



Do You Care About Your Community?

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Gary Tang is a 16 year old youth organizer with Youth Together in Oakland, California. Youth together focuses on promoting ethnic studies and student advocacy. In this essay, Gary reflects on how organizing has impacted his life and helped him grow as a leader. Gary explores how his family's cultural values initially contradicted his advocacy. By becoming a youth organizer, however, he discovered his voice for change. He describes how being involved as a leader in Youth Together has helped him become more extroverted, gain confidence, and foster an environment where everyone's voice is heard. Gary highlights how he and his peers faced challenges with adult authority figures not taking youth action and advocacy seriously. Through his journey he emphasizes the importance of community organizing and encouraging others to use their voices collectively for positive change.

Finding My Voice and Encouraging Others

People in my family don't want to speak out on their problems. They don't want to cause more problems by speaking out. In a way, I'm kind of straying from what my family usually does. I'm moving away from what I've been taught to do.

My family came here from China and I was the only one that was born here. There was a lot of prejudice that they grew up in. My parents were raised to not talk back to your elders, to listen to authority figures, and not to talk back to your teachers. Don't speak up to anyone that might be higher than you. They think any opportunity I have is better than what they had.

Before I became an organizer with Youth Together, I was very introverted. I would see a problem and I felt like it's just me. I'm one person. I'm the only one bothered by this, so I'd just brush it off and not say anything. Now I know others are bothered and care about issues too.

One day my friend started to invite me to Youth Together lunch meetings, and I would go to support her. I thought it was hella cool what they were doing, teaching students about standing up for themselves about how to make a difference. Not just complaining about stuff but actually taking action. I didn't take interest in a leadership position at that time because I needed a job. But my friend didn't have a ride to this event she was helping with, so I took her. When I was there behind the scenes, my feeling about joining the organization changed.

It was Martin Luther King Jr. Day, and there was this march taking place. I was able to see behind the scenes of how the event worked and participate in creating icebreakers for an upcoming meeting. Being a part of the meeting creating process allowed me to see how Youth Together can inspire the community. I also saw my friend and her coworkers on this truck chanting and giving speeches and they were actually being heard. I thought it was hella cool. Seeing that inspired me.

At first, I was very introverted and shy, but my mentors at Youth Together helped me get out of my shell. They make me feel heard and seen. They acknowledge my responses and my opinions. The organizers Seanna and Lacey support me and have become like a family.

I recently took on a leadership position where I have to lead a club. It has allowed me to be more vocal. Talking to my peers gives me more confidence. When the organization holds meetings, I hear them and they hear me. I'm not afraid if people disagree with me because I feel that as long as I get my opinion out it might make someone more confident in sharing their opinion as well. In the meetings I lead with other students, I make sure they feel heard and that they are comfortable with sharing their opinions.

Being in Youth Together kind of changed me in a way, I did a whole 180. I'm very extroverted now. I literally talk to random people at my school and spark up a conversation with someone in the cafeteria. Just being nice, which creates a good vibe around school that spreads. If you're nice to someone, that person is in a good mood and they'll be nice to someone else. I even talk to my teachers a lot now, trying to bond with them and giving them feedback. Before I low-key didn't even talk to them. Being nice and learning to advocate for myself has made school more fun. I'm even more vocal at home.

Before, when my parents and I would disagree, they would get a little bit loud and I would just walk away. When I started to speak up, we would still get into arguments. Being from China, they don't really know how things work here. It goes back to what they think about speaking up to authority figures. I didn't give up and started educating them on what I was doing in Youth Together and how it works here. I shared my experiences

and they shared theirs with me. I feel like my parents heard me. I realized that sometimes I have to stick up for myself even when it seems rude. They're pretty chill now. My mom really supports my organizing now. I tell her all about it and, even though she doesn't understand it all, she still listens.

I learned to speak up for myself at home and school through organizing. I want to make an impact where people at my school aren't afraid to speak out and advocate for themselves too.

We May be Young, but Our Voices Matter

A lot of adults see us as a bunch of kids. They automatically think we are messing around. I feel like they undermine our opinions. It's a little discouraging. We work so hard researching a topic or coming up with something, and then adults don't get it.

