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# JEWISH COMMUNITY

## Youth Call All Shots in New Community Group

by Emily Torgan-Shalansky  
Jewish Community Reporter

Rhode Island resident Karen Feldman doesn't dismiss teenagers as "just kids."

Because she thinks far too many people do, she recently founded Youth in Action, a uniquely youth-operated non-profit organization devoted to helping teens develop themselves and their communities.

"This group is controlled by young people," Feldman explained. "There are plenty of organizations in which young people make decisions, but they

in their own houses, and this would give us place for Friday night dinners. Teen mothers would also be able to come by and share childcare arrangements. Others could just hang out."

Feldman, 30, combined her education, experience and Jewish beliefs to develop the concept behind the fledgling organization.

Originally from Long Island, she came to New England to earn her B.A. in psychology from Wellesley. After spending three years as a substance abuse coun-

"I knew that some of the kids wanted to start something on their own, and I wanted to help them," Feldman said. "That's how YIA started."

According to Feldman, her desire to help both personally and professionally grew out of her long-standing commitment to Judaism.

"When I was 12 years old, I blew out the candles on my birthday cake and wished for world peace," she laughed before continuing in a more serious tone.

"The most important parts of my identity are my Jewish heritage and my desire to fulfill *Tikkun Olam*," she explained. "As a people, many of us have gotten away from leaving a piece of our field for the hungry. For me personally, the needy have always been the young."

Feldman's experiences in her own synagogue youth group initially led her to concentrate on adolescents.

"As a child, I was introverted and timid," she said. "I didn't think I had any strengths, but when I got the opportunity to do things within the Mitzvah Corps, I really changed. Some adults somewhere helped me. I didn't know how much they were doing. I just saw how much I was doing, and I was transformed."

Feldman saw similar needs within the community, and her group is comprised of youth from widely varied social, ethnic and economic backgrounds.

"No one ever gives credit to urban minority kids," she said. "They struggle against many things. Often, their families have low incomes and their parents speak no English. But once they are given a chance, they knock people out."

As the small group's sole volunteer staff member, Feldman knows that YIA and its members will face challenges as they work to obtain participants, funding, recognition and more.

But she isn't worried. "When I was in youth group, my favorite song was called 'I'm tirtzu,'" she said. "The lyrics were Theodore Hertzl's words, and he said, 'if you build it, they will come.'"

For further information on Youth in Action, call Karen Feldman at (401) 751-3086.



Karen Feldman

Herald photo by Emily Torgan-Shalansky

ultimately have to answer to adult boards. We, too, have an experienced adult board, but because youth have the supermajority, the adults cannot outvote them."

As the ethnically diverse participants work toward YIA goals of community outreach and education on topics such as teen pregnancy, drug prevention, HIV and racism, they will learn about fund-raising, grant-writing and community organization.

"Those are pieces of what it takes to be a leader," said Feldman. "No one thinks young urban people can do these things, but once they acquire the skills, they're incredibly capable."

There are local youth and adults who agree with her — at present, nine teenage board members are deeply involved in YIA.

The organization's adult volunteers include Bert Crenca, artistic director of AS220; Aisha Adullah-Odiase, a Providence School Board member; Rob DeBlois, a school director; Michael Aaronson, an accountant; Herb Kaplan, a community activist; Linda Cyr, a parent; and Susan Kavanagh, a VISTA volunteer.

The group is already incorporated, thanks to Aaronson and the efforts of the youth board, which raised the necessary monies by soliciting small contributions.

Crenca has provided meeting space in the AS220 building.

"Eventually, we hope to obtain our own space inside a home," Feldman said. "A lot of young people do not feel at home



YOUTH IN ACTION MEMBERS (left to right) Sonnurear Prom, Sopheap Khong and Nuon Van perform in a multi-media event at AS220 on Oct. 25.

Photo courtesy of Scott Lipine