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Our History and Community

Project Reach

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Our History and Community

Young people, as a class, have no power in this society. New York's most disenfranchised youth communities have few, if any, programs/training spaces that address their crises and provide opportunities for them to develop their awareness and leadership skills as socially responsible rebels, activists and community organizers. Thirty years ago (1970), Asian American community activists started Project Reach to provide services to immigrant youth, a direct response to the rise in Chinese youth gangs. Seventeen years ago in an action, unprecedented among race-segregated youth programs, Project Reach opened its door to all young people and put in place an innovative and dynamic youth organizing training space where understanding and confronting institutional discrimination and systemic oppression would form the foundation of its core youth organizing training curriculum.

Project Reach's constituency is Black, Latina/o, Native American, Asian, Multiracial and White, young women, young men and intersex youth, lesbian, gay, bisexual, Two Spirit, transgender and heterosexual, immigrant and undocumented youth, HIV+/young people living with AIDS, young people with learning and physical differences, teen mothers and fathers, gang-related, court-involved and incarcerated youth, and runaway/foster care/homeless youth, whose realities are compounded by the fact that they are also from low/no-income families, mostly raised by immigrant parents (Asian, Caribbean, Latin/Central American).

Today, Project Reach is a youth and adult-run, multiracial, multi-gender, grassroots, anti-discrimination, youth organizing center with a clear mission and commitment to challenging the destruction of, between and among New York City's disparate youth communities. Implicit in that mission is a vision, which recognizes that the empowerment of disenfranchised youth communities is critical and integral to their participation as future leaders in the larger movement for social justice. Project Reach's strategies include building a city-wide, cross-community youth movement where "organizing readiness" supports a sustainable community of youth organizers truly invested in fighting against injustice and for radical systemic change.

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Our Work

Project Reach is a youth and adult-run, multiracial, multi-gender, community-based, crisis intervention, anti-discrimination, youth organizing center working with New York City's most marginalized youth communities. For over 30 years, Project Reach has worked within communities of young people other organizations would not - young women; lesbian/gay/bisexual/Two Spirit/transgender/intersex youth; immigrant and undocumented youth; HIV+/young people living with AIDS; young people who are differently-abled; teen mothers/fathers; gang-related/court-involved/incarcerated youth; and runaway/foster care/homeless youth - whose realities are compounded by the fact that they are also from low/no-income families, mostly raised by immigrant parents (Asian, Caribbean, Latin/Central American).

As an anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-ageist, youth rights organization, Project Reach asserts the rights of young people to identify those barriers/problems/institutions that disempower them and to organize actions, campaigns, and projects that concretely confront and change those conditions and institutions. Working with schools, community groups, youth organizations, colleges/universities and professional organizations, Project Reach's youth and adult staff conduct workshops, trainings, retreats, and technical assistance around issues of discrimination and community-building. Our 7-10 week Youth Organizing Youth Summer Training Institute brings together over 70 young people (Black, Latina/o, Asian and Pacific Islander, Native American, Multiracial, and White) to train and work in community around issues of race, gender, sexual orientation, class, age, ability, health, and immigration status.

Present work includes our *cross-community Traveling Anti-Discrimination Project* confronting post 9-11 violence against Arab/South Asian/Muslim communities; *Lower East Side Young Women-run Organizing Project* identifying and organizing against sexist norms/practices/institutions; *Positive Youth*, an employment and organizing project for 12 young people living with AIDS; and the *Homophobia/ Heterosexism Documentation Project*, documenting violence facing lgbtqi youth in schools and communities.

Proposed Work for 2001-2002

Our goals and objectives for the coming year and description of the work to be done to meet those goals and objectives.

GOALS

To work with youth communities most marginalized by ongoing institutionalized discrimination and, in particular, those affected by the events of September 11th.

To develop the skills of young people in 1) assessing the conditions within their communities, 2) better understanding the root causes of those conditions, and 3) designing and implementing organizing projects and efforts that create substantial and sustainable social change.

OBJECTIVES

To partner with Arab and South Asian community groups and organizations in the creation of a *youth and adult-run, cross-community Traveling Anti-Discrimination Project* which will provide immediate and on-going assistance to schools, organizations, and communities most directly affected by the reactions to the September 11th event.

To re-establish and institutionalize *Positive Youth*, an *HIV+/young people living with AIDS-designed and run, employment and youth organizing initiative* working to challenge the silence facing young people, in general, and proactively change the conditions facing young people living with HIV and AIDS.

To work with young women from local junior high/high schools to establish a *Lower East Side young women-run crisis center/organizing project* which will provide direct services to young women in crisis, develop their understanding and skills around issues of sexism, and engage them in organizing projects that concretely challenge the sexist norms, practices, and institutions in their communities.

