

---

## ***The Real Deal:*** The Evolution of Seattle, Washington's At-Risk Youth Program<sup>1</sup>

*Presenter:*

Reco Bembry,<sup>2</sup> Teen Programs Coordinator  
Al Tufono,<sup>2</sup> Senior Recreation Specialist

### **Background**

The 1980s marked an unprecedented surge in violent juvenile crimes, due in part to a transition by young people from drug use to the profitable and highly competitive drug *trafficking* market. Traditional youth recreation programs and approaches became irrelevant because they were not aligned with the current behavior and circumstances of the participants.

A new mayor was elected in Seattle at the end of the 1980s and at every public meeting he attended he was asked, "What are you going to do about gangs?" Seattle had a reputation of being America's most livable city. Although known for its high quality of life, this image was being tarnished by the gang problem. The public, political officials, and businesses were all applying pressure to the bureaucratic system to address the gang problem. Reco Bembry, Seattle Teen Programs Coordinator, noted, "It was clear the solution had not been found yet, so the community and government were open to new ideas."

In 1989 a consortium of recreation professionals in the city was established as the "Seattle Team for Youth." In addition, a Mayor's task force was formed comprised of the heads of city departments which deal with youth. The Department of Parks and

Recreation analyzed crime statistics provided by the Police Department and determined that the four major categories of serious crimes (i.e., homicide, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault) involving youth ages 16 and younger, as either victims or offenders, reached their peak in the afternoon between the time school let out until midnight. Between midnight and 6 a.m. the percentages were relatively low. As a result, the department chose to focus the efforts on the afternoon and evening period, and became part of a joint planning team to initiate The Late Night Recreation Program. Forty-three thousand dollars in Federal support was received to launch the program based on a collaborative team proposal written by staff from Juvenile Rehabilitation, the school system, Parks and Recreation, and personnel.

An important first step was to bring representatives of at-risk youth to the table to determine program content. From the start, the program embraced more than basketball. Activities of interest to specific cultural groups, such as Asians and Pacific Islanders, were incorporated. Donations of computers from businesses were solicited as part of the plan to incorporate an educational component.

The Late Night Recreation Program began at two community centers: Garfield and Rainier. Each Friday and Saturday night 400 youth were involved in activities in these high-risk areas until 1 a.m.

---

<sup>1</sup> Material is taken edited by Witt, P.A., & Crompton, J.L. (Eds.). (1996). *Recreation programs that work for at-risk youth: The challenge of shaping the future*. State College, PA: Venture Publishing, Inc.

Out of print, used by permission of publisher

<sup>2</sup> City of Seattle Department of Parks and Recreation 100 Dexter Avenue North Seattle, WA 98109

Phone: (206) 684-7186

instead of being out on the streets. The Police Department collected statistics from the census tracts which were determined to be within the zones of influence of the two centers. Data were collected from the period March 1, 1990, to November 30, 1990, and pertained to the number of arrests of youth, teens, and young adults ages 13-23 for the following crimes committed in the two areas: murder, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, residential burglary, nonresidential burglary, motor thefts and assaults. When compared to the same period the previous year, crime in these zones was reduced by approximately 30%.

Crime reduction could not be solely attributed to the Late Night Recreation Program because a concerted effort in these two urban areas was also made by several other agencies to implement a crime prevention program, Drug-Free Zones, and an increase in the number of police officers in the area.

Initial success was sufficient to win political support to expand the Late Night Program to other sites and to add many other dimensions to the overall at-risk youth program and expand the operating budget to its current level of \$508,000. This additional support has been gained by responding to what is politically important: reducing crime by 30%, funding 70 jobs each year for at-risk youth without any government subsidy, and acquiring enough community support to get a bond issue passed to build five more community centers.

## Philosophy

The staff associated with the at-risk youth programs in Seattle does not talk of recreation. Rather they talk of the re-creation of human life. This is a powerful way of communicating to elected officials and

taxpayers what is being done in these programs. Reco Bembry who is the teen programs coordinator states:

The way we think about teens influences how they act. We always try to describe them in positive terms. The adjectives we use to describe kids should be positive: creative, imaginative, fun, excitable, curious, etc. It isn't the kids who are the problem, it is the environment to which they are exposed. It's an at-risk environment, and we need to provide hope, a lifeline, a way out of that environment. Gangs aren't bad, it's the things that they do which are bad. There are no positive social outlets in the high-risk environment in which these kids live. We have to offer that.

