

Best of the NETWORKER

Feature Articles from Past Issues

The Northwest Youth Networker; newsletter of the [Northwest Network for Youth](#), edited by [Jerry Fest](#) of the [InterNetwork for Youth](#)

February 2009, Issues 38-42

[Subscribe Here](#)

Note: some links from older issues may be expired

MY SYMPOSIUM

By Jerry Fest



I was going to title this “Symposium ‘09” but the nature of Symposium itself made that feel like a misrepresentation. Co-sponsored by the [National Network for Youth](#) and the [American Bar Association](#), there were so many concurrent workshops, plenary sessions, various meetings, Executive and Youth Leadership Institutes, Homeless Youth and the Law Institute topic areas, and informal networking opportunities, that my annoying inability to be in more than one place at the same time prevents me from describing Symposium as a whole. Noticeably lacking in my description are the numerous events specifically for and by the nearly 60 young people in attendance. I can only recount my personal Symposium experience, which began when I arrived by train from

Philadelphia Saturday evening (January 24th).

As is the case with so many Symposiums of the past, this one was held in Washington DC’s [Omni Shoreham](#) hotel. It is a beautiful hotel that is worth visiting even if you don’t stay there simply for its history and grandeur. Walking into the enormous chandeliered lobby impressed me as it always does, brought back memories of Symposiums past when I served as the Region X representative to the National Network Board and the National Council for Youth Policy, and stood in stark contrast to the lobbies of the Philadelphia homeless shelters I had visited only the day before.

For me, Symposium began the following day with the Assembly of State/Regional Homeless Youth Networks Meeting, one of the two reasons I was in attendance at Symposium (the second being a workshop presentation). At this meeting I represented the Northwest Network and our affiliated State networks in a discussion of the challenges facing networks today. One of the challenges was readily apparent as only the Northwest Network, California, Hawaii, and Vermont were represented ... though we were joined by representatives from Toronto and St John’s in Canada who wanted to learn more ... about networks in the US (more on our Canadian friends later in this article). Despite the small turnout, we managed to fill 3 hours with discussions on challenges ranging from dues to geography and culture.

Symposium officially kicked off after the Networks meeting with the opening Plenary where the featured speaker was [Michelle “Mickey” McKinney](#). A former “systems kid” herself, Mickey is currently the senior program advisor for the [Children’s Defense Fund](#)’s [Cradle to Prison Pipeline Campaign](#) with over 15 years of professional experience in Child Welfare. This was followed by Regional Meetings where legislative updates and lobbying tips were the primary focus.

Monday began with a morning Plenary featuring keynote speaker [Josh Shipp](#). For me personally, this was one of the best parts of the entire event. Josh was abandoned as a child and grew up in the foster care system. A “troubled” youth by any account, he has turned his experience into a career as a motivational speaker. He was

dynamic, humorous, and most important to me, spot on in his attitude and message (IMHO). The line that I remember best is when he described people's often negative attitudes toward foster kids, and ended by saying:

“If the foster kids in your state suck, it's because *you* suck. And I mean to offend, because I want you to take it that *personally!*”

After the Plenary, I was torn between the Youth Leadership Institute, the Homeless Youth and the Law Institute, a [FYSB](#) briefing, and various workshops. I went the workshop route because of both a specific topic and a specific presenter; Trudee Able-Peterson. Trudee is an old friend and colleague who is currently with [Freeport West/Streetworks Collaborative](#) in Minneapolis, MN, and is internationally recognized as one of the top Outreach/Mobile Youth Work experts on the planet. She co-presented with Steven Serrano from the [Tumbleweed Center for Youth Development](#) in Phoenix Arizona, an agency I also have a great deal of familiarity with and respect for, and the topic was Street Outreach: Trafficking of Youth: How Can Outreach Workers Help? While informative, the sad underlying message of this workshop was that outreach has not yet risen to this challenge.

