind," fellow ICVisions Project Co-ordinator, Gavin Sheppard, further explained of their novel hiphop-based, for youth by youth, programming:

there hasn't been any models to follow. So we have had to develop whole new practices, without really knowing what works and what doesn't... I mean we can look at what works in Social Work in general and then add an urban slant to it, which is why our slogan is 'remixing social thought'...But we haven't had a blueprint to follow. We are on very uncharted ground. Also, since we don't have a model to follow, we don't have any success stories from before that we can go [to the funders and say], 'well they have

done that and it worked so we should replicate that success here'....So the chips are kind of stacked against us on that front.

Shahina Sayani, Executive Director of For Youth Initiative also spoke about the trailblazing efforts required of her organisation, and her organisational position in particular, as exemplified in her development of an employee handbook: "When we came in, we didn't really have formal [job] postings or...a formal [job hiring and training] process because there just wasn't enough money to do these things. I had to develop an employee hand book when I was a project coordinator working in Etobicoke because the agency didn't have any employment policies", she explained, in relation to the kinds of difficulties encountered in running an under-staffed and funded youth-run organisation.

### Ageism

Focus group participants and youth-led organisational staff frequently spoke of experiencing ageism in their relations and consultations with adult-run institutions. "When you are a young person and you go to a meeting" 31 year-old Shahina Sayani explained of her various consultations and community outreach engagements as Executive Director of FYI, "no one listens to you because they think you are a little kid and you don't know what you

are talking about." Voicing the opinion of many of her GYC peers, twenty-seven year old Executive Director of SOYAT, Amina Yassin, spoke of the oft implicit lack of trust exhibited towards youth organizations and leadership, particularly around finances and in terms of capacity and responsibility, among government agencies and funders:

the majority of funders look at [youth led organizations] like who are these kids and what could they do... You know, it's the whole credibility thing.... And that's hard to get rid of... those biases you have as a funder... And 'do they have the ability to budget' and 'are they going to have a problem with mismanaging the money we are going to give them'... and 'this is tax payers' money'... and 'what are they

going to do with that' and 'what do they know?... Ageism is a big [issue]... with youth-led organizing.

"It goes back to where if they came and saw the actual place that they are funding" SOYAT Youth Worker, Ali Farah concluded, in his explanation of how to allay agency fears and mistrust, "then they could see the [quality of the] work that's being done."

## Racism

GYC youth-led organisations, all of whom serviced considerable numbers of non-white, Canadian ethno-racial youth populations, related numerous stories of racial discrimination, experienced both by service users and providers in the course of program and service provision. "Just last week, one of the Tamil outreach workers from Malvern took some of his kids to basketball", CANTYD Program Co-ordinator, Vathany Uthayasundaram related, "and he brought them back and he was keeping them until their parents came to pick them up from the [Scarborough] Towncentre... and the security guard came up to them and says 'I don't want to see you guys group up'...'Clear it out...'" "A lot of people think that Tamil kids are involved in gangs" D, explained, which moved CANTYD Youth Outreach Worker, Pirathep to relate his own personal experience of racial profiling:

Just yesterday I was pulled over by the cops for just sitting in my car and talking to another kid as part of my outreach program. [The officer] came and grilled me for the fact that I was just Tamil and I was there with a car. I told him I was a youth worker there and he said that if he found out that I was affiliated [with a gang] then he would be really mad...



SOYAT staff members further noted a racialised pay hierarchy in youth service provision which, whilst by no means necessarily or intentionally racially motivated, institutionally eventuated in a racialised structure of monetary reward. "A perfect example", Ali Farah, Outreach Worker at SOYAT for instance observed, "was the John Howard partnership

[we had]... The person that was hired along with Faisal - the person who was placed over at John Howard - they made one third more than him per hour doing the *same* work, doing the *same* mandate, funded by the *same* people, but they made one third more," Ali exclaimed.

Such criminalisation of youth of colour also plagued SOYAT's youth service users and staff, to the point of occasionally jeopardizing their

## Gender Imbalance, Male Dominance

Many of the organisations participating in the focus groups took note of the disproportionately high male composition of their youth service users. This gender imbalance not infrequently related to parental cultural mores and views on gender propriety, in immigrant and settled minority ethnic communities, which often translated into restrictions on youth gender inter-mixing and hence participation in gender-mixed youth programming. Discussing why “there are more males than females in [their] programs”, CANTYD outreach worker, Darshika Selvasivam for instance explained:

There is a cultural issue with males and females with Tamil parents... It's a cultural thing....There's a whole cultural boundary... when it comes to the girls their parents don't really let them out...That's why most of our participants are males.