Everything we do rests on five building blocks: Trust, Self-Esteem, Consistency, Respect and Integrity. These are the values our staff seeks to instill in the youth by the way we act towards them, and the way we expect them to respond to us. They come to our programs because we give them reinforcement for positive behavior.

We don't really go out and find at-risk kids and pull them in by the hand [for an exception, see Exhibit 7A, page 84]. What we do is to create opportunities which will encourage them to come and find us. We have to have something they want. If you know what they want and provide it, they are going to show up. Word-of-mouth gets around.

If you rescue one kid, he or she influences others. Your influence is leveraged. Take it one

### ***Exhibit 7A A Beacon in a Time of Trouble\****

On the night the Los Angeles police officers charged with beating Rodney King were acquitted there were substantial protests in Seattle. Reco Bembry and James King, who supervised the youth program at the Garfield Center, were watching the news that night when they saw some familiar faces involved in the protest on the city's Capitol Hill.

The men mobilized a group of youths and police who drew signs saying "Late Night Program." They plastered the signs on the side of a Metro Bus, headed for Capitol Hill and picked up about 35 youths, who Bembry said, were fed up with the protests.

"In that case we took the alternative to the kids. Sometimes you can't wait for the kids to come to you," King said. "We are trying to create heroes, not zeros," he added.

\*Mayor Norm Rice characterized the Late Night Recreation Program as "a beacon in a time of trouble."

kid at a time, then that influence is multiplied among their peers. Our job is to instill the five building blocks in one person, and get him or her to commit to doing this with one other person. We have to teach them the building blocks and teach them in such a way that they will teach others.

### **Staffing**

To lead at-risk programs, the Department looks for role models with whom the kids will identify. The role models will often be former gang members or former athletes. Hiring people who have lived in an environment where there are gangs, who have experienced what it feels like to be in a gang and what it feels like to get out of a gang is important. The people hired had the opportunity to get out and, therefore, are interested in creating similar opportunities for others. Al Tufono, who directs the Together for Teens program, is a good example. He was a former gang member, who got out and became a star player on the University of Washington championship football team. He subsequently coached with the team. In addition, he is a Pacific Islander and is, therefore, particularly effective in communicating with that target group.

Program leaders have to show a passion for the work and commitment to it. Reco Bembry notes, "It is about going beyond the paycheck. They can't pay us enough to do what we do." Often the program leaders have not attended college because they do not meet the required academic standards, and few colleges are prepared to change the standards to meet their needs. Hence, the staffing model is often an apprenticeship program through which staff are trained on the job. After they have been on the job for a couple of years, staff may be encouraged to go to college to improve their academic credentials and skills.

The Department pays program leaders between \$10.50 and \$15 an hour. This is a high-profile, difficult job involving mentoring and conflict resolution. Paying people at this relatively high level means the Department expects a relatively high level of performance.

### **Programs**

#### **Late Night Recreation Program**

The Late Night Program has now expanded to include a total of five Community Centers and two

middle schools. The centers have extended hours from 10 p.m. to 1 a.m. on Friday night and 8 p.m. to 1 a.m. on Saturday night. Although designed for youth between 17 and 21 years of age, the program has attracted youth as young as nine and young adults up to age 23. In 1991, the weekly average attendance was 1,600 teens; currently the centers are serving about 2,500 teens per week. Special events draw 300 to 400 youths.

The Late Night Recreation Program provides:

- (1) educational services such as tutoring, computer and teen parenting programs;
- (2) intercultural activities such as ethnic dancing and bead making;
- (3) athletic activities such as basketball, football, volleyball, gymnastics and several other sports;
- (4) adults, leaders and role models who care about and listen to the young people; and
- (5) a positive alternative to life on the street.

Special events have ranged from outdoor excursions to a talent search, as well as a trip to San Francisco. On the San Francisco trip some teens participated in a regional basketball tournament, while others created and performed a show at a sports banquet. They all participated in a Drug and Alcohol Resistance and Education (D.A.R.E.) seminar. The trip was made possible by the Parks and Recreation Department, the Seattle Housing Authority and many local businesses. A "Make It Big Talent Search," sponsored by Parks and Recreation, The Bon Marche, and The Seattle Center, was also held. This was a big hit and provided youth with an opportunity to break into the entertainment industry.