To collaborate with existing lesbian, gay, bisexual, Two Spirit, transgender, and intersex (lgbtsti) youth-serving organizations and the NYC Anti-Violence Project to initiate an *lgbtsti youth-run Homophobia/Heterosexism Documentation Project* that will directly address the discrimination and violence facing young people in New York City's schools and communities.

THE WORK

Our work for the coming year has been informed both by the events of September 11th as well as those conditions that continue to impact youth communities most marginalized in New York City. Those communities include 1) Arab and South Asian youth who face rising hostility in the form of verbal and physical attacks, a direct reaction to events of September 11th and the escalating war; 2) HIV+/young people living with AIDS who still remain the most silenced and invisible, representing the community where infection rates are highest; 3) young women on Manhattan's Lower East Side where no programs specifically address the crisis in their lives or equip them to take greater control over their victimization; and 4) lesbian, gay, bisexual, Two Spirit, transgender, and intersex youth who continue to face harassment and isolation from family and in schools.

Though we continue to maintain our day-to-day operations related to our crisis intervention work and requests for training and technical assistance, our strategies for accomplishing our objectives grow from already existing relationships and new collaborations initiated with youth organizations, schools, grassroots ethnic and cultural community groups, health, housing, and legal agencies.

Traveling Anti-Discrimination Project

The events of September 11th have impacted Project Reach young people and their families in multiple and horrific ways. The collapse of the World Trade Center towers took the lives of some young people's

family members, close friends and neighbors and rendered other young people and their families, all of whom live in our community just south and east of the Trade Center complex, helpless and isolated, without electricity, hot water or telephone. Even today some phone service continues to be inoperative and limited mobility, resulting from increased security and transportation disruptions, are coupled with poor air quality and continuous soot and dust from the ongoing recovery effort. With the subsequent pro-war sentiments promoted by the media and our public leaders, American flags have appeared everywhere most prominently in heavily populated undocumented/immigrant communities like Chinatown where flying the flag is much more a passport to safety rather than a show of deep-rooted patriotism - this all being a direct response to the almost immediate and growing violence directed against our Arab and South Asian youth and their families. Now, with the escalating war, a third community of victims appears at Project Reach - those young people who feel compelled to enlist in the military service and those who fear that they will be drafted, all fearful of everything from biological warfare to nuclear attack.

Numerous community forums, ad hoc coalitions, and numerous requests for training and technical assistance have brought Project Reach together with groups like South Asian Youth Action (SAYA) who has sent teams of young people to train in our summer Youth Organizing Youth Institute as well as brought us in to do anti-discrimination training with their line staff. The Sikh Culture Society, with whom we recently shared a panel discussion at the American Museum of Natural History, reported that over 95% of those who wear turbans are Sikh but mistakenly stereotyped as Arab. They later met with us agreeing that we should bring our youth communities together. The Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund's Asian Youth Legal Rights Project, which has joined Project Reach, SAYA, and the Sikh Culture Society at a number of coalition/community gatherings, has agreed to work with us to provide legal rights workshops for young people victims of both racial attacks and police harassment and the War Resisters League, along with the American Friends Service Committee's militarism education project, have offered their curriculum and resources for our training components.

At this point, we are working to grow a partnership with these organizations and community groups toward the creation of a youth and adult-run, cross-community Traveling Anti-Discrimination Project, which will provide immediate and ongoing assistance to schools, organizations, and communities most affected by the reactions to the September 11th event. Our plan includes outreach to the South Asian and Arab youth communities, partnering with SAYA and The Sikh Culture Society in conducting awareness and anti-discrimination workshops and trainings in schools and community venues, hosting a city-wide youth gathering where Arab and South Asian young people can meet, network, and work with adult community members to recruit for and establish a city-wide, cross-community team of young people trained to facilitate community discussions and address critical issues related to September 11th, inter-group tensions, racial and anti-immigrant bias, and the escalating war. Project Reach will work with participating youth and grassroots organizations to develop and conduct the training modules and curriculum. Young people from our past summer training institutes have already expressed great interest in joining the traveling anti-discrimination project.

