

Volunteer Partners: *Our Town Picnic Dinner Theatre*

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Abstract

*The authors describe how youth and adult volunteers created, directed, and produced an interactive dinner theatre to raise awareness about the 4-H program, and funds to support it. It describes the success of a youth/adult partnership in a community. Research shows that youth benefit from partnerships with adults when they are seen as individuals who are competent and able to contribute to important decisions. This interactive theatre production, *Our Town Picnic*, provided a fun, learning and profitable experience for the local program, the community, and participating youth and adult volunteers.*

Key Words:

interactive dinner theater, performance arts, youth development, youth engagement, youth/adult partnerships, volunteers

Introduction

Interactive theatre has been used by volunteer resource managers and not-for-profit administrators in a number of ways, including as a training tool for volunteers (Urbansky, 1998) and volunteers using theatre arts to teach youth about social issues (Cossa, Fleischmann Ember, & Russell, 1996). This article illustrates how one interactive dinner theatre provided a community environment for youth and adult volunteers to learn and work together, ultimately benefiting participants, their program, and their community.

Early in 2009, a small group of Oregon youth and adults planned to create greater visibility for their Lane County 4-H Youth Development program and to raise

funds to support it. Ten youth and adults agreed to produce an interactive, murder mystery dinner theatre. Eleven 4-H clubs participated. Some helped by donating items for the production, creating stage props, learning to be performers, and being a production crew. Others planned, prepared and served dinner to patrons during the two performances. Every youth and adult participant was involved in creative decision-making in all aspects of the interactive dinner theatre, *Our Town Picnic*.

4-H: Positive Youth Development Education

Positive youth development is important to volunteerism today and in the future. It occurs from an intentional process

that promotes positive outcomes for young people by providing opportunities, relationships and the support they need to fully participate. Positive youth development programs help youth learn and grow in a safe environment. It takes place in families, peer groups (such as 4-H clubs), schools, neighborhoods, and communities. According to the 4-H Study of Positive Youth Development (2008) youth involved in high-quality, structured out-of-school programs are more likely to develop behaviors that result in thriving, engaged, and healthy young people. The study found that children who have participated in 4-H for at least one year by the eighth grade were more than three times more likely to volunteer in their communities.

In particular, non-formal youth development programs cultivate educational outcomes which include competence, character, connection, confidence, and caring, known in the youth development profession as “the five C’s. When youth develop the five C’s, they create environments in which the sixth C, “contribution,” emerges. During the interactive dinner theatre, youth experienced each of the five C’s in the following ways:

- **Competence:** Participants developed cognitive skills by helping to make decisions that affected the theatre production, and social skills by cooperating with others.
- **Character:** Participants learned the value and importance of the dedication and responsibility needed to complete a project.
- **Connection:** Participants were able to work together as team with their peers, families, and new community members. One adult participant commented, “I enjoyed watching them grow in friendships and confidence at each practice. They made great strides and were eager to please each other.”
- **Confidence:** Participants developed a greater sense of self worth and self efficacy

by honing their communication and leadership skills. “I witnessed very shy young (people)... who decided to join 4-H because they saw how much fun these kids have that they wanted to join and be a part of this. We have had several of these members speak at different public events since the dinner theatre. They have done a great job.”

- **Caring:** Participants shared their time, energy and talents for the betterment of the program.

The performance arts project addressed in this article grew out of these positive youth development roots. Performance arts is one of over 1,000 4-H projects that help more than six million young people develop life skills such as public speaking, teamwork, and decision making. Life skills that are learned in non-formal educational settings support formal school learning as well. Youth who may not be chosen for an acting position in school were still able to take part in this performance arts project, develop skills and enhance their opportunity to participate at new levels in the future.

When youth are involved in positive social relationships and activities with adults, they are less likely to engage in risky behaviors, more likely to have: strong communication skills and leadership experience, increased self-esteem, increased status and stature in the community (Camino, 2000). Youth and adults participating in the interactive dinner theatre were partners working, learning, and striving to reach their full potential – as encouraged by the 4-H mission.