#### **Teen Advisory Council**

The Teen Advisory Council is a group of young people, ages 16-21, who meet every other week from 4:30 to 6 p.m. to plan, organize, and help implement activities such as dances and special events. The council serves in an advisory capacity by recommending desired activities and programs. Council members are from different communities throughout the city and are recommended by recreation staff to serve on the council.

**Exhibit 7B** Teen Advisory Council Goal, Roles and Responsibilities**Goal:**

to involve youth in planning for youth programs to better provide activities and resources for youth.

**Roles:**

- to find activities for youth to enjoy;
- to attract youth and increase participation in programs;
- to communicate with the public to increase awareness and participation;
- to raise funds for youth projects; and
- to serve as a youth advisory group to the citywide teen programming unit.

**Responsibilities:**

- attendance at all meetings, two absences permitted;
- must attend all special events, one absence permitted;
- undivided attention at meetings, insightful input and participation;
- willingness to work volunteer hours;
- complete any task assigned to you;
- be on time (two tardies is the same as one absence); and
- call in when unavailable to attend a meeting or event.

To be on the Teen Council is a privilege, and these responsibilities must be followed to remain on the council.

Every teenager wants a safe place where the doors are always open and they feel like they are welcome. Young people are tired of adults making decisions that affect their lives. The Advisory Council plans activities and dances for teens that are safe and fun. The council members also deal with issues and topics that affect the communities and neighborhoods they represent. Teen council members feel that their input will keep some young people off the streets and therefore decrease the chances of gang violence and drug abuse. The expectations and responsibilities of teen council members are listed in Exhibit 7B.

**Transportation**

To enable youth to get to the Late Night Program, the Department has an arrangement with Metro, the local transportation company. Metro provides two buses and drivers for the Late Night Program. Youth who do not have access to this special transportation or their own transportation are given free passes on regular Metro routes so they can get to the centers.

In addition to Friday and Saturday night activities, Late Night continually develops new activities and special events. The newest Late Night Centers were implemented in neighborhoods with high Asian gang populations. According to Reco Bembry, "Late Night is the hottest teen program on

the west coast. The proof is that the program is constantly growing. Twenty-four other cities have started programs of their own modeled after ours in Seattle." Further evidence is the unsolicited testimonials of the program participants such as that quoted in the news clipping extract shown in Exhibit 7C, page 88.

**Security**

Two uniformed police officers are on duty at each site. The role of the police in this situation is not primarily that of a cop; rather, it is that of a public employee whose job is to safeguard life and property. The presence of the police gives participants a chance to meet police on a one-to-one basis. These encounters help overcome youth's suspicions of police and authority and also help the police understand the kids. At three of the centers, all those entering the site are handwanded searched. At the other centers, the staff feel confident that this is not needed.

**Costs Versus Benefits**

The cost of the Late Night Recreation Program is \$84,000 per year. But as Reco Bembry notes, "Part of the problem of doing a cost benefit analysis of the program is that you cannot measure what didn't

**Exhibit 7C** This is better than hangin' around

'This has been a dyn-o-mite evening,' a tough-looking 16-year-old called out at Reco. 'All fun and no fighting, man,' he said, coming as near to gushing as his street-wise years would allow. He was so impressed that he thrust a handful of bills toward Reco. 'Me and my homeys liked it so much-no fighting, no problems - that we want to support this program, so take this money,' he ordered. Reco tactfully refused the help but thanked him for the offer and bid him to return often.

That incident happened one night at the Department's Late Night Recreation Program. It is testimony to the impact the program is having on young people in Seattle's Central Area and Rainier Valley.

*Seattle Post Dispatch* (May 6, 1992) p. A-10.

happen. We save lives, but how can you measure a shooting that didn't occur because the kid was in this program?" One way of doing this may be to calculate the cost of particular crimes and the costs of charging and incarcerating guilty individuals. An overall cost savings could be calculated based on decreasing crime statistics in neighborhoods in which programs are operating.