Positive Youth

In 1988, Project Reach worked with its first known AIDS case, when a young 14-year old, frequently absent from school, participated in one of our in-school truancy interventions support groups. After the loss of his mother to AIDS, he brought over a dozen young people to our center, all of whose parents or family members were living with or had died of AIDS. Our community was indelibly changed as CASAA (Community AIDS Support and Action Agenda) was formed in 1992 to address the needs of HIV-affected young people. By 1996, Project Reach initiated a city-wide call to all health clinics and community organizations serving HIV+/young people living with AIDS and drew more than 70 service providers and HIV+/young people with AIDS to a dinner workshop. Out of this gathering grew Positive Youth, a project which hired 12 HIV+/young people with AIDS who worked together for one year to create an exhibition documenting their lives and struggles as young people living in the epidemic. Since then, with the absence of AIDS funding, the numbers of HIV+/young people living with AIDS working at Project Reach has remained small, generally 2-3/year while the incidence of HIV among young people of color has remained among the highest of all communities. This past summer, 6 young people joined us as a team from Safe Space's Safe Home, a group home housing HIV+/young people with AIDS who were

homeless as a result of their seroconversion. Of the 12 young people hired in 1996, 4 had resided at Safe Home, which had only opened shortly before the founding of Positive Youth.

Over the past ten years, Project Reach has worked with APICHA (Asian and Pacific Islander Coalition on HIV/AIDS, its founding executive director trained as a case manager at Project Reach in 1989-91) providing technical assistance and case managing APICHA's first Chinese AIDS case, a 51-year old man who had been ousted from his home by his wife and three daughters upon his diagnosis of AIDS. More recently, APICHA and our parent organization's own HIV/AIDS program, have requested that Project Reach work with their new HIV testing initiative in relation to the counseling and testing of young people utilizing the over-the-counter HIV home testing kits. With the continuous but rapidly rising incidence of HIV infection among young people and the almost completely invisible population of HIV+/young people living with AIDS, particularly among Asian youth, where 80% of the HIV+ adult Asian population reside in Queens and/or are non-English speaking immigrants, young people from Safe Home, along with young people and staff (half of whom have family members who are HIV+ or have died of AIDS) at Project Reach, have decided that Positive Youth must be re-established and institutionalized as a permanent program - one which is an HIV+/young people living with AIDS-designed and run, employment and youth organizing initiative which will work to proactively change the conditions facing young people living with HIV and AIDS.

Former members of CASAA and young people and staff from Safe Home are presently meeting with Project Reach to begin the process of outreaching to and identifying all those institutions and programs presently serving HIV+/young people living with AIDS (HIV+/YPWA). Our work with Safe Home has been critical as our two organizations have grown a much keener sense of how important comprehensive services in terms of housing, education, mental health, and employment are in addressing the empowerment of young people infected by HIV/AIDS. Our strategy will include researching where HIV+/YPWA's are, what the quality of their care looks like, and how HIV/AIDS discrimination manifests itself. Outreaching to those health clinics, hospital programs (Kings County Hospital, Brooklyn, Mt. Sinai, Manhattan, Montefiore Hospital, The Bronx, and Gouverneur Hospital's Leicht Clinic (Lower East Side), and support groups serving young people, Project Reach, Safe Home and other collaborating organizations will work with HIV+/YPWA's to define the "employment" criteria and establish an equitable interview and hiring process.

Once hired, the Positive Youth project team of approximately 12 HIV+/YPWA's will join an internal support group where they can better understand the status of their own health (re: blood work, viral load, medication protocols, etc.) and a training group which will insure that the team has the knowledge and information necessary to being competent in the area of HIV/AIDS and the skills to do HIV/AIDS crisis intervention counseling for young people who are thinking about getting tested or who have seroconverted. The team will then take on the responsibility of interfacing with and surveying other HIV+/YPWAs about the ways HIV/AIDS discrimination continues to silence them, assessing what services/programs exist to address those needs, and designing and implementing an organizing project that will move HIV+/YPWA communities to change the conditions in their lives. A Positive Youth Hotline, an interactive website, and a guerrilla theater performance troupe are ideas that have suggested that silence need not be the prevailing response.

Young Women Crisis Center/Organizing Project

Ten years ago young women and women staff went on strike to protest what they felt were subtle and not so subtle violations of their rights in a space where anti-sexism training was part of the mainstay curriculum. A year later the Womyn's Space evolved as a women-only safe space within the walls of Project Reach along with a policy that mandated that no programming could take place unless women constituted at least 50% of those present. Over those years, The Womyn's Space has played a vital role in the health and welfare for all young women and women staff, a constant that was non-negotiable and a clear message that women continue to face a wide range of inequities personally and institutionally.

More recently, it has become apparent that the Womyn's Space was unable to maintain consistent and sustainable programming often finding resistance from within the young women's community itself. Though anti-sexism training continues as one of the major bottom-line issues, some young women have

expressed that they do not feel the need for a Womyn's Space while others have questioned its existence and have been found to defend young men in the center. Because young women and women in general, play significant roles within Project Reach, it is also clear that young women who attend our Youth Organizing Youth Summer Training Institute as well as those who come in as crisis cases through our drop-in center continue to experience violent and abusive situations at home, in school and in their relationships. After lengthy discussions and assessments about what kind of environment actually exists for young women at Project Reach, youth and adult staff have acknowledged that we have established an "organizational culture" here in the center that is explicitly, anti-racist, anti-sexist and anti-homophobic. What was also acknowledged was that that culture ends the minute one leaves the building.

