



“Chill: A Community that Cares”

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Alex is a 19 year old organizer with Coleman Advocates in San Francisco, where he is involved with the Youth Making a Change (YMAC) program. Alex used to see the world as a cruel place. As an organizer, his experiences have shown him the power of youth voice and the importance of community. Organizing helped him to change his perspective about life and it inspired him to work for change. No longer is the world a cruel place for Alex. The world is full of love and support from a community that cares.

The World is Cruel

I want you to imagine that you’re floating on a river. What do you see? For me, I used to see the world as a cruel place. In school, the cops were a constant reminder of this cruelty. When people would fight at school, the cops would be there, and they would straight up arrest people without trying to work it out. I had friends who were involved within the juvenile justice system. They told me their experiences. The world is cruel, I would think to myself.

When I was younger, I didn’t care about anything. It was like I was floating through life with no direction, and school wasn’t helping. In regular school, it felt like they were never going to tell me the full story, the full true story. Why are there cops in school? Why do so many of my friends end up going to juvenile detention?

These questions are hard to answer, even for me now. Back then, it was even harder because school wasn’t giving

me the facts about how the world actually works. Making things even harder, regular school wasn't fitting my schedule. So, I started going to continuation school. I didn’t realize it at the time, but this was a big turning point in my life.

Around the time when I started to go to continuation school, I got involved with a program called YMAC (Youth Making a Change). YMAC is a program led by Coleman Advocates that helps young Black and Brown students to develop leadership and organizing skills. As a group of students, we advocate for change at school and in our community.

Every March we go on a camping trip as a whole community. As one of my first experiences with YMAC, the camping trip is what initially got me involved. I remember how much I liked the environment and what it was like to be with others who had a similar experience to my own. I learned about Coleman and what they are all about. It intrigued me to join because as a youth I can relate to the work they do.

At the time, it felt like YMAC was giving me the facts. During the camping trip, we talked about cops in schools and the problems facing youth. I thought about my experiences in regular school and my friends who had been arrested. As I heard other people's stories, I started to relate to them. After that first camping trip, I was on board.

What I Fight For

Over the past few years, I have fought to get cops out of schools while also trying to close juvenile hall. I started to learn about the power that I have once I got more involved. I went to city hall with over 200 other people, and we were able to prevent a school from closing. As a community united, we have power to change things for the better. As an Hispanic person, I have a voice and I believe that everyone should listen to what students of color have to say.

With YMAC, we got a grant for \$10,000 to make a documentary. In it, we talked about our life and school experiences. We talked about the difference between regular school and continuation school. In total, the project took us over a year to finish. Being involved with it taught me a lot about myself and how hard it can be to share my story.

It was hard for me because I don't normally tell people my story. Typically, I just like to keep things to myself. I didn't see the documentary and I don't even want to see it, but I do remember that I did share a lot in the documentary. I also remember how powerful it was to hear other people's stories.

Everybody's story is different. Hearing other young people talk about their experiences makes you feel like you're not the only one. It's almost like you can see a bit of someone else's story in yourself. You're not the only one who has been negatively impacted by the way things are. You're not alone. Or at least this is how it made me feel as I heard other people's stories.

As I got more involved, I learned more about the school-to-prison pipeline, and this was all so interesting to me. I never knew all of this was happening while I was at

regular school. I fought for these issues because it seemed like whatever youth do, they go straight to juvenile hall, which doesn't help them at all. This is not right, and it is not fair. People need to be treated right; they need justice.

My experiences showed me that justice happens when we come together as a community. It is when everybody, Black, White and Brown come together to be united. Organizing has taught me that this can happen. Organizing is about being united. Organizing is about helping others with the struggles they have. Organizing is about supporting each other.

Support and Care

In organizing there's always someone there for you 24/7. There is someone constantly caring for you. There will be bumps on the road, but there's always people that are going to hold you. Being an organizer is for people who are trying to constantly be better while also trying to help others be better.

I think everyone should experience what it is like to be supported. People deserve to have the mentality that no matter what you do, people are going to be there for you. I am so thankful to people like Ashley (a YMAC staff organizer) because she has always made me feel supported. In organizing there are always people that are going to be there for you, always supporting you.

For me, I wouldn't be the person I am today without my experiences as an organizer. Because of organizing, I learned to be more humane. Before becoming an organizer, I didn't care about anything. That all changed because of my organizing. It changed because people were there for me and this turned me into a more loving type of person. Organizing means that I'll be there for you, no matter what.

I used to see myself as a bad person, but now I'm more chill. I'm more relaxed, and I am more focused. I feel like I have a main point in life, and this makes me feel like I know where I'm going. It feels like I'm floating on a river and the sun is shining. I feel supported and I feel the love. For me, my main point in life is to help other young

people to be in a better position at school, while also following my dreams of being a mechanic.

My Dreams

I have dreams, but I know there will be bumps in the road. Bumps in the road or rocks in a river, life is full of challenges. I have another job on top of this. It can make it difficult to go to meetings because after work I'm fried. Between school, my job and helping my mom, life can get in the way; but I don't let it stop me.

I remember what it was like when we lost one of our staff at YMAC. It was intense because less staff meant that we had to cut how many schools we could engage with. It was stressful for me, and school was stressful too. This was a big bump in the road, but Ashley helped me to get through it. She was there for me. She advocated for me and so many others.

This experience taught me that you have to remain calm when everything feels like it is falling apart. I try to always keep myself calm. I do this because I know there's always going to be other people stressing about things. By being calm or acting like you're calm, this helps to make sure that everyone might feel the same way.

Rather than see the world as a cruel place, I would say that things feel pretty chill now. I'm in college and am currently taking a personal finance class. Our teacher gave us a project to make a board game for 9 to 11 year olds about savings and budgeting. For me, this feels practical, like it might actually help someone. I got a 95/100, and it makes me proud because it feels like I am one step closer to achieving my dreams.

I like working on cars. In the future, I plan on becoming a mechanic, and I would love to be able to give back to the community that has given me so much. I wouldn't be who I am today without the love and support that people like Ashley and so many others have shown me. I want to support others in this way because they deserve to see the world in a positive light too. ♦

About this Project

This essay was produced as part of a project with the Alliance for Educational Justice (AEJ) and the Community Based and Participatory Research Course taught by Professor Mark R. Warren at the McCormack Graduate School at the University of Massachusetts Boston.

The mission of the Youth Justice Corps (YJC) of the Alliance for Educational Justice (AEJ) is to support young people to develop as organizers and leaders of their peers in their local schools, communities and youth organizing groups. The program provides political education and organizing skills training and connects these emerging youth leaders across the country. The young people are typically youth of color from low-income communities attending secondary schools.

Doctoral students collected the stories of young people leading education justice organizing efforts in their local communities.

These stories are posted on peoplethinktank.us, the website of the People's Think Tank. PTT is a network of thought leaders from over forty community, parent and youth organizing groups, national alliances, and allied organizations committed to building knowledge to support movements for racial equity, educational and social justice, and community liberation, fiscally sponsored by the Schott Foundation for Public Education. For more information on other projects, check out [@peoplethinktank](#) (Instagram), and [@4edjustice](#) (Instagram).



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