**Inner City Outings**

The Inner City Outing program provides wilderness activities for inner-city youth who would not normally have access to experiences in the mountain and wilderness areas of Washington state. The wilderness belongs to all, yet many are unable to experience the outdoors because of socioeconomic constraints such as a lack of transportation and the cost of the basic equipment. The mission statement of this program is to "work with multiethnic youth to create an environment for community leadership and empowerment." Its specific goals are to:

- (1) teach leadership, self-esteem and survival skills for the wilderness that translate into achievements and survival in the urban environment;
- (2) provide a retreat from everyday stress to facilitate basic skills needed to attain their "dreams;"
- (3) provide wilderness activities and environmental education; and
- (4) facilitate understanding of options for life goals and lifestyles.

The wilderness skills that these youth learn translate into achievements in their urban lives as well. Taking young people out of their routine inner-

city surroundings gives them a chance to see life with a new perspective, a new curiosity, and reminds them that there are opportunities open to them that they might not have experienced. Trips offer young people a chance to retreat from the everyday stresses of life in the inner-city, to discover the importance of preservation of the environment, to learn and actually practice survival and leadership skills, to develop friendships with peers, and to build mentoring relationships with adult role models.

**Together For Teens**

Together for Teens is directed primarily at reaching Asian and Pacific Islander groups. These target populations are often referred to as the traditionally underserved in Seattle. This summer teen activity program for Seattle's at-risk youth operates at three sites in the city. Its goals are to:

- (1) provide safe, upbeat and positive alternative programs and activities for teens throughout the summer;
- (2) encourage cultural diversity and understanding by increasing participation from new refugee, new immigrant and Asian and Pacific Islander populations; and
- (3) empower teens to get involved in the program planning process.

Four types of activities are offered through this program:

- (1) multicultural activities such as ethnic dancing, cooking and athletic events;
- (2) educational services such as computers, tutoring, and teen awareness workshops;
- (3) YO! Hott Shotts entrepreneur job training program; and

(4) drop-in sports activities, including basketball, volleyball, rattanball, and Ping Pong.

### **YO! Hott Shotts**

The YO! Hott Shotts program is sponsored by Starbucks Espresso Company and meets the critical need for more youth employment opportunities. This entrepreneurial program is intended to inspire at-risk youth to take an interest in business and self-direction. Ten young people work with Starbucks, learning how to make espresso, market the products, organize daily cart operations, track sales, and other essential aspects of running an espresso operation.

Youth trainees are recruited and referred from community-based agencies and organizations that work with at-risk youth. Interested young people complete an application and interview process. The selected trainees undertake 100 hours of basic training and an additional 150 hours of management training. Some training components include learning the characteristics of an exemplary employee, discovering what it takes to make the best cafe lattes and Italian sodas, what it takes to achieve success in the espresso business, computer skills, inventory control, ordering, public relations, and customer service.

When the training is completed, the youth trainees become certified "baristas." Each barista is awarded a certificate signed by the mayor describing his or her accomplishments, and receives

recommendation letters from Starbucks and Seattle Parks and Recreation. The YO! Hott Shotts Certification Program assists in job placement and provides the young baristas with marketable skills and solid references when they apply for future jobs.

Reactions from some participants in the program are shown in Exhibit 7D. The Department regards this program as a demonstration program to illustrate to businesses the types of partnerships that can be created. It is anticipated that its success will cause other businesses to cooperate in similar ventures.

### **Jobs With Concessionaires**

To further encourage job opportunities, the Parks and Recreation Department includes in their concessionaire specifications, a requirement that concessionaires hire and train one or more at-risk youth. While the net result may be a lower revenue bid for the department, the trade-off of providing youth with job training is considered worthwhile.

### **9teen Talk**

The department links with Channel 9 to coproduce a 30-minute television talk show which provides a unique venue for teens to express their thoughts and opinions on issues that directly affect their lives, but about which they often feel powerless. Program content includes problem solving, dealing with criticism and rejection, conflict resolution,

#### ***Exhibit 7D***

#### **1993 YO! Hott Shotts**

#### **Certified Youth Baristas' Comments:**

"It was really fun and I learned a lot."

Kang Chong - 16 years old

"If there was no YO! Hott Shotts program I'd probably be just hangin' out."

Rosie Laronal - 15 years old

"This is a pretty cool program."

Robert Kitiona - 16 years old

"Can I come back next year and be in the program?"