In discussions with young women in the community, many of them verify that sexism is pervasive and ever present outside and in their schools. Upon researching other programs that might more specifically address the needs of young women, no programs were found that provided a space where young women could talk about difficult issues of violence and abuse. Most programs that exist for young women grow out of sexist practices that provide sex-segregated services that more likely than not perpetuate the importance of sex roles and sex role expectations. Though most programs encourage young women to pursue a career, attention was also given to recognizing her role with respect to her future partner, who is expected to be male. For this reason, it became increasingly clear that The Womyn's Space needed to move toward providing a safe space for young women on the Lower East Side who have not yet become involved with Project Reach.

More evidence of this need comes from our work with Seward Park High School, the result of violent altercations between Black and Asian students last spring. A request to come to the school to conduct an anti-discrimination training for their staff development day resulted in unintentional but sexist comments coming from a male teacher. The female teacher, so upset, quietly left the workshop in tears. Upon further discussion with her and other teachers, it became clear that such issues are not discussed on staff or in the classroom. The SPARK counselor has already identified communities of young women, some of whom identify as lesbians, who are very interested in learning more about Project Reach and The Womyn's Space. Given the anecdotal stories from young women coming through our drop-in center as well as those "secrets" revealed by over 30 young women in our summer training institute, our plan is to work with young women from local junior high/high schools to establish a Lower East Side young women's crisis center/organizing project. This crisis center and organizing project would prepare young women to provide direct services to young women in crisis, develop their understanding and skills around issues of sexism, both personal and institutional, and engage them in organizing projects that concretely challenge the sexist norms, practices, and institutions in their communities.

Beginning with local junior high (IS 131, JHS 56) and high schools (Seward Park, Murry Bergtraum, East Side Community High School) with whom we have relationships, we will work with guidance counselors and teachers to establish in-school meetings and/or support groups where young women can begin to articulate their realities in safe young women-only spaces. Facilitated by young women who have been trained by Project Reach, these groups will grow a community of young women who reside on the Lower East Side and who, through meeting one another, might be interested in "adopting" The Womyn's Space for their own use. With trainings that can be offered, along with out-of-the-city retreats, and community-wide forums focused on issues identified and important to these young women, young women might be able to imagine "a room of one's own" where they can begin to support one another and organize a collective community response to the sexism which silences them in their own backyard. The Womyn's Space can become their safe space and the beginnings of a Lower East Side crisis center and young women's organizing project.

Homophobia/Heterosexism Documentation Project

In 1991, Project Reach received a \$5,000 grant from the Wiener Foundation to open the doors of its Anti-Discrimination Work Space, an anti-discrimination resource center and soon-to-become meeting space for lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth. Though openly gay young people were few in number, straight young people, who had struggled in homophobia/heterosexism workshops conducted by Project Reach, grew to understand that lesbian, gay and bisexual young people had no where to go on the Lower East Side. Wanting to support a young woman on staff who quietly shared her lesbian identity, over 20 straight

identified young people agreed to create a safe space within Project Reach for lesbian, gay and bisexual youth living in this community. The Anti-Discrimination Work Space was then re-named Pro-RADS by this young lesbian – meaning both “pro-radical” and Project Reach Anti-Discrimination Space. Because the only existing lesbian, gay, and bisexual spaces existed on the far west side of Manhattan, Pro-RADS became the first lesbian, gay, bisexual youth space on the east side, and with a name that did not “out” its members, young people could identify with it openly without fear of disclosing their sexual identities.

In an unprecedented move, Project Reach invited every known lesbian and gay youth-serving agency (only about 4) to join a city-wide planning group to conceive and plan New York City’s first-ever city-wide lesbian and gay youth retreat. What marked this planning process as unique was Project Reach’s role in ensuring optimum youth participation in decision-making. From the earliest meeting, Project Reach’s young people collaborated with adult staff to immediately separate youth participants from adult staff of all participating agencies. Greater facilitation skills were actually needed in the adult meeting where many staff people nervously accepted the fact that their young people might be able to meet on their own. Project Reach young people facilitated a very spirited youth-only meeting which produced such clear ideas in the share back that many of the adult staff began to appreciate the importance of youth-only space. Organizations included Hetrick Martin Institute, Gay and Lesbian Youth of New York, The Door, and the Lesbian/Gay Community Center’s Youth Enrichment Services, and Project Reach. In the spring of 1991, 25 lesbian, gay and bisexual young people traveled to upstate New York for the city’s first-ever retreat.