Monday's luncheon featured Karen Mathis, Executive Director of the [Central European and Eurasian Legal Initiative](#), and past president of the American Bar Association, and Andrew Swain, a peer educator from [Ozone House](#) in Ann Arbor, MI (as well as the traditional hotel rubber chicken). This was followed by another round of workshops, which I had to skip in order to prepare for my own workshop later that afternoon.

My workshop was titled Youth Development for Supervisors: Working with Workers who Work with Youth. The main premise of this workshop is that traditional supervisory structures may need to be modified to support a non-traditional youth work approach such as Youth Development. Based on the attendance at other workshops, I was expecting 20-30 people, so I was caught a bit off guard when there was standing room only (the room was set for 40 people, and I counted at least 50 at one point). I had to wing it a little as some of the interactivity I planned was not possible with a room that crowded, but the feedback I received was positive, so I guess I winged it well ;-). The day ended with the National Network's annual business meeting.

Tuesday's morning Plenary featured Jack Calhoun, past president of the [National Crime Prevention Council](#) where he is credited with revolutionizing crime prevention by shifting its definition to encompass building vital communities that don't produce crime through community and youth involvement. I was then tempted to attend the continuing Homeless Youth and the Law Institute sessions, but another workshop was more relevant to my personal interests. This workshop also featured Trudee Able-Peterson, who was joined by James 'Bo' Bolas, Director of Education for the [Empire State Coalition of Youth and Family Services](#) in New York. However, the real draw for me at this workshop was the third presenter, Dr. Walter Specht from the [International Society of Mobile Youth Work](#) who is known as the Father of Street Outreach in Germany. The workshop was titled; A Perspective and Discussion of US and Global Homeless Youth Services, and discussed the many things that the US and the international community have to learn from each other specifically in the area of mobile youth work (a more international term for street outreach). Most exciting was the discussion of bringing a future International Symposium to the United States.

As an aside, I had the opportunity (OK, I *made* the opportunity ... if I can't reach out to an outreach worker I wouldn't be much of an outreach worker myself ...) to talk to Dr. Specht later in the conference. The most fascinating part of our talk had nothing to do with outreach, though. He guessed from my name (Fest) that my ancestry was German and asked if I knew what part of Germany I was from. When I replied that I thought it might be the area around Pforzheim (a town in the Black Forest region), he recounted an experience he had as a child. He was 6 years old when the British bombed Pforzheim off the map in 1944. He lived about 10 miles north of the city, and remembers running through the streets with his mother to the shelters when the air raid sirens sounded. On the way to the shelter he could see the targeting flares falling by parachute, and when they left the shelter he remembered the sky being blood red and Pforzheim in the distance burning and exploding in a

series of fireballs rising into the night. He also remembers being confused by the fear and sadness of the adults because, in his 6 year old mind, the flares and the fireballs in the darkness was the most exhilarating, beautiful thing he had ever seen. Being a student of both children and history, that's the part of our conversation I'll remember the most.

Tuesday's luncheon was hotel rubber chicken version II, and featured David Plouffe, the campaign manager for Obama's 2008 presidential campaign as the keynote, followed by the final round of workshops. My workshop choice was the one presented by the Canadian contingent I mentioned earlier. Rachel Gray from [Eva's Initiatives](#) in Toronto, and Sheldon Pollett from [Choices for Youth](#) in St. John's titled their workshop; From Best Practice to National Response, and described how youth homelessness is being addressed in two very different Canadian urban environments and their efforts to coordinate a national response to the issues. In Canada there has been no national agenda comparable to our federal legislation and pockets of responses have grown independent of each other across the nation. Their efforts over the past few years to connect with and learn from each other have revealed that even though communities responded to the issue independently, they developed similar responses not through collaboration, but through independent discovery of core approaches that work. I had met Mr. Pollett before when I was doing some training in Calgary, Alberta a few years back, so in addition to the workshop I had the chance to reconnect and see how far Canadian services have come over the past few years.

Tuesday night marked the final official event of Symposium, the Annual Awards Celebration. This year, instead of holding the celebration in the hotel, attendees were bussed to Capitol Hill for a Congressional Reception. We heard from two members of Congress and 3 young people before the awards ceremony, which was held in a Senate Office Building overlooking the Capital.

