



How I Serve: Lessons from a Youth Organizer and Advocate

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Julia is a 16 year old high school student involved in social justice reform. She took inspiration from her family who encouraged her to be a social activist. Her areas of advocacy include educational, social and immigration justice reforms. For the past three years, she has learned about these issues while participating in various social justice programs. After learning about the issues, she eventually joined Vietlead and the Youth Justice Corps (YJC). Using her personal ambition and training, she hopes to empower youth organizers to become more socio-politically aware of their surroundings.

Humble Beginnings: A New Journey

I am an 11th grade high school student interested in social justice reform. I have been involved with the Youth Justice Corps (YJC) for a few years and am a community organizer. I developed an interest in social justice reform due to my informal support and community at-large. They educated me on various social policies and how I can help through advocacy (educational justice and community organizing). The first lesson my YJC leader taught me was to be more aware of my environment. We had a series of workshops, readings and advocacy training, and I used that to become more active in my community.

My family raised me to be socially, culturally, and politically aware. It helped me to pay attention to current events and YJC helped me understand how those events affected my life. I got to go to a national meeting of the Alliance for Educational Justice in Colorado. We had opportunities to hear everyone's stories, take different workshops and bond with other people in our program. It

was good to see my peers working on similar projects and we bonded over those shared experiences.

Experience and Perspectives

Through learning and involvement I realized that things I didn't think about in the past actually do influence me. It was an aha moment for me when I realized that things in the news were not just a "them" problem but a "we" problem. It really galvanized me to take interest and delve deeper into certain issues like women's rights in the workplace, pay equality, abortion rights and human rights. My perspectives on these issues have changed over the years as I became more knowledgeable and matured as a woman.

Since I cannot change the world or everyone's thinking, I had to learn to focus on the things I can control. One thing I can control is how I act in society and the issues/causes I study. I also understand that not all change happens overnight and not all gestures have to be grand. There are tiny things that I can do, on a local level,

to impact the issues. For example, spreading the word on upcoming protests and why those protests happen. Educating young people on why they should pay attention to social justice issues and showing them how to get involved. Organizing is all about the background work, versus what is visible in the media. It is the little steps that people do not really see. For example, the first protest I went too was anxiety inducing. There were a lot of people there and it was loud and some bystanders were honking their horns. However, the issues were something I cared deeply about so it did not discourage me from going back.

YJC helps with brainstorming ideas that will engage young people and promote youth advocacy. There is a lot of behind the scenes planning that goes into arranging events around these issues. I am more comfortable working behind the camera than in front of it. I enjoy getting signatures for a petition, speaking with local leaders to get permits for demonstrations and the overall planning of events. It is my way of contributing to the larger picture of social justice advocacy and reform. An individual event may not change the world alone, but it can spark interest and curiosity about what is possible. I hope to have an impact on the communities I serve. If possible, I would like to influence administrative changes that could have a real impact.

Fresh Eyes: An Advocate's Agenda

Educational reform is another area that is important. In my school, some teachers do not teach both sides of history. For example, our history classes just discuss slavery and the civil rights movement without mentioning the context and consequences of it. I feel that this is a disservice to us because we are excluded from the full reality of history, a reality that needs to be fixed. Some teachers don't teach the stuff they should be teaching, or they just don't teach at all. So, it doesn't really prepare us for anything. I find that this leads to another social justice issue, the school-to-prison pipeline.

If students are not prepared to join the workforce after high school, they may be forced into other lifestyles. These lifestyles often lead to crime and addiction, thus promoting the school-to-prison pipeline. I would like to

see an education system that promotes education equality and critical thinking, a liberatory education. It would give students an opportunity to engage with the topics and make the words on the pages come alive. Students would have greater interest in their learning, and it would help them in future pursuits, such as college.

Another issue is oppressive bathroom policies. In my school, students are not allowed to use the bathroom 10 minutes before or after class begins or ends. Sometimes they lock the bathroom during class periods. The teachers say this policy stops kids from skipping class and eliminates students' ability to smoke or do other things in the bathrooms. But it can make students uncomfortable if they need to regularly use the bathroom due to medical reasons. A student should not have to "hope that a bathroom is open". For female students, it can cause urinary tract infections and prevent them from maintaining personal hygiene. Although I have not been personally affected by this policy, I try to avoid using the facilities during school hours. I am in school for six and a half hours a day and it is tough to not use the bathroom all day.