Though the past 10 years have brought on significant changes for lesbian, gay, bisexual, Two Spirit, transgender and intersex (lgbtsti) youth, a recent study conducted by the New York City Gay and Lesbian Anti-Violence Project (AVP) revealed a wide range of violence and harassment facing lgbtsti youth in schools and home situations. Suicide continues to be one of the leading problems facing one out of every three young people who are attempting to grapple with their sexual orientation. Even where growing numbers of lesbian/gay and straight alliances are appearing in both private and public schools, such publicly announced support groups provide little comfort for the significantly larger number of young people who are closeted or still questioning their feelings and identities. Still many school administrators and teachers are ill-equipped to effectively challenge the damaging effects of homophobic and heterosexist comments and behaviors. More recently, Project Reach has been participating in a number of meetings where lgbtsti youth-serving agencies attend. At these meetings countless examples of harassment, verbal and physical abuse, and silencing and isolation lead to increased drop out rates for lgbtsti youth in schools. While many anecdotal stories arise, very few are documented except through AVP’s hotline program. Unfortunately such documentation reflects more serious violence and the 4-page form used in documenting cases is far too complicated for young people. In 1997 Project Reach staff and Pro-RADS youth conceived an idea of a documentation project that might allow lgbtsti youth and their allies to begin to document all the forms of homophobia they faced in schools. During the Lesbian/Gay Pride March, Pro-RADS young people passed out palm cards stating “when a gay and straight alliance/support group is not enough...”. This palm card went on to announce the possibility of a homophobia/heterosexism documentation project. At that time 6 young people joined AVP’s hotline training to better familiarize themselves with issues of violence and methods of documentation. Unfortunately, a change in administration, and lack of support by AVP prevented the project from coming to fruition.

As a result of the year-long study which includes a one-year follow-up, AVP has solicited help from lgbtst youth organizations to utilize the study’s results. At several meetings of youth serving organizations, Pro-RADS youth and Project Reach staff have received very positive feedback about the possibilities of piloting our homophobia/heterosexism documentation project. At this point, the AVP is very excited about working with young people to create a 1-page documentation form drawn from their 4-page hotline instrument. Our plan for actualizing this project includes working with AVP to put out a call for the creation of a youth and adult planning group that would explore the possibilities of creating a youth-designed, user-friendly 1-page documentation form that could easily be utilized by any student or young people wanting to document incidents of discrimination. If piloted in a school where we have developed some rapport with administrators, such data gathered and compiled could then be used as evidence to challenge school administrators to recognize the existence of homophobia and heterosexism.

Documentation could then go further to document the resulting impact of such discrimination. At this point, our meetings with the Anti-Violence Project, Generation Q, an lgbtsti youth organization in Queens, and a staff person from the Administration of Children Services, who works with lgbtsti youth in foster care, have produced great interest in a larger gathering of young people where the project can be announced and promoted. Young people at Project Reach are prepared to work on the form now, train within AVP's hotline training, and attempt to conduct a small pilot project using their own schools and friends as a means of field-testing the form and process. Some young people have suggested that we make available our 800 number as a hotline specifically for youth callers and that as young people begin to document and substantiate frequency of incidents of homophobia and heterosexism around the city, they will be able to plan organized responses at those locations where bias and violence is greatest.

On-going, year-round work

At present, our on-going, year-round work will continue to include:

- 1) Sept 11th relief work re: collaboration with and housing the Lower Manhattan Residents Relief Coalition and being lead organizers of the Youth and Education working committee of Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund's city wide Sept 11th coalition;
- 2) local organizing/support work with groups like Third World Within, Chinatown Justice Project, National Mobilization Against Sweat Shops, and NYC Taskforce on Homeless Youth;
- 3) city-wide, cross-community 7-10 week Youth Organizing Youth Summer Training Institute;
- 4) presentations, anti-discrimination/youth organizing trainings, and program/organizational technical assistance upon request; and
- 5) crisis intervention counseling and advocacy.

In addition, Project Reach will continue to grow its role as a community center opening its doors after-hours to community groups, grassroots organizations, and organizing efforts who lack the resources and space for meetings and planning. Typically, Project Reach stays open from 9am till 12 midnight on weekdays, depending on need, and meeting, planning and organizing space is available and utilized on weekends for daytime and evening gatherings. More recently, after Sept. 11th, Project Reach was opened as a relief site 15 hours every day to accommodate the needs of local residents and the Lower Manhattan Residents Relief Coalition.

