

CREATING A NEW 'STANDING ARMY' OF YOUNG PEOPLE FOR PEACE

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UNDERSTANDING

INTRODUCTION

Youth for Understanding (YFU) was founded as a simple solution to an unbelievably complex problem: how to heal the wounds of the Second World War, and harness the hope of a new generation of young people to ensure that the world would never again come to the brink of extinction.

YFU's history began humbly in the United States in 1951. Understanding that the hardships prevalent in Germany after the Second World War were having devastating effects on the country's young people, placing them in a cycle of bitterness, hopelessness and despair, American minister John Eberly made a proposal to church leaders. He asked to bring teenagers from war-torn Germany to the United States to live with a family and attend high school for a year. By teaching a group of young people how families lived together in the United States, the hope was that they would be motivated to go back to Germany and rebuild the country as a democracy, according to what they had observed while living in the United States.

THE FIRST YFU STUDENTS

In 1951, 75 German teenagers from Germany and Austria were selected by the Army of the Occupation to come to live with American families for one year under the auspices of the US Department of State. The students selected were from the oldest age group not to have been part of the Hitlerjugend, the youth organisation of the Nazi regime. The students were between 15 and 18 years old and, as it became apparent, this was exactly the age group that seemed to be most able to participate naturally and adjust to the lifestyles and values of a foreign family and community.

Dr Rachel Andresen, Executive Director of the Ann Arbor/Washtenaw Council of Churches, was asked to lend her assistance and help place these first students in American homes on a voluntary basis. In 1952, the Council of Churches received permission to act as the official agency for the programme, which they named Youth for Understanding. Family and community living were at the centre of the YFU international learning experience.

The initial exchanges established the family living experience and provided the impetus for YFU to expand to other parts of the world. YFU now has a global footprint, being active in more than 60 countries. Through the exchange experience,

YFU students gain intercultural understanding, learn mutual respect, and develop a sense of social responsibility. Their experience abroad gives them leadership competencies necessary to meet the challenges and benefit from the opportunities of a fast-changing global community.

In 2016, YFU celebrates its 65th anniversary, and proudly claims more than 250,000 alumni. Our ranks include prime ministers, heads of government organisations and leaders in industry and civil society. But equally and importantly, they include everyday citizens who have been instilled with a sense that national borders are not as important as the connections among global citizens. And close to 65 years later, the world may need a YFU prescription more than ever.

A THORNIER DILEMMA

In November 2015, within days of one another, bombings in Beirut and in Paris claimed the lives of close to 175 people. Understandable and appropriate expressions of support flooded into France as scenes of one of the world's most iconic cities flashed across screens, onto the web and through mobile devices. As vigils were held, peace activists in the United States and elsewhere quietly asked an important question: 'Where is the mourning for Lebanon?' How could a similar heinous act provide global support for one group of people and not another?

The YFU youth movement started at the end of what many had hoped would be the last great world conflict. Many more traditional wars would follow, but perhaps this new era of 'incident terrorism', in which disparate groups can and do strike any place and at any time, has created a thornier dilemma, but one in which the global engagement of young people with communities is still the answer.

THE HEART OF CONFLICT

Dr Andresen was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1973 for her work in uniting young people and communities. According to the Alfred Nobel's will, which established the recognition, the Peace Prize will be awarded "to the person who shall have done the most or the best work for fraternity between nations, for the abolition or reduction of standing armies and for the holding and promotion of peace congresses."

One of the central challenges for today's young people is that standing armies are not the pre-eminent threat to a peaceful co-existence. But while this is certainly the case, the heart of conflict has not changed all that much: conflict and terror exist when people move from a place of fear to a place of hatred to a place of violent action.

Paris and Beirut, and countless other cities, are victims of those who believe a way of life is threatened or that their values are not shared or at least respected. In this frame, young people are facing a future where conflict is resolved not through traditional methods of discourse, and when that fails, conventional warfare, but rather are subject to random acts of terrorism, destabilising the world and causing some to retreat into hyper-nationalist views that impede a much broader agenda for peace.

People to people exchanges are also about breaking down walls. When participants from one culture are courageous enough to leave the safety net of their home culture to experience that of another, the by-products are increased understanding, tolerance and increased skills for dialogue and negotiation.

In 2013, I met a young man named Rami, who was to come to the United States from the Palestinian Territory. He applied to the US Department of State's Kennedy-Lugar Youth Exchange and Study (YES) Program, which was founded by the late Senator Edward Kennedy and then-Senator Richard Lugar after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, to provide scholarships for high school students from countries with significant Muslim populations to spend up to one academic year in the United States. The simple premise was this: if young people could see that the American people were not the stereotypical manifestation of 'evil', then perhaps future 9/11s could be prevented.

Rami was to be placed at a rural school district in the US state of Pennsylvania. When the school reviewed his application, they noted that he had listed Occupied Palestine as his country of origin. Soon there was a public expression of concern that perhaps this young man would be anti-Semitic or somehow not fit into the community. I was very proud that YFU fought back in the media, and Rami was ultimately placed in the community, spending a very successful year explaining his life, his viewpoints and his desire for peace. Shortly after his return, Rami's region was bombed. I emailed him to find out if he was OK. After several days, he emailed back saying that he was fine but could not understand how a nation that he had come to consider his second home (the United States) could support policies that, in his opinion, supported the bombing. My response was that I could only hope that his year in the United States has taught him that the people of nations and government policies were two different things, and asked him to hold on to the belief that the US government held a particular position, but not all Americans. He said he would have to reflect on that. How many more young people like Rami are out there that could benefit from being able to cut through the media clutter? What might happen if we created 'cultural armies' of young people versus standing armies? The impact could be profound.