Symposium is held in Washington DC every year in order to afford National Network members the opportunity to meet with their Congressional representatives and advocate for youth. Wednesday opened with a "Hill Day" rally, followed by everyone scattering to the hill to make certain that the needs of runaway and homeless youth stayed on their representative's radar.

It had been in the neighborhood of a decade since I had last attended Symposium, and I was very pleased to see that my memories of Symposium were surpassed by my experiences this year. It was a full and valuable agenda and I was glad to have had the opportunity to attend, and the value I observed leads me to conclude with a bit of a:

SOAPBOX

FACT: Without the work of the National Network, as well as the Regional/State Networks, federal legislation in support of runaway and homeless youth may not have been reauthorized, or at least not with all the provisions it currently has.

FACT: 10,000 voices shouting independently are not as strong as a lesser number shouting as one.

FACT: When Network's lobby on behalf of runaway and homeless youth, you can bet that Congress looks at membership size. How closely they listen is determined by how many members a network represents.

FACT: The National Network's membership, as is the membership of regional and state networks, is small compared to other national advocacy groups. It does not even have all of the federally funded Basic Center, Transitional Living, and Street Outreach programs as dues-paying members. This lack of membership weakens the Network's efforts by restricting its resources and limiting the volume of its voice on Capitol Hill.



It's easy as a program to cut membership dues out of your budget, particularly in tough financial times. But it is, in my opinion, a false economy fraught with danger. Your interests are being represented by the Network whether you pay dues or not, so by not joining you are accepting a free ride while undermining your voice. Today, more than ever, we need a voice that speaks as one and that voice needs to be strong. We need to join together to show our nation how many people care about runaway and homeless youth. Not joining sends the opposite message, that these kids just aren't that much of a concern. If you haven't joined or have dropped out of your state, regional and, especially the National Network, I beg you to reconsider. If you know of an agency that isn't currently a member, reach out and apply peer pressure. In today's tough economic times, Benjamin Franklin's words may be the best argument for freeing up the funds to pay your dues ... "We must *hang together* ... else, we shall most assuredly *hang separately*."

Hello. My Name is Inigo Montoya ...

By Jerry Fest

Every fan of [The Princess Bride](#)* just said out loud, "You killed my father, prepare to die!" It's one of the most significant lines from the movie, and is so well known and loved that it even appears on T-shirts ...



such as the one on the left, which I purchased at Thinkgeek.com (click on it and you can get one too!). You'll notice, however, that the shirt is only available in black. Not much of a problem here in Portland during the winter, or even during my recent trip to Philadelphia and Washington DC where it was cold and snowy. But when I arrived in Santa Monica I discovered that they have this strange, glowing orb in the sky burning with fire, and walking around in that black shirt I started getting mighty hot. I decided to wander into a nearby coffee shop for a nice iced mocha.



I got in line behind 3 men who turned out to be a single group. Oddly enough, all 3 of them were named Mike. It turned into this hilarious, confusing exchange as the barista would ask for their name after each order, and each of them would say "Mike" ... with the 3rd man simply saying; "I'll have what Mike's having!"

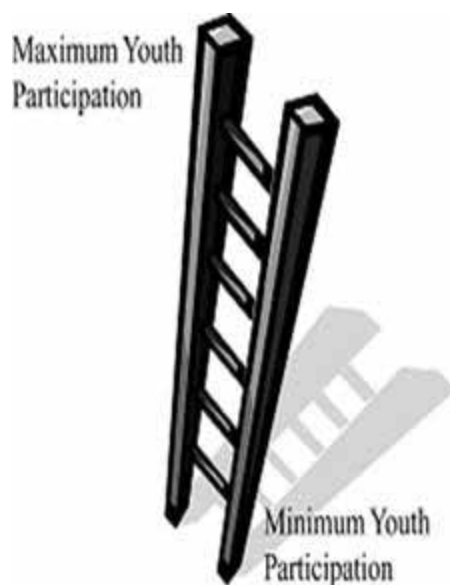
When it came my turn to order, I was prepared with what I thought would be a fun lame joke. I was going to say my name was Mike, too ... which I fully expected might actually make the barista's head explode. You can imagine my disappointment when I ordered and she didn't ask my name. I supposed they only need that information when serving a group, so I sat down to wait for my drink and imagined how much fun my lame joke would have been.