Present and past groups include CAAAV Organizing Asian Communities' Chinatown Justice Project (training site for their Fukienese youth/anti-gentrification project) and Chinese Street Vendors (organizing effort to stop Mayor Giuliani's eviction of street vendors on Canal Street); October 22nd Coalition Against Police Brutality (No More Stolen Lives - National Day of Protest); Asian Americans for Mumia; *mindf_ck*, weekly youth-run writers group (a collaboration of young people, multiracial, gay, lesbian, bisexual, straight, transgender, men and women who read and write poetry, stories, words, and prose - challenging traditional language); and Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund's Youth and Education Committee (working group for the Sept. 29th city-wide Youth/Community Speak Out and Community Protest).

PROJECT REACH

Our Mission and Vision

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A multi-racial, community
based, youth counseling,
advocacy & organizing center

Centro multi-racial de la
comunidad para la consejería,
defensa y capacitación de jóvenes

Project Reach is a youth and adult, people of color-run, crisis counseling, anti-discrimination, youth organizing training center serving multiracial, multi-sexual, indigenous, immigrant and grassroots communities. As a **drop-in center**, located on Manhattan's Lower East Side, Project Reach services all young people on an "open door" basis focusing on those situations where they have little or no control over their present life circumstances. As a **youth organizing training center**, young people, as participants, youth organizers, interns-in-training, interns and youth staff, work collaboratively with adult staff to identify problems, provide direct and comprehensive services, design and implement training experiences, and organize collective responses to problems impacting the youth community. In short, our mission is to significantly alter the ways in which young people participate in our community.

Our goals commit us to:

- 1) *moving young people in crisis, especially those for whom few options exist, to a place where they can take greater control over their lives and proactively organize with other young people for social change.*
- 2) *challenging adults around issues of ageism, adultism and youth empowerment in order to better understand how youth organizing is an integral part of community empowerment, and*
- 3) *creating new approaches that institutionalize the ways in which young people and adults collaboratively work for community empowerment and social change.*

Ultimately, the vision of our organization, implicit in everything we do, is to foster a movement in which young people are autonomous and become instrumental in bringing about social change in themselves and in their communities. Our mission is to create awareness and provide opportunities where young people can better understand the systems and institutions that disempower them and work with other young people in determining what they need to do to change the conditions that oppress them. It has become increasingly clear that young people – how they are doing and how they are feeling – are the barometer by which we can measure the quality of our own lives.

Basic to the development of our vision and mission has been the underlying belief that we must learn from young people in this community, that they best know their own needs and problems and that the greater part of the struggle is to create a safe enough space where silence about their oppression is broken. For the last 15 years, young people have opened up, taken great risks, shared intense life experiences, spoken out, asked adults to leave, demanded their own caucus space, created their own institutions, organized with other young people, challenged and confronted each other and, most importantly, supported each others right to be heard and empowered.

Our History

Project Reach began in the early 1970's through the efforts of volunteers committed to providing community-based, crisis intervention counseling and advocacy for young people victims to the sudden rise of Chinese youth gangs. As Project Reach became a publicly funded social service program and as gang recruitment and violence became more prevalent (including a shooting within the center), its work turned toward "safer" drug prevention programming.

In 1985 Project Reach staff took on the task of evaluating and reassessing its program and the status of young people in this community. Deficiencies were found to exist in three main areas:

Young people facing critical and serious problems (battering, gangs, drugs, suicide, homelessness, sexual abuse, heterosexism, etc.) had no where to go. Traditional clinical settings were unavailable after-hours and on weekends and non-clinical counseling programs for young people did not exist.

Project Reach was servicing an exclusively Chinese population clearly consistent and reflective of the race-segregated social services programs made available to young people in most communities around the city.

Youth programs, at best, only provided "band-aid" social services, uncritical of what did exist for young people and how they were being delivered and devoid of any understanding of the root causes of youth problems. Programs provided few channels through which young people could participate in improving their own conditions.

As a result of this assessment, Project Reach moved to provide crisis intervention counseling and advocacy for all young people on an "open door" drop-in basis and partnered those services with a youth empowerment component that has involved these same young people on every level of decision-making in and out of the center. From youth-identified awareness raising workshops to peer counseling/facilitation/conflict mediation skills trainings, young people have gone on to take greater control over confronting the issues that impact their lives. Conducting anti-homophobia/heterosexism workshops in junior high and high schools..., running a youth conference on racism that included a speak-out against the adults..., establishing an Anti-Sexism Hearing Committee, a product of sexism in the center and a center-wide Women's Strike..., networking and organizing with lesbian, gay and bisexual youth from around the city..., sitting-in and picketing unfair labor practices at the Shinwa Restaurant... and forming the Youth Committee, an integral part in the interviewing and hiring of all staff and interns...are only some of the many ways in which young people have been involved in youth organizing and social change.