There is a lot of diversity in my school. We have students of various races, ethnicities and cultural backgrounds. Aside from academics and issues within school, a lot of students are nervous about the Trump administrations immigration policy. We hear stories on the news about Immigration & Customs Enforcement (ICE) showing up at school and detaining students and teachers. I knew I wanted to do something to support my school. However, I did not know exactly what to do or where to begin. My organization had a training called "Know Your Rights" and it dealt with how to engage with law enforcement if approached by ICE. It was intimidating to think about the possibility of interacting with them. However, I felt smarter and empowered after completing the training. I decided to bring this training to my school to educate other students. It was my first time ever doing something of this magnitude and I was concerned about the level of interest in it. My concerns were put to rest when we had a good turnout. We had about 20 or so students express interest, and I was able to put together material for an hour-long training. I think it was a success, and I am proud I was able to do it.

As previously stated, it is those little victories that can go a long way. I do not know if or when the students will ever use the Know Your Rights training. My hope is that they will never encounter an ICE agent. But if they or someone they know ever does, at least they will be prepared. Sometimes, all I can hope is that the work I do will leave an impression. The idea of making a positive contribution to society makes me want to continue in youth organizing after high school. I'm getting to the point where I need to make some life choices. This work has been rewarding and if given the right opportunities, I would consider remaining in the fight.

Challenges and Triumphs

My biggest challenge is learning to speak-up and advocate for myself. It is one thing to discuss issues with your friends and family, but something totally different when you're doing it publicly. My organization placed me in situations that forced me to have a voice. I was nervous about it at first, but noticed things started to change when I was more vocal. However, that newfound skill did not come without its own unique challenges. For example, some people would become very confrontational when I did speak up. I had to learn to deal with that and learn techniques to overcome it.

I think it's easy to forget that I am still a high school junior, despite the social justice issues I'm involved in. Some adults get offended and speak to me in aggressive ways due to my views. But I have slowly begun to learn my advocate voice and how to push back but remain respectful. In the current political environment, confrontation is inevitable, especially when engaging with opposing viewpoints. I recognize that certain conversations need to be had, even if they offend some people. More importantly, I'm understanding my place in the world and the value my experiences have in it. Although I am a minority, I have a unique perspective that can change the world for the better.

Through organizing, I learned my speaking preferences and my style of facilitating workshops. Some people prefer scripts and guided commentary, but my approach is more laid back. I do not like scripts as I find it

easier to speak freely and openly discuss my points. It allows for better engagement with the audience and for them to speak more honestly. Whenever someone expresses a strong viewpoint or is dismissive, it is easier to engage rather than retreat into silence. I realize that people prefer to be "talked too" as opposed to being "talked at" and that helps reduce confrontation. I like creating open and judgment free zones where people do not feel attacked or wrong for their views. I was not sure if I would be able to effectuate change in those early days. But Aiden, my Vietlead organizer, helped me realize that although I had different life experiences, my contributions are still worthy and valuable.

Concerns and Plans for the Future

My only concern is the longevity of our organization. There is a lot of restructuring happening within the federal government and funding sources are being cut. So many organizations are applying for the same grant, and it's competitive. I worry that social justice programs such as this may not be around in the future. There is a clear need for such programs and the benefits they offer to society. But there is equally a lot of disdain for a "woke" society, especially one for the benefit of minorities. I am considering exploring some policy-advocacy opportunities.

Although I am not completely sure, if the program were to end, I would try to stay involved in some other form. For example, I have an interest in grant writing and have looked into programs to learn. If something were to happen, I could become a grant writer for these types of organizations. I also considered law school, but I heard it's hard and people stay up all night and cry. I do not want any part of that, but I have not ruled it out yet. I can be so indecisive, and I am still weighing my options.

No matter what I decide, to do in the future I will always be grateful for the skills I gained as a youth organizer. I've grown a lot as a person, and I developed my activist identity. When I first joined the program 2-3 years ago as an intern, I was the quietest person you ever met. I physically tried hiding myself in the corner to not say a single thing to anyone. So, if I were to look at my old

self, I would be shocked to see my new self leading workshops and organizing. ♦

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](https://www.instagram.com/peoplethinktank) (Instagram), and [@4edjustice](https://www.instagram.com/4edjustice) (Instagram).



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