After a few minutes it started to register that someone was yelling in my direction. I snapped out of my musing and turned to see the barista holding up my drink and shouting to get my attention, calling out what she assumed was my name ... Inigo, INIGO! Apparently, instead of asking my name, she had simply read my "nametag." To her, I was Inigo Montoya (yeah, yeah, I know ... you killed my father, prepare to die!).

This was a classic case of misinterpreting something you see (thinking a message T-shirt was a real nametag), missing the cultural reference (the barista had obviously never seen The Princess Bride), and operating on a false assumption (my name is *not* Inigo). And these things don't just happen between strangers in coffee shops ... they happen in youth services every day.

Young people we do not know show up and we see how they are dressed, or their mannerisms, or the language they use, and we make assumptions about them. Even worse, sometimes their file shows up first and we make our assumptions based on the assumptions of others. Maybe we see a red bandana and assume they are gang affiliated ... when it's possible they found a red bandana on the street and just want to keep the sweat out of their eyes. Maybe we see them being quick to anger and assume they are aggressive and violent ... when it's possible they are scared to death and trying to survive in a violent culture and being quick to anger is how they keep themselves safe. The point being that there's only one way to *really* know a youth, and that's to dedicate time and attention to getting to know them. Reading their file or interpreting their image just doesn't cut it, and can leave you operating on assumptions that are about as true as my name being Inigo. Here's the only safe assumption to make when you meet a young person (or any person, for that matter): Assume that you know nothing about them. Don't metaphorically rely on reading their "nametag." Spend the time to get to know their *real* "name."

* If you haven't seen The Princess Bride ... what are you waiting for? It's a MUST see!



Rethinking the Point and the Promise of Youth Participation

By Jerry Fest

Let me be clear, I will happily stack my youth participation credentials up against anyone's. I implemented the first staff/resident partnership group home model in the nation, was among the first to create paid peer positions for Street Outreach, and was instrumental in bringing young people into the governance structures of both the Northwest and National Networks for Youth. So it is with the goal of increasing and improving young people's participation that I say it may be time to rethink our efforts, because frankly I feel we are too often missing both the point and the promise of youth participation.

Let's start with the point. Why do we support youth participation? To a degree it's a matter of both consumer rights and program excellence. Just as with other systems, we benefit from having structures that allow for consumer feedback and guidance. But this is actually just a beneficial side-effect of youth participation. The real reason we incorporate it into our programming is that it is an important element of Youth Development. Meaningful Participation is one of the 3 primary Protective Factors* that fosters innate resilience, helping young people to overcome challenges and promoting healthy development. So the point is not what youth participation does for us or our programs, it's what participation does for the young person participating. This, in my opinion, is the reason why the people who often benefit the most from peer counseling programs are the peer counselors.

Now let's look at the promise. Young people are innovative, open-minded, and enthusiastic. They are present-minded and ready to devote enormous amounts of energy to projects and causes they care about. They are also experts on themselves and their world, and we do them a disservice if we don't utilize their expertise as we support them in their development. The question is; are we combining the point and the promise in the most effective way to ensure that they, and we, get the most benefit from their participation? Too often, I think not.