The Need

Young people on the Lower East Side face a myriad of problems. Parents who are abusive, school systems which are insensitive, and peers who do not know how to give support, leave these young people with a sense that few alternatives exist. Running away from home, dropping out of school, hiding out with gang groups, seeking out "support" in sexually premature relationships, or attempting

suicide become the only options for many young people. Still others face problems surrounding "coming out" as Lesbian, Gay, or Bisexual, deciding about an unwanted pregnancy, dealing with a sexually abusive relative, or coming to grips with a parent who is living with or has died of an AIDS/HIV-related illness.

Many young people believe they have little control over their lives and that, for the most part, their lives are controlled by adults (parents, teachers, employers, police, etc.). Unfortunately, many of the problems young people bring to us are direct products of difficulties they experience with adults. What is equally disturbing is that many of these same adults "role model" the very "maladaptive" behaviors for which young people are blamed.

Though numerous agencies exist to service young people, few if any, recognize the importance of involving "clients" in the development of their service provision approaches. Where young people are involved on youth councils, advisory boards or mentoring/youth "leadership" programs, it is, more often than not, the adults, rather than the young people, who articulate the importance of youth involvement in programmatic/policy decision-making. Young people are then left with a particularly awkward and often confusing notion of who they are. The phrase "young adult" leaves many young people to assume that adults are the only role models. Young people need opportunities to meet one another on their own terms so that they can begin to redefine their identities as young people and work together toward an agenda that not only meets their needs but also requires their energies.

Current programs and accomplishments

At Project Reach, young people are not only serviced but also trained to perform all the tasks and programming responsibilities once reserved for staff. Crisis intervention counseling and advocacy is provided for young people by young people as well as adult staff. Training and skills building workshops are geared to pass on the ability to run and facilitate groups by and for young people on subject areas identified by young people and to make peer counseling accessible to everyone in the Center. Young people are involved at every level of decision-making regarding programming, interviewing/hiring of interns and adult staff and establishing policy for running the Center. Operationally, anti-hierarchal, consensus-based, decision-making forms the foundation of the policies and practices implemented here at Project Reach. Of the staff members, 9 out of 13 grew up in this community and 8 are youth staff who, along with adult staff, are trained to perform all crisis intervention, fiscal, personnel, maintenance and programming tasks.

Because rules and regulations as well as established disciplinary procedures are nonexistent, young people are expected to develop their own ways of handling problems that arise. In a crisis, staff may be asked to intervene but wherever possible young people are encouraged to design their own resolutions. Youth-run, grievance and planning committees; Pro-RADS, Project Reach Anti-Discrimination Space, a youth-run drop-in center for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning youth; the Youth Committee, established to hold staff accountable to young people in the center as well as have veto power over any decisions around hiring and firing of interns and staff; the Traveling Anti-Discrimination Project, a team of young people who design and facilitate racism, sexism, homophobia/heterosexism, classism and ageism workshops in public schools and community centers; an Anti-Sexism Hearing Committee established to confront a young man charged with victimizing 3 young women; and intern staff (over the past 10 years; ranging in age from 15 to 24), who work with staff to design and run the 7-10 week summer trainings are among the different ways that young people have taken up the responsibilities of "running" our center.

Project Reach has evolved from a community center that dealt exclusively with Chinese young people at risk for gang involvement in the 1970's to a comprehensive youth organizing program in the Lower East Side that actively confronts discrimination. Project Reach provides crisis intervention and

prevention counseling, individual, group and family; advocacy work requiring that we critically interface with schools, family/criminal courts, detention centers/correctional facilities, probation/parole officers, hospitals/mental health centers, community organizations and city/state agencies; safe space/support groups like **Pro-RADS Drop-In Center** for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning youth; the **Women's Space**, a Lower East Side young women's drop-in/resource center; the **CASAA/Positive Youth** for HIV+ young people and those affected AIDS; and the **Anti-Sexism Men's Group**, meeting time for young men where challenging male power/privilege is institutionalized; and youth empowerment trainings which include **Homophobia/Heterosexism Documentation Project**, **HIV/AIDS Support Group Training**, **Anti-Sexism Separate Gender Trainings**, the **Traveling Anti-Discrimination Project** and the **Youth-Organizing-Youth Networking Project**.

