

History of Youth Philanthropy

19TH CENTURY ROOTS

Kindness, generosity, and concern for the welfare of others have been a part of the religious and social inheritance taught to children throughout the ages. In the United States' earliest days, Americans looked to the children to "assure that democratic values would prosper." Some of the earliest efforts included school and church education and education of the youth work force. These efforts encouraged youth to give of their time (extra chores at home and for neighbors), talent (knitting or sewing for bazaars and fairs) and treasure (contributing part of their wages).

By the 1830s, social change was sweeping the country. Youth participated in adult organizations, but soon began to organize and lead their own organizations. The largest of these was the Cold Water Army, which advocated for temperance. It might be said that the Cold Water Army was the precursor to the "Just Say No" movement of today. Many of the groups who began during this time moved into the churches and many of the youth-led groups were disbanded. In the 1880s, the important new development was in religious youth work. The original group, the Society for Christian Endeavor, included missionary work and community service efforts; however, community service soon took a back seat to service to the denomination and local church.

20TH CENTURY PROGRESS

By looking at the Timeline, we can see that many youth organizations began in the early 1900s. More young people had free time and different forms of youth organizations developed to serve different needs. The largest of these such as the YMCA, the YWCA, Boys Clubs and Campfire continue today — almost 100 years later! World War I saw youth involved in Junior Red Cross and Scouts and their purpose was to serve "our fighting men." They did so by knitting, assembling basic need kits, planting victory gardens, and raising money for war bonds. After the war, many of the organizations that promote citizenship were formed for youth. These include organizations that until this time, only served adults: Rotary, Kiwanis, Civitan, and Optimist Clubs.

As the century drew to a close, the timeline tells us that youth were more involved than ever before. They became equal partners with adults in resolving some of the community issues; they took their place 'at the table' of many organizations by serving on boards, committees of the board, and advisory councils. They became valuable voices for a community that truly cares about serving the common good of the community.

Judith Erickson states "youth organizations have changed a great deal over the years and must continue to evolve within the communities where they operate. They must recognize their own potential as educational environments as well as providers of recreational activity to fill leisure hours. Young people today have too many competing demands on their time to spend it in ways that are not meaningful to them."

The material for the adaptation of the article on organizing children's philanthropy is part of an on-going research effort, The American Youth Organizations Project, which seeks to understand the historical development and contemporary roles of youth groups in the United States. In addition to numerous journal articles, products of the project include the Directory of American Youth Organizations: A Guide to 500 Clubs, Groups, Troops, Teams, Societies, Lodges and More for young People, published biennially by Free Spirit Publishing.