I have traveled all over this nation looking at youth participation efforts in a wide variety of agencies, and I have been in countless meetings where the desire for greater youth participation has been discussed. Almost without exception, the strategies I've seen, or the quick response to a desire for greater participation, has relied on some form of governance meeting structure; a decision making executive body such as a board or advisory group. While there are an infinite number of variations, the reality is that our response to youth participation

generally focuses on ways to include young people in our decision making and planning structures. Without challenging the positive aspects, I believe this approach misses both the point and the promise. Why? Consider the following:

The human brain does not fully mature until the mid to late 20's. Specifically, it is the Prefrontal cortex that is the last to develop. This is the part of the brain that controls what we call "executive" functions, such as organizing, setting priorities, strategizing, controlling impulses, and decision-making. This is why adolescents so often seem to have an inability to accurately interpret social cues, are impulsive and inattentive, and exhibit risk-taking behavior while appearing insensitive to the consequences.

So what does this mean for our youth participation strategies, which are heavily dominated by decision making, organizing, and strategic planning bodies like boards and advisory groups? The point of youth participation is missed as our structures only allow a small number of young people to participate (how many youth can sit on your board ... the point is for *every* youth to have an opportunity to meaningfully participate), and the promise is missed as the opportunities we create tap into a young person's *least* developed function.

I'll repeat what I said at the start of this article ... I am not advocating against youth participation, and I'm not even advocating against participation in decision-making structures (although I do believe that most of these structures do not adequately train and inform youth participants prior to their involvement, but that's for another article). What I'm advocating for is the realization that it is not enough to simply have youth representatives to adult structures. When we speak of meaningful participation for young people, we should be discussing opportunities available to *every* youth, allowing them meaningful participation in their own lives and communities. If your answer to the youth participation question is yes, we have youth representatives to our committee, board, or group, it may be valuable to have a deeper discussion of the point and the promise of participation by young people.

* The other two being Caring/Supportive Relationships, and High Expectations



“There’s only two things I hate in this world. People who are intolerant of other people’s cultures and the Dutch.”

By Jerry Fest

The above movie line, from [Austin Powers Goldmember](#), is kind of related to a pet peeve of mine, which I was reminded of recently while watching the news.

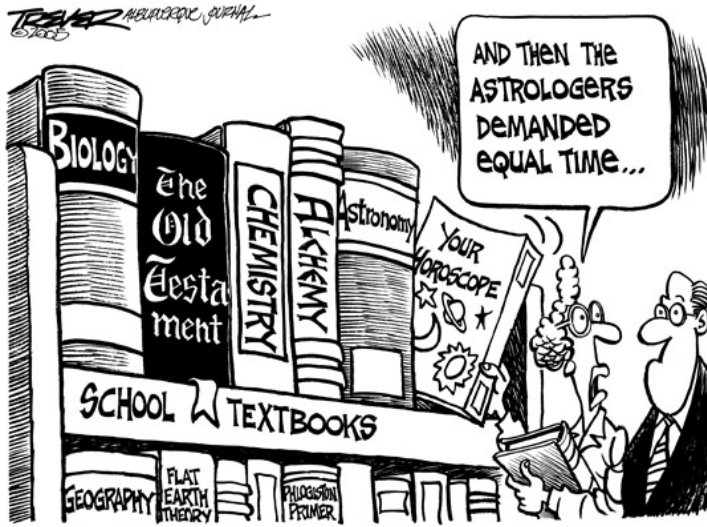
The story being discussed was the [chimpanzee attack](#) in Connecticut. A representative of [PETA](#) was being interviewed, and repeatedly made the point that a chimpanzee’s behavior is similar to that of a child. She then made a revealing statement, in terms of my pet peeve ... she said; “Because they act like children they are often treated inhumanly ...”

Now, I know she wasn’t saying that acting like a child, or being a child, is justification for inhuman treatment. She probably wasn’t even making a reference to the degree to which many children *are* treated inhumanly. But she was, inadvertently, reflecting a societal attitude toward children and youth that would be unacceptable if it targeted any other group or class of people. The news anchor had absolutely no reaction to her statement, but suppose she had said; “Because they act like Hispanics (or insert any other group or class) they are often treated inhumanly ...” I can imagine the anchor might have reacted with; “Huh? What are you saying about Hispanics???”