Noting the impact of such cultural gender norms on their programming, Darshika for instance spoke of the reluctance of young females to participate in their drama programming due to the potential for negative characterization due to intermingling with males:

We have had to have guys playing female roles because there are not enough girls...because you are going on stage in front of the community... The reactions are 'what are they doing up there... acting with all those guys?'... 'These are not our family values'... One of the girls, even if she is a nice girl in university...if she goes up there, 'boom', people started questioning her values..."

SOYAT, RAY and Regent Focus similarly spoke of their necessary negotiation of cultural boundaries around gender which sometimes prohibited or discouraged female participation in their programs and services. As Cutty Duncan of RAY for instance observed: “We have to be aware of the differences in culture to make sure that you don't offend...because parents, especially of Muslim girls, have a lot of issues on how they are raised.”

FYI and ICVisions also highlighted the reality and impact of male dominance in mainstream Canadian popular youth culture as it impacted on their programming. As Project Coordinator of the Girlfriends Program at FYI, Alana, observed:

I see a problem in the way this society...western society...does the masculinity thing. There is s culture of masculinity that really runs programs...Like we just started this girls group that we never had before and we realized that we needed it because we would have these co-ed programs and the male participants were running the programs...Females didn't really get a chance to relax and stuff...and even though we have our girlfriend programming it is hard gaining the respect.

“They don't understand why the ladies have the program,” FYI Program Director, Chris Banton, explained of the reaction of male youth service users: “There is this attitude of guys feeling and acting like they have ownership over the programs” Chris argued in agreement with Alana, further advising: “It would be nice to have a program for the guys that will raise awareness around this issue.”

FYI volunteer and former Program Worker, Andrea Zammit, further raised problems experienced by FYI around “discussing issues around oppression...about homosexuality and transgender”, which she felt were taboo for many in the Black community FYI served. “There is no understanding,” Alana, who is of Afro-Caribbean descent herself, contended. “It can be really homophobic.” “It is a touchy conversation” FYI Program Worker, Jerome Grant, further added, “but we have had the conversation...But there are a lot of people that won't go into that topic with an open mind...I see it as a problem because there are youth dealing with homosexuality or in the closet that we can't reach out to,” he concluded. “There is a lot of self-hatred going on,” Alana added in conclusion.

## *Location, Information, Transportation, Child-Care Support*

Other constraints to youth participation in youth-led programming included problems of organisational visibility, many of the organisation's being housed in locations removed from main transportation arteries and/or being invisible to passer-byers. Knowledge and information about the programs offered to area youth was also often lacking, particularly among more marginalized youth. Making connections with schools in the service area, where youth were concentrated, was one key means of countering this problem and spreading information to young people about the existence of their youth led programs.

Another widely commented upon obstacle to youth participation in youth-led programming concerned transportation. Although most of the organisations were centrally located in the

communities they served, often only those youth closest to the organisational premises were able to regularly frequent and participate in the programs offered (the catchment areas often being widely construed), often for reasons of transportation costs. Another obstacle, particularly for young single mothers, was the lack of child care options for young women, which prevented them from fully participating in youth programming. Lack of child-care support for young single mothers spoke further to the need, importance and necessity of building community social infrastructure and services as part of a more holistic and integrated youth policy. Finally, faction-fighting between youth 'cliques' in the community on occasion militated against youth participation in youth programming, with clusters of youth refusing to participate in cases when and where their neighbourhood rivals were also present.

## PART III: RECOMMENDATIONS

### For Organizations Servicing Youth

- Youth-staffed and run youth service organisations and programming
- Empowerment of youth service users through Democratic, Grassroots Decision-Making Structures & Processes
- Representative Service Providers: Youth staff reflective of ethnic, race, class, gender composition of constituency
- Long-term, Prevention Focused Community Development Approach to Youth Programming
- Critical Importance of Creating and Sustaining Long-term Programs, Staff and Community Rapport over time
- Increasing Capacity & Sustainability through Diversified Revenue Streams
- Use of the Arts and Popular Culture as a Medium of Youth Engagement
- Capacity Building Through Partnerships
- Co-operation with Adults & Adult-run Organizations and Ongoing Exchange/Transference of Knowledge, Skills and Expertise to Youth and Youth Staff

### For Funding Agencies, Politicians & Policy-makers

- Greater Investment in Youth in general, and Youth-Led Organizing & Programming in particular
- Critical Importance of Multi-Year, Core Funding to Sustainability & Effectivity of Community-based, Youth-Led Organizing & Programming
- Greater Proportion of Project Fund Allocation to Staff Administration, Training & Capacity Building
- Greater representation of youth, women and ethno-racial minorities in positions of decision-making power in government and funding agencies
- More integrated and holistic youth policy vision informed by longer-term, prevention-focussed, community development approach
- Creation of a single Youth governmental agency or body to facilitate and co-ordinate a more holistic, inter-sectoral, and integrated Youth policy vision
- Greater Support for Youth-Led Advocacy & Research & Expansion of the sphere, definition and terrain of Civic Engagement
- Greater appreciation for the macro, social, institutional, and systemic determinants of 'youth at risk-ness'
- Closer Co-operation, Contact and Communication Between Funders and Fundees
- Supplementation of Quantitative Project/Program Evaluation Methods & Measurements with Qualitative Investigations into the Impact of Youth-Led Programming