Evaluation

Following the project, participants were invited to provide feedback about their volunteer experience in the community and about working in youth/adult partnerships. Nine adults and ten young people received an initial e-mail informing them of the

evaluation they would soon receive. They then were sent a formal cover letter, consent letter, and questionnaire via Survey Monkey. The survey invited participants to identify all aspects of their involvement in the dinner theatre, comment on specific learning aspects of youth engagement that may have occurred during their involvement, and share observations regarding successes and challenges between youth and adults partners as they were involved in the project.

Youth Engagement

Results from a 2005 national seminar hosted by W. K. Kellogg (interviewing 100 participants from 14 not-for-profit organizations) indicated that “one of the primary components of effective youth engagement has been partnership with elders and other adult community leaders. The crucial word in this context is partnership, in which all perspectives are valued, and young people’s ideas, wisdom and energy are genuinely and passionately represented at the table” (p. 8). The seminar reported eight “pathways” to youth engagement including youth service, youth organizing, youth leadership, youth philanthropy, decision-making and governance, youth civic and political engagement, youth media, and youth research and evaluation.

This performance arts program provided an opportunity for youth to engage in four of these eight pathways to youth engagement, including youth service, youth organizing, youth leadership, and youth philanthropy. Specifically, the ways young people experienced pathways to engagement in this project include:

- **Youth Service.** Youth were responsible for specific tasks such as managing other volunteers to design the theatre stage. As a result, youth were viewed

by both participants and audience members as a source of community support.

- **Youth Organizing.** As part of the team to plan each aspect of the interactive dinner theatre, youth shared decision-making power with adults as the script was adapted, props were secured, and dinner was planned. One participant said, “The ideas and thoughts that this group of young people brought to the play made it a huge success. It would not have been as successful without them!” Another said, “I think ... (this is) a great way for kids to learn how to organize successful events.”

- **Youth Leadership.** One way youth participated in group processes during the interactive dinner theater was by offering creative challenges at each table of theatre-goers. Participants said, “Through this project I observed youth increasing their leadership skills,” and, “Adults were able to see that youth are capable of a lot more than we give them credit for.”

- **Youth Philanthropy.** Youth were willing to give of their time, talents and energies. They applied their skills to create an artistic “product” that had value to participants and the community. The product was educational and unique in its appreciation for cultural arts. “(There is) one youth who has really taken an interest in leadership roles after helping raise money for this dinner theatre.”

Kleon, King, and Wingerter (2008) concluded that teens are potential resources available to many groups and organizations. They are willing to take leadership through volunteerism to improve the quality of life in their communities. However, it is important to recognize that teens must be allowed to be in partnership with adults in carrying out the group’s mission. It is important that both adults and teens be prepared in working in a volunteer environment together. As reflected in the project evaluation, 100% of the adult

respondents observed youth developing skills as leaders, event organizers, and fund-raisers, and 80% of the adults observed youth developing volunteer service skills during the performance arts project.

Youth/Adult Partnerships

Partnerships are generally understood to be relationships in which individuals understand one another's expectations, roles, and responsibilities. According to Jones, Bye, and Zeldin (2008), youth/adult partnerships thrive when there is shared ownership among the parties involved. Historically, volunteer administrators and volunteer managers have experienced, "...unforeseen obstacles as they seek to design, implement and manage community-based programs involving teens as partners" (Safrit, 2008, p. 103). Only during the past decade have youth/adult partnerships been viewed as an element of program quality when youth and adults work together for a common purpose (Zeldin, Petrokubi, & MacNeil, 2008).