One of the most significant steps has been that, since the fall of 1992, we have had 3-4 youth staff functioning on a full-time basis. This means primarily that young people at Project Reach are involved in almost every level of decision-making and programming in the center. Workshops and projects to be highlighted this year would include: a series of sessions on immigrant rights conducted through a role-play with 70 people and three "boats" (rooms), where some were immigration officials deciding the fate of immigrants desiring to enter the U.S.; the Women's Space "clothesline", a work-in-progress involving workshops on sexual abuse and the draping of a clothesline with pieces of colored paper representing rape, incest, battering, sexual harassment, etc., as a way of exposing the often hidden abuse against women; a walk around the block in the LES with over 70 young people holding hands in same-sex couples as part of an anti-homophobia and heterosexism training; the "Money Game", where young people looked at capitalism by recreating a typical stock market trading floor; a role-play at a Mc Donald's where young people explored labor and class issues as they became both audience and customers. Outside the center, young people organized with other young people to design and implement the youth-only segment of the North Star City-Wide Racism Conference; presented workshops at City-As High School, Humanities and Martin Luther King High Schools; The Day School, IS 131; SUNY Binghamton; Brown University; and provided technical assistance to GLAAD, and the NYC Department of Gay & Lesbian Health.

Populations we serve

Characteristics of the young people served:

ages 12-23; 50% young women, 50% young men; 30% Asian, 40% Latino, 25% Black, 3% Native American, 1% Middle Eastern, 7% Multiracial 4% White; 35% lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender; 65% bilingual (Chinese, Spanish); 80% from immigrant families (Asian, Latino, Caribbean, Middle Eastern); 75% single parent families; 95% on public assistance or low paying jobs (waiter, seamstress, maintenance); 21% face some kind of hidden/learning/emotional/physical disability; 85% from Manhattan's Lower East Side; 55% from families with history of substance abuse; 25% have parents who died of AIDS; 45% are directly affected by family/friends/partners who are HIV infected; 90% have some experience with alcohol and marijuana; 25% have a history of gang-related activities; 35% are involved with the court system; 47% of young women acknowledge being incest survivors, 34% acknowledge being victims of rape; 25% are faced with decisions around pregnancy/abortion; 37% have experienced temporary/permanent homelessness; 85% are sexually active and at high risk of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases; 65% attend less than 1/2 of their classes.

Characteristics of adults served:

25% parents (of those parents: 15% Black, 30% Latino, 50% Asian, 5% White; 55% have history of substance abuse); 20% school personnel (teachers/guidance/counselors/deans/A.P.'s/principals); 20% social service providers (settlement houses/youth agencies); 20% community activists (women's groups, labor organizations); 15% other professionals (lawyers, social workers, psychologists).

Number of staff/volunteers

We are a staff of fifteen - nine youth staff and six adult staff; nine women (including two young mothers) and six men; Asian, African American/Caribbean and Latina/o, Multiracial and White; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and heterosexual; HIV+ and HIV-; most of whom have grown up on the Lower East Side - committed to reflect the racial composition and diversity of the community in which we work.

Six staff people are full-time, Nine are part-time, approximately 15 young people volunteer, while over 90 young people work with us as paid summer interns, youth organizers and interns in training.

Our relationship to other organizations

Our work with other youth organizing groups has included Kids Meeting Kids, Students Organizing Students, Talking Back, Free Spirit, Youth for Philippine Action and Youth Force. Young people from these groups also receive training and do trainings. Project Reach differs from most of them in that we have a drop-in center and provide crisis intervention counseling. Many of our young people who receive trainings came through our counseling services.

It's Time, Henry Street Settlement's Cultural Harmony Project, Chinatown YMCA, Street Reach, Hetrick Martin Institute, American Indian Community House, and the Lesbian/Gay Community Center's Youth Enrichment Services are among the groups who are considering participation in our Youth-Organizing-Youth Network Project. As recreational, educational, cultural arts and direct service organizations, they generally do not offer youth trainings except within smaller project components such as Hetrick Martin Institute's peer educators training program. Peer counseling forms the foundation of most young peoples' involvement at Project Reach. Many then go on to participate in a number of other anti-discrimination/support group workshops/trainings.

Bisexual Gay and Lesbian Youth of New York, Youth Enrichment Services/Lesbian and Gay Community Center, Street Work Project, Safe Space, Hetrick Martin Institute, Aids Center of Queens County, Gay Men's Health Crisis, Gay and Lesbians At The Door, Brooklyn AIDS Task Force and The Neutral Zone are among over 15 organizations who have, since attending a city-wide Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning Youth Network Meeting sponsored by Project Reach, formed an on-going network. Though many of these organizations service primarily lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender youth, few offer training opportunities that complement the extensive direct services they provide. A number of these agencies are very interested in replicating some of the training programs their young people have attended here at Project Reach.