## PART IV: APPENDIX (ORGANIZATIONAL PROFILES)

### 4UNITY Productions Youth Media Association

4UNITY productions is a youth driven media association dedicated to facilitating multimedia-based opportunities (audio, video, new media) for youth in Parkdale and across the GTA. 4UNITY productions stresses teamwork, creativity and critical thinking and is committed to improving the lives of urban youth by enabling the transformation of their often challenging life experiences into positive realities. 4UNITY integrates life and job skill development with urban art forms in an effort to help develop and foster self-esteem, self-worth, creativity and hard skills to youth at no cost.

Programming includes:

- Menu Days – an innovative 8 week program of theme days designed to provide youth with tangible skills. Topics include the music industry, life skills, writing, hip hop culture, video production, DJ'ing and beat making.
- UNISON – a creative collaboration between 4UNITY and Style in Progress involving the staging of ten art exhibits and musical and new media performances.
- Peace of Mind – an anti-violence initiative that involved the creation of an enhanced CD compilation with a companion video documentary, providing a vehicle for youth empowerment through the project's method and message.

### Canadian Tamil Youth Development Center

The Canadian Tamil Youth Development Center (CanTYD) was formed through an initiative of 13 member organizations. CanTYD is committed to empowering and developing Tamil Youth by utilizing the principles of advocacy, partnership, education, assistance and research.

CANTYD seeks to:

- Provide role model to inspire Tamil Youth towards higher educational and wider employment opportunities.
- Generate a positive image of Tamil youth.
- Assist newcomer youth and their families to integrate with the Canadian society.
- Train Tamil youth in technical, leadership and entrepreneurial skills
- Empower and recognize the voice of young people.
- Reduce and prevent violence among Tamil youth
- Provide assistance for the rehabilitation of youth who have been involved in violence.

## For Youth Initiative (FYI)

The For Youth Project was formed in 1995, having evolved out of the work of the City of York Community Agency Social Planning Council's Multicultural Committee. This committee identified a general lack of services for ethno-cultural youth in the City of York.

For Youth Initiative (FYI) is an organization that is committed to creating healthy communities by increasing life-chances of youth at-risk. We will do this through the provision of empowering programs and services that are youth-driven, inclusive and accessible. FYI works primarily in the former City of York and North Etobicoke areas.

FYI has five main programming streams: Recreation; Community Development; Life Skills; Cultural Production, and; Female-Specific Programming. These five streams best define FYI as a holistic agency that is positioned to anticipate and respond to a wide variety of service needs of youth of diverse backgrounds. FYI also engages in research and conducts advocacy for youth issues. Overall, FYI aims to encourage civic engagement and increase access to employment, educational, recreational, economical and cultural opportunities.

FYI is experienced in creating and implementing projects that increase the capacity of at-risk youth to identify issues and develop solutions to the challenges they face. Youth who are empowered and skilled are able to work with community stakeholders and their peers to build a better future for the community that they live in.

In 2004, FYI acquired Federal charitable status.

## Inner City Visions (I.C. Visions)

Inner City Visions (I.C. Visions) is dedicated to using urban music and culture as an engagement and empowerment tool. Our mission is to build healthy communities by working with individuals through the arts.

Working with individuals using urban music and culture as it's engagement tool, I.C. Visions believes the path to a healthier community is through a healthy understanding of self. I.C. Visions is committed to working towards this understanding of self and community through the arts, specifically the urban arts.

The project empowers young people from South Etobicoke and across the city to run numerous youth engagement, leadership development, life skills and technical skills programs to their peers. These programs use urban music and culture as their engagement tool and this has proven to be highly effective in engaging urban youth in their programs. By providing a safe and supportive environment where youth can creatively express themselves, the project has opened up new avenues of understanding self and community.

I.C. Visions is sponsored by L.A.M.P. (Lakeshore Area Multi-Services Project), which is a member of the United Way.

## Rathburn Area Youth

Rathburn Area Youth Project was formed through a partnership initiative of the United Way to establish services in grossly underserved neighbourhoods in Central Etobicoke (Capri, West and East Mall).

Rathburn Area Youth project goals are to:

- To increase and sustain access to programs, services and resources that address the priority needs and concerns that are identified by at-risk youth, on an ongoing basis, in Central Etobicoke (particularly in Capri, West and East Mall).
- To increase and sustain access to programs, services and resources that address the priority needs and concerns that are identified by at-risk youth, on an ongoing basis, in Central Etobicoke (particularly in Capri, West and East Mall).