In many youth organizations today, young people are being asked to take on responsible roles (Family and Youth Services Bureau, 2002). According to Safrit (2008), "engaging teens in meaningful leadership roles has become a major focus of many contemporary not-for-profit organizations. Today's cultural and political climates demand that community-based organizations approach youth not as mere recipients of programs, nor even as mere resources in program development, but rather as valued and equal partners in the holistic program development, implementation, and evaluation process" (p. 102). Barnett and Brennan (2008) stated that youth volunteerism is greatly shaped by positive and encouraging adults, and that adults may have the "largest impact overall on youth volunteerism" (p. 46). The adult evaluation findings suggested that prior to

this performance arts project, "The adults carried the burden" and that "more adults were leading the fund-raising efforts with few youth partners assisting." Another noted "the adults in the program pretty much told the youth members . . . what to do (and how to do it.)"

Not surprisingly, when adults and community organizations were open to, and in support of, youth volunteerism, youth were most likely to choose to become active (Barnett & Brennan, 2008). Safrit (2008) believed that "positive engagement is the most fundamental aspect of effectively working with teens as partners and volunteers in not-for profit organizations" (p. 106). He reiterated the importance of actively listening to and truly valuing the ideas and concerns of teens, even if an idea does not immediately resonate with adults.

The interactive dinner theatre provided an environment for a successful youth/adult partnership. Both were equally responsible. The theatre project was organized so that each person had a specific role, thus developing autonomy for everyone to use their skills and creativity within that structure, and respecting the value each person brought to the program.

Youth and Adults Benefited

In addition to making 4-H more visible in the community, the two performances of the theatre production yielded more than \$1,500 to support the local 4-H program, and provided a stage upon which young people moved toward the outcomes of the five C's: competence, character, connection, confidence, and caring. During the interactive dinner theatre, all volunteer cast members had the opportunity to discover individual skills, practice public speaking, and take a risk in a safe environment. A mother observed the development of her child's self-assurance and commented, "my son grew in

confidence during his time practicing and performing.” They also planned a community dinner service, developed a sense of commitment, and learned responsibility to a larger team.

Research has shown that youth benefit from partnerships when adults see them as individuals who are competent and able to contribute to important decisions. As a result of participating in the interactive dinner theatre, adults were able to experience the positive contribution the youth brought to the project. After the dinner theater, all adult survey respondents observed that youth benefited from the partnership with adults. Project volunteers understood the importance of this opportunity for youth/adult partnerships to flourish. One shared, “this was a great venue to have young members learn to work with adults in a safe and fun environment that gave these youth an opportunity to walk away (with) a feeling of accomplishment.” According to another, “These kids would not have been able to have the experience of this (success) without all the adult help.”

Eighty-three percent of the adults surveyed observed that other adults also benefited from a partnership with youth during this project. One adult said, “Watching each adult smile with the achievements the (youth) make, warms your heart.” The value of listening, especially to youth, is evident in another participant’s observation: “Our theatre director was good when it came to listening to children about changes that would enhance the play...(which) could have been a personal issue for them...but they really worked well with listening and working together as a team.” Adults are developing greater acceptance of youth in community engagement roles, as stated by one adult, “...the kids should be taking the lead and making some of the decisions with the adults providing guidance.”

The importance of equal partnership was made obvious when youth and adults relied on one another. As one youth member noted, “There were times when adults needed help with their lines and the kids would help the adults out. And sometimes when the kids needed help with their lines, the adults helped the kids out.”

Adults also saw the benefit of youth/adult partnerships. As one participant stated, “I experienced the youth members and adults coming together – especially when things needed to get done like preparing decorations and serving food. Members and adults were equal partners in this. It was especially great at the end of the play to see the results of how everyone came together. The project brought people together.”

The interactive dinner theatre created a venue for diverse youth with different interests to volunteer for a common purpose. Youth cast members ranged from age 13 to 19, and most had little or no acting experience. Some were involved with the 4-H program, others were not. The youth arrived at the community dinner theatre from very different interests. Some youth were involved only in animal science, while others were learning about food and nutrition or leadership. One youth commented that she “would never have had the opportunity to get to know people who were so different,” from her if she had not participated in the dinner theatre. One adult observed, “I saw a lot of opportunities for different clubs to work together as a team toward a combined goal.”