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'A CALL TO LEAD'

David Gergen, Professor of Public Service and Co-Director of the Center for Public Leadership at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government, writes in the World Economic Forum's 'Outlook on the Global Agenda 2015' that our world today "... looks in vain for strong leadership" to tackle the planet's great and many challenges.¹ Gergen notes that, "From the US to Europe and Asia, there's an agreement that having a 'global perspective' is the number one skill for any strong leader" today. He adds that collaboration and communication round out the top three traits most needed to bring a fractured world together: "We need moral, effective leadership, collaborating and communicating across boundaries - business, non-profit, and political leaders all have a role to play."

If Gergen's antidote is correct, how do we create such leaders to tackle the great issues of the day? It is often said that each generation looks to the next to solve the problems they could not resolve in their own lifetime. Civil society organisations (CSOs) such as YFU, and many others, must find increased pathways for young people to communicate, collaborate and gain a global perspective.

1 'Outlook on the Global Agenda', World Economic Forum, 2015.

When Dr Andresen began YFU six decades ago, the world was a simpler place. Students travelled on boats across the ocean to live with host families. There were few rules of engagement then. There were no governmental offices that monitored regulations. Students wrote letters home to update their parents on their experience abroad, and, if they were lucky, called home once during the experience, often to arrange a reunion time for when they would arrive back home. Schools accepted young people because a local citizen wanted to have their exchange son or daughter attend. And technology most likely referred to a car, not a mobile device.

In today's hyper-connected world, students have access to volumes of information and can almost in real time gain insights into events and activities that are shaping global cultures. But technology does not provide a filter for bias and misinformation. Only through deep engagement - people to people - can disparate cultures understand one another.

Today's young people must have access to forums that provide deep engagement and youth-led dialogue. I will always believe that traditional exchanges provide the best vehicle for such dialogue, but there are barriers to entry for too many young people, including, but not limited to:

- 1) Cost: Increased costs of travel, housing and basic living expenditures have priced all but the affluent or those who receive financial assistance out of engaging in traditional exchange. Those organisations that offer cheaper exchanges often cut corners on safety and support for young people.
- 2) Protectionism: Parents and guardians are understandably concerned about allowing young people to travel and live in what seems like an increasingly volatile world. Parents who are highly involved in every aspect of a child's life - sometimes referred to as 'helicopter parents' - often cannot take the leap of faith of allowing young people to go abroad to a culture that is not their own.
- 3) Crowded educational requirements: In many countries, mandatory curricula make it appear difficult for young people to experience another culture for long periods of time. In the US system, a proliferation of sports, cultural and other extra-curricular activities tie young people to increased schedules that many adults could not maintain in years past.

NOW WHAT?

If we believe that the world's future depends on interconnected citizens with an ability to see the benefits of different cultures, then we must find ways to allow the next generation to interact with those who may appear as the other. Just as the YES Program was created with a belief that Muslim-based cultures must understand Judeo-Christian cultures, and vice versa, and in an era when many nations are no longer defined by religious traditions at all, we must create vehicles for young people to dialogue and to take those skills into their adult lives when they become heads of state, heads of corporations, heads of families or simply everyday citizens.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A hyper-connected world provides several potential solutions:

- 1) YFU has just embarked on its first ‘Virtual Exchange’ programme, harnessing the power of social media and technology to provide an ongoing dialogue among young people of different cultures. Meeting young people where they most are living, YFU’s programme is looking at curating conversations through social media and online platforms, but with the pathway of that conversation mostly managed by young people themselves. Key questions here include what are young people interested in talking about, and how can their imagination and interest help to reduce barriers and increase understanding? Can we break through the packed educational agendas in schools to be a partner in delivering curricular needs through youth dialogue? If so, could this be one avenue for young people to realise they are more alike than different? YFU is starting a pilot programme with the poorest school in New York City. The principal there, who also happens to be a YFU Trustee, posited that impoverished children in New York are a different form of refugee. We will attempt to link them up with young people in the Middle East and North Africa region, who are experiencing great upheaval and refugee status, to explore similarities, in the hope that the adult versions of these young people might contribute to a safer planet.
- 2) Corporations and individuals must step forward to provide resources to allow increased participation in traditional exchanges. Not only will these help create the workforce most needed in an increasing global society; the return on investment will also be far greater than the cost of training adults in intercultural competencies later on.
- 3) Governments must promote a platform of intercultural engagement in societies and schools, encouraging an examination of other cultures to provide greater global security.
- 4) CSOs that care about intercultural engagement must find new ways to link young people in dynamic dialogue and work in partnership with others to reduce the barriers to entry.

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Dr Andresen answered the call after the Second World War. In one of her speeches, she recalls being in Amsterdam when the lights were turned on again. She notes, “The work of YFU is ensure that the lights never go out again.” That must be a shared mission if the next generation has a shot at fulfilling that promise.