As well as working with local schools to provide in-class youth-led mentoring activities, Rathburn Area Youth provides a youth drop-in and youth-led after-school programs for local youth.

## Regent Park Focus

Regent Park Focus is a not-for-profit organization that was established in 1991 as part of a provincial government initiated strategy to promote health in vulnerable communities across Ontario. The organization is located in the heart of Regent Park, Canada's largest and oldest public housing community.

Regent Park Focus uses media technology as a tool to employ young people, enhance resiliency, bridge information gaps, increase civic engagement, promote health and effect positive change. Regent Park Focus believes that information and media technology plays a vital role in building and sustaining healthy communities.

Regent Park Focus provides a community based facility for media production. In this supportive dynamic space participants work together as a community to create resources promoting health to other young people, learn new skills, feel a sense of belonging and engagement, and produce new works of art.

Regent Park Focus is sponsored by the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health.

## Somali Youth Association of Toronto (SOYAT)

Somali Youth Association of Toronto (SOYAT) is a non-profit youth based community organization serving Somali youth that was established by Somali youth volunteers in Metropolitan Toronto in 1992 in order to facilitate and act as a conduit for appropriate service delivery to Somali youth in the greater Toronto area.

SOYAT partners with key organizations and groups to implement services and initiatives that promote the successful integration of Somali youth and their families into the Canadian society. Using its community mobilization and outreach capacity, SOYAT engages youth and their families and offers them culturally sensitive services in the areas of leadership, settlement, recreation, employment support, awareness raising and referrals. The organization currently implements eight projects that enhance the integration capacity of youth in the Somali community. Last calendar year, SOYAT services and activities involved 730 youth in Toronto. The projected participants of the organization's activities and services for the current year are 850 youth.

SOYAT's mission is "to enhance the lives of Somali Canadian youth by assisting them through a full range of programs that will encourage, elevate and create an environment that affirms Somali culture.

Among the primary goals and objectives of SOYAT in this respect are to "preserve the culture and values of Somali newcomers" to Toronto; to foster "unity and co-operation among all members of the Somali community"; to encourage academic excellence and "participation in national and international youth organizations and activities; and to assist in youth employment, training, immigration and other social services.

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<sup>1</sup> Adonis went on to clarify the difference between a traditional Board of Directors and an Advisory Committee: "The distinction is that a board is responsible for all decision-making. The board is legally accountable. An advisory committee is not legally accountable. So I report to the advisory committee, they make recommendations and those recommendations, unless for some reason they are rejected by CAMH, are approved. There hasn't been a time yet where CAMH has overruled our advisory committee. In a lot of ways, I don't see the difference between our community board and an advisory committee at all."

<sup>2</sup> "[SEYA] is really is a bunch of youth that get together... and every year they put on fashion show or a cultural arts show," Gavin explained of SEYA's main organisational activities in the South Etobicoke Region.

<sup>3</sup> Ali Farah, SOYAT Youth Worker:

The biggest difficulty has been with Toronto Parks and Recreation. I mean they have been really difficulty...it's a really gruelling process and you will rarely get the gym. Luckily there is a really nice person that works at North York Community Centre...They help me out with getting gym space. It is okay for now but it really is a small gym and there is nowhere that people can really sit... so we pretty much have to put chairs around. It has the potential to be a really big tournament and have well 8 to 12 teams but right now we are really limited in terms of space and resources.

As a result of space constraints, SOYAT had to limit the number of teams in their annual basketball tournament contest to four, with senior and junior competitions alternating on a yearly basis.

<sup>4</sup> Andrea explained how the initial pre-referral diversion program she helped to create evolved into a conventional post-referral program providing community service hours to convicted offenders, in response to changes in the Youth Criminal Justice Act whilst her project was being piloted. The narrow scope for project revision given by the funding agreement thus further added to her programming difficulties. "It is difficult when funders don't give you that leeway to develop programs and you had to break ground to do that program", Shahina remarked.

<sup>5</sup> Regent Park Focus' Project Co-ordinator, Adonis Huggins, described his organization's unique history, founding and governmental support in a focus group as follows:

The organization was formed in 1992. It was part of a provincial initiative so it was a Ministry of Health strategy through the Ontario government to prevent substance abuse in vulnerable communities. They essentially targeted nine communities across Ontario, four in Toronto. Basically they said, we are going to give you \$250,000 a year for the next four years as part of a pilot project and what is unique about the funding is we are going to let the community decide what they want from the outset. All that they demanded was that the steering committee or the coalition would be made up of a cross-section of stakeholders and primary residents. That was what was unique about the funding - there was not any, 'you have to do this' and 'you have to do that', 'your programs have to meet that.' It essentially had to show that it involved the community...The resident group was actually the decision makers. So they made the decisions and they hired the coordinator to run the program and then the coordinator hired staff.