Stephanie Lee - 17 years old

"I know how to make all the espresso drinks and Italian sodas."

Monique Jones - 17 years old

transferable life skills, and developing a process of setting and achieving goals, as they relate to each topic. 9teen Talk provides a controlled yet innovative environment through which youth can develop the discipline, confidence, motivation, and technical skills necessary to achieve a competitive edge in a changing high-tech job market. Youth involved in the “behind the scenes” production aspects of 9teen Talk gain valuable experience and technical knowledge in television production.

Adult involvement in the television program provides mentors and role models. Youth service providers serve as panelists on the shows to respond to youth questions and concerns. Program directors, camera operators, and other technical staff train participants in entry-level technical skills. In return, the adults benefit from an opportunity to learn more about youth needs and opinions, thereby improving their ability to provide needed agency services.

Entrepreneurship is emphasized by helping youth develop a strong work ethic and marketable employment skills. The audiovisual productions provide a platform for program participants to express themselves creatively, develop social skills, and enhance and strengthen self-esteem.

9teen Talk is also incorporating the city’s high schools as show venues. Schools provide support in a variety of ways including educators and counselors as panelists. Schools also provide a diverse audience base for the shows.

### **Hang Time: Collaboration with the Ackerly Youth Foundation**

Over 60,000 youth statewide participate in the very popular Hang Time program which includes basketball skills instruction, academic incentives and “the big draw” direct interaction with Seattle Supersonic players. The program is one of many supported by the Ackerly Youth Foundation, established in 1993 by Barry and Ginger Ackerly, owners of the Supersonics (see Exhibit 7E).

Sonics players participate in summer Hoops Camps, teaching basketball fundamentals and life skills and rewarding kids who stay off drugs and in school with Sonics tickets and giveaways. An annual Stay-in-School Jam honors middle-school students who have achieved 95% attendance for the semester. This program, which targets twelve schools in the Seattle School District, features all twelve Sonics players, Coach George Karl and his staff. A mascot dunk competition, giveaways for the students, and special entertainment are also included as part of the Hang Time program.

In addition to support for special events, the Ackerly Foundation has supported recreation programs and activities by purchasing vans to transport youth to and from community centers, refurbishing several basketball courts, and purchasing a variety of athletic equipment for recreation centers throughout Seattle. The Foundation also supports ten recreation leader positions to help develop and coordinate recreation activities for youth.

#### ***Exhibit 7E***

##### **Mission Statement:**

To provide at-risk youths with positive influences and recreational activities as alternatives to violent actions.

The Ackerly Youth Foundation was formed by Barry and Ginger Ackerly in the fall of 1993 with the goal of supporting Seattle’s at-risk youth through the resources of Ackerly Communications, Inc.

The idea for the foundation grew out of a conversation the Ackerleys had with Seattle Mayor Norm Rice on ways to prevent youth violence in the city. The Ackerleys also drew upon the many positive experiences they shared with children who participated in the Seattle SuperSonics’ community relations programs. Children’s enthusiasm for positive interaction can be seen in the success of the Sonics basketball camps held each summer. The Hoops Camps provide kids with the opportunity to learn basketball fundamentals and life skills from SuperSonics players, while rewarding kids who stay off drugs and in school with Sonics tickets and giveaways. The success of this program, which after four years has grown to 60,000 kids participating statewide, prompted the formation of the Ackerly Youth Foundation.

The Ackerly Youth Foundation will utilize the resources of all local companies of Ackerly Communications, Inc.: Ackerly Outdoor Advertising, The Seattle SuperSonics, radio stations KJR-AM/KLTX-FM, and television station KVOS in Bellingham.

The Foundation refurbished three basketball courts in the Seattle area in the 1993-1994 basketball season and provided a variety of athletic equipment including basketballs, footballs, soccer balls, T-shirts, uniforms, caps, and other items to a number of community centers throughout Seattle. In addition, the Ackerley Youth Foundation funds other recreational activities such as arts and crafts projects, and provides nutritional snacks and beverages for the youth at each community center.

The Foundation coordinates Family Nights at five community centers hosted by a Seattle SuperSonics player and his family. The admittance ticket for kids enables them to bring a parent or guardian with them to participate in this family event. Sonics players share experiences and life skills, and kids are treated to NBA video entertainment, refreshments, and a mini-basketball clinic.