Our adult society condones ridiculing, dismissing, and, yes, even *hating* non-adults, as the picture of the cap shows (I’m not providing a link, as I really don’t want you to buy one ;-)

example of apparel available that capitalizes on negative attitudes toward young people. Can you imagine someone wearing an “I Hate Africans” or “I Hate Chinese” cap in public? Maybe, but they’d be rapidly ostracized as a racist idiot. But clothing and comments that denigrate children don’t seem to carry quite the same stigma.

Look, I’m not trying to start a campaign. I’m not asking you to cop an attitude every time somebody says “damn kids.” But I am trying to raise the level of awareness concerning our culture’s attitude toward young people. As advocates for youth, it should not be acceptable to us to live in a society that disrespects an entire class of people in ways that would be simply unacceptable if targeting any other class. When we don’t challenge those attitudes we may as well be saying; there’s only two things I hate in this world ... people who are intolerant of other people, and kids!



Op-Ed: On Intelligent Design

Should it be taught as a science?

By Jerry Fest

One of the current education-related debates is whether or not the theory of Intelligent Design should be taught as a science alongside evolution. To offer an opinion on this question it is not necessary for me to reveal my personal spiritual beliefs or even my position on Intelligent Design. Regardless of those beliefs, my answer to the question of whether or not to teach Intelligent Design as a *science* is ‘no’.

Advocates of teaching Intelligent Design as science will say that it is a theory, as valid or as invalid as is

evolution. In that respect they may be correct, for there are only two types of theories; those that have been proven false, and those that have not yet been proven false. There is no such thing as a “proven” theory -- once a theory is proven, it is a *fact*.

Both Intelligent Design and evolution are theories that have not yet been proven false, so why shouldn’t they both be taught as science? The reason has to do with the premises upon which they are based.

Evolution is based on the premise of survival of the fittest. This premise is a scientifically valid one that has been both observed and tested. It is the scientific validity of the *premise* that permits the *theory* to be taught as *science*. Intelligent Design is based on the premise of the limitations of randomness; that is, intelligent life is too miraculous and complex to have developed at random, and therefore intelligent life *itself* is evidence of a greater intelligence.

Here we see why Intelligent Design cannot be taught as science. The premise upon which it is based is not only scientifically questionable; I would say that it is scientifically *invalid*. As sample sizes increase, so does the influence of randomness.

Suppose I walked into the jungle, grabbed the first monkey I saw, and locked him in a room with a typewriter. I then made a bet with you that within 30 minutes that monkey will type at least one line of something legible and coherent on the typewriter. Would you take the bet? Probably, as with the small sample size of a single monkey and only 30 minutes, the likelihood of a coherent line being typed -- or even of the monkey typing at all -- is infinitesimally low. If that monkey did type something coherent, it may even be evidence of intelligence working in that monkey.

But let's change the bet. Now there is not one monkey, but an infinite number of monkeys with an infinite number of typewriters and an infinite period of time available. Would you still take the bet? At this point you'd be a lot more foolish to do so, because the odds of a coherent line being produced by an infinite number of monkeys banging away on an infinite number of typewriters for an infinite period of time are actually quite high, due to the randomness factor. Given that large of a sample size, by randomness alone, some monkey is going to write something -- and that monkey will be no more intelligent than any other monkey.

What makes Intelligent Design appear as a science to its teaching advocates is an earth-centric bias. Earth appears as the single monkey with the single typewriter and 30 minutes. Considering only the small sample size of our humble planet, intelligent life appears so miraculous that randomness alone could not possibly be responsible. But Earth is not the universe. As far as we know, the universe is infinite -- there may even be an infinite *number* of universes. Add that fact to the equation and randomness takes on a much more significant role. Suddenly, as monkeys could type a coherent line, maybe intelligent life *could* develop at random.

This is not to say that the theory of Intelligent Design is invalid. The fact that intelligent life *could* have randomly developed in no way proves that it was *not* created by a greater intelligence. But it does render *unscientific* the principle upon which Intelligent Design is based, making it faith, not science. For this reason, Intelligent Design has its place, but in my opinion, that place is not a science class.