The performance arts project impacted community volunteers, too. One observer said, “It brought people together who wouldn’t have come together otherwise.” Several new volunteers had observed the 4-H program and came forward to contribute time and skill. These episodic

volunteers were valuable to this educational project and the overall program.

The Community Benefited

Barnett and Brennan (2008) discussed the important role volunteerism plays in building community and creating effective adult-youth interaction. The volunteers in this local production helped to play such a role. One said, "I observed some community members come to the (interactive dinner theatre). Several of these adults did not know what 4-H was until that night." The community witnessed youth in expanded roles, as event managers, public speakers, event organizers, fund-raisers, and volunteers in community service. While community and institutional norms have not historically supported youth/adult partnerships (Zeldin, Petrokubi, & MacNeil, 2008), this interactive dinner theatre was successful because adult volunteers believed that youth have the ability and motivation to work collaboratively with adults; youth are accountable for their own actions; and that youth are valued in the community (National 4-H Council, 2002). "Youth/adult partnerships and the active role of youth in community development are currently being explored by researchers in both of the fields of youth development and community development, since both youth and community benefit" (Barnett & Brennan, 2008, p. 41).

Interactive Dinner Theatre

This three-month project was made possible through the unique skills of one resource volunteer with ten years of experience writing, producing and directing interactive theatre. At the request of youth and adults, she authored a 4-H-themed play, entitled *Our Town Picnic*. She understood how to recruit cast members, coordinate rehearsals, conduct marketing, produce a theatre production, and involve volunteers

each step of the way. She was motivated to volunteer by her love for theatre and her desire to share that passion with young people.

The first month of the project was dedicated to creating a script customized for use with the 4-H program. Performers were recruited from within 4-H groups and in the broader community. Rehearsals were scheduled for three hours every week, over the course of two months. The first hour of every rehearsal was dedicated to improvisation to help novice actors gain skills and confidence. The second two hours were dedicated to rehearsing the script. The play was a western murder mystery that included dinner. The actors were seated among audience members, eating, conversing, and dropping an occasional clue as to who might have committed the crime. During the production, each member of the audience had an opportunity to write down their best guess as to who committed the crime and why. At the conclusion of the performance, the actors reviewed the physical and verbal clues with the audience, helping them to solve the mystery. All the correct guesses were collected for a drawing. One name was picked to become a lucky amateur detective and receive a prize.

Concluding Remarks

The dinner theatre production, *Our Town Picnic*, can be adapted for other volunteer organizations. For more information on how to receive a production packet with details on ways to duplicate a successful interactive theatre, please contact the first author. The packet includes information about event promotion, theatre production, and dinner service, such as: (1) a marketing plan, ticket pricing, sale incentive ideas; (2) a production script, methods for recruiting performers, materials to support performers, stage props, instructions for production crew, and timeline for rehearsals

and performances; and (3) food preparation and service plan, and table and theatre décor ideas. The theatre production was publicized through organizational newsletters and the local media. Youth volunteers from 11 4-H clubs sold tickets via phone calls and door-to-door requests. Financial incentives were used to motivate volunteers to sell tickets. Each of the two clubs that sold the highest number of tickets received a \$100 reward.

The success of this local interactive dinner theatre is an example of adult volunteers believing in the contributions youth volunteers bring to a community partnership. Youth and adults agreed to work together and had mutual decision-making roles. The theatre project was organized so that each person had a specific role, thus developing autonomy for everyone to use their skills and creativity within that structure, and respecting the value each person brings to the program.

The dinner theatre did not require professional actors, a professional production crew, or banquet caterers to be successful. It required dedicated youth and adult volunteers who agreed to work together and were committed to making it happen. The best practices of youth volunteerism, youth engagement, and youth/adult partnerships were evident in *Our Town Picnic*.

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