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Empowering Teens to Make a Difference in Their At-Risk Community

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Abstract. When identifying problems and creating solutions that support the community culture of health, youths provide a unique perspective. This article describes how staff from Somerset County, NJ 4-H partnered with staff from Middle Earth, an at-risk youth service provider, to organize a group of teens who identified and implemented projects that affect the health and wellness of their community of Bound Brook, NJ. Extension professionals can replicate a sustainable and synergistic youth-adult partnership by creating the opportunities, making the initial connections within the community, and following the 4-H club model to ensure teens experience the essential elements.

INTRODUCTION

“What are you kids doing in this park?” an angry resident next door to the park demanded as students gathered measurements of the area. This comment reflected the frustration residents experienced with witnessing daily drug deals. This comment also solidified the students’ resolve to invest in improvements to take back their neighborhood park within Bound Brook, a low-income Hispanic town in Somerset County, ironically, one of the wealthiest counties in New Jersey. This type of reaction inspired the Somerset County 4-H staff to team up with staff from Middle Earth, an at-risk youth service provider, to approach teens in the low-income community of Bound Brook (where over 65% of students receive free/reduced lunches) to identify and rectify evidence of a decaying community.

As 4-H professionals, we strive to organize teens into the types of youth/adult partnerships that researchers (Brennan, Barnett, & Baugh, 2007; Ilkiw, 2010; Jones & Perkins, 2005; Zeldin, McDaniel, Topitzes & Calvert, 2000) have proven to be effective in meeting their goals. Thus the 4-H /Middle Earth Students Ambassadors for Community Health (SACH) club was formed. The SACH club started with a grant from Robert Wood Johnson New Jersey Health Initiatives. Middle Earth recruited teen members who live in Bound Brook and have never participated in 4-H. Teens worked in partnership with the Bound Brook town council, police, other community organizations, and Rutgers University’s Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy (BSPPP) to learn about and solve community problems. The teens implemented self-designed projects to make their communities healthier and more vibrant. The teens were invested in this program as evidenced by the multiple finished projects SACH members have tackled over the past few years.

2018 PROJECTS

In 2018, ten SACH teens who were new to 4-H worked with the Bound Brook government to increase pedestrian safety by providing “high visibility areas.” These are areas that passively slow drivers and enable pedestrians to cross safely in designated areas. In addition, they built a parklet (a moveable seating area that takes up two parking spaces) to use at township events. The SACH members successfully created the following projects:

- **Street Murals**—With guidance from a local artist, SACH members painted 5 large colorful street murals around Bound Brook, which passively slows traffic down.
- **Crosswalk Murals**—SACH members collected data about jaywalking, distracted driving, vehicles yielding to pedestrians and cyclists, and shared the information with local government officials. Based

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upon that data, they obtained approval to paint high visibility crosswalk murals within town. These brightly colored murals passively slow down traffic creating a safer crosswalk.

- **Parklet**—SACH members built a parklet, a temporary and movable seating structure that acts as an attractive sidewalk extension, providing more resting space for the public. The parklet can be quickly assembled and disassembled for transport and is roughly the size of two parking spaces. The teens assembled the parklet at many community events, giving residents an attractive place to stop, sit, and to rest while taking in the activities. The parklet continues to be used at 4-H, Middle Earth, and other county events.

2019 PROJECTS

In 2019, based on the success of the previous year, the four SACH members who did not age out, returned and eight new teens joined the project. They received permission from the Bound Brook town council to revitalize a park that had been neglected for years. The members:

- Petitioned to have the park renamed “Mariposa Park” (Spanish for butterfly) to symbolize the transformation of the park from a caterpillar into a beautiful butterfly.
- Partnered with a newly formed Community Garden Committee and added herb boxes and a vegetable stand to the community garden. They planted two peach trees and raspberry bushes so visitors could pick the fruit for free.
- Installed a grill, benches, picnic tables, and a Little Free Library. Sweet Reads, a local nonprofit that distributes books to children in underserved communities, donated the books.
- Painted a street mural and colorful crosswalks to passively slow down drivers.
- Installed a beautifully patterned pathway from the park’s street entrance to the community garden.
- Offered classes at the park, such as food tasting, arts and crafts, and yoga, that were well attended by the community.
- Created a “Story Book Trail,” a series of twelve 3D butterfly sculptures designed and painted by artists commissioned by the teens. Each butterfly features a metal podium containing a portion of a story about Maria the Mariposa discovering her life’s purpose. The story, written in both English and Spanish, was authored and illustrated by the club members.
- Unveiled their hard work at a Mariposa Park block party where over 100 community members attended, including the mayor, members of the borough council, and a county commissioner who declared that the work they accomplished was “magic.”

CONCLUSION

In this youth/adult partnership, youths were excited about taking ownership of projects which created a more vibrant and healthy community that has grown well beyond the New Jersey town of the Bound Brook. Zeldin, McDaniel, Topitzes, & Calvert (2000) described this excitement as a “synergy in terms of a new power and energy that propels decision-making groups to greater innovation and productivity.” The success of the various projects tackled by this group since 2018 led to increased demand of youth/adult partnership community projects with neighboring communities. Extension professionals can replicate the success of their youth/adult partnerships by including the following aspects into their program planning:

- Create opportunities for teens to be a part of their community’s health and wellbeing—this can be in the form of clubs, youths on boards, short term programming, or whatever design best fits your community.
- Make the initial connections with the appropriate agencies and organizations in the community so they are prepared when the teens contact them.
- Follow the 4-H club model so teens experience the essential elements (belonging, independence, generosity, mastery) while learning parliamentary procedure, public speaking skills, planning and organizational skills.

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