One example where students didn't get to have our voices heard happened at school recently. Our principal has built a fence around our school. It was the start of the new year and we came back from winter break to see this fence getting built. My first thought was, "That's so ugly." The principal didn't really give a reason, but I did overhear my teachers talking about it. Apparently, they put up the fence for gun safety reasons. There was a shooting incident on campus at our last graduation; but that was between parents, no students were involved. Sometimes there are drive-bys in the neighborhood so guns can be a problem. But I feel like they needed to do something else. At Youth Together, we were talking about the fence and how we feel like we're trapped. It feels like a jail.

In a way, it's dehumanizing. It made me mad because a fence is not going to fix the problem of people coming in. It was disappointing because we have an outside school and there's a lot of nature to walk around in but now they added this fence. It literally feels like we're trapped in here.

We didn't really have time to prep for a protest because they put up the fence in secret, only releasing a statement when we started talking about it. We ended up posting a lot of flyers and parents came to talk to the principal because a lot of students' graduation ceremonies

were ruined. That ugly fence took that moment away from them. But they ignored us, saying it was for our protection.

We knew gun safety and stuff like that were important but they shouldn't have blindsided us with that fence.

Some adults just don't take us seriously, especially when we are in school.

Another time a student club led this walk out to support people in Palestine. The club only had about a classroom of people but through their flyers and posts on Instagram telling people to walk out, they organized a movement in the school. I wasn't in the club. I followed them on Instagram and in one of my classes I shared a table with one of the co-presidents. She asked the teacher if she could tell people in front of class about the walk-out, and some of our teachers were very supportive.

When the walkout happened our principal was there listening to the chants and she was just looking angry. One teacher was hella pressing students about one of the chants, "From the River to the Sea." The teacher just kept asking everyone, "Do you even know from what river to what sea? If you don't, you should go back to class." I thought that's crazy. Why was the teacher out here doing this?

Even with some of the teachers not being supportive, the walk-out was still powerful. Showing up for Palestine shows that, even though we are students, we take these things seriously. Adults need to take us seriously, too.

School Isn't Enough

I just don't like school. There is not enough choice and the day is long. Teachers expect me to have the same energy in my seventh period class that I do in the morning. Sometimes school is too much, but sometimes it's not enough.

My school just started the Ethnic Studies class in my freshman year. I felt it was a little bit unorganized. I didn't take much away from it. I wish my class had a better experience. Everyone in our year brushed it off because we didn't know much about it, to be honest. I felt like it was

only focused on one thing, slavery. It didn't focus on all the other backgrounds. At my school there's a lot of white people but there is a diverse array of other people. I wanted more about my background and other people's backgrounds. I felt like we were just highlighting only certain parts and certain accomplishments.

Teachers seem to have rules they have to follow. They can't talk about political stuff to us because that's not allowed. At my school specifically there are teachers who don't want us to think critically. Students complain that it's a straight curriculum. The classes I'm better in are the ones that allow me to be more independent with my work. We can go at our own pace in that class and there's no rushing. It's my favorite class and my best class.

At Youth Together the premise of our meetings is like an ethnic studies class. We talk about people that were leaders in our community. Since Oakland is such a very diverse community, we have a bunch of leaders we can talk about. We talk about how the Black Panther Party originated in Oakland, about women leaders, Asian leaders, and others too.

I feel like school is very straightforward. At school they just give us packets. They just follow the curriculum and I feel like we don't dive deeper into things that we're actually interested in. In my organization we might be talking about a certain topic at first, but then we go off on subtopics we want to dive deeper into. When we end a meeting we can always come back to the main topic at the next meeting if we feel like there is more to learn and research. It feels like there is more time to learn. At school we can't dive deeper because of the curriculum.

My Community

In Youth Together we want our community to come, learn, and become open-minded. When I'm talking to people about my organization I open with, "Do you care about your community?" They're shocked, but that's what draws them in.

My community is very diverse where I live. There's a lot of people of color, including Asian people, Hispanic people, and Black people. I feel like my area is connected

in some ways. We don't really interact with each other beyond saying hi, but we really appreciate each other.

I don't see my people speaking out or standing up for themselves. I want them to feel represented. That would be really cool. There is power in numbers. I want to be able to bring people together. A group of people showing up and showing that they care about a topic is powerful. Organizing is like bringing in my community or strengthening my community to speak out for themselves. Through organizing I basically educate people on what's going on in the world and give them a safe space. I want everyone to feel like their opinions are being heard and have a space to decide what we should be doing in our community. Bringing in other organizations to work together on common goals can have a large impact. We all might specialize in different areas that need improvement, but we can all agree that there are things that need to be done. By sharing experiences we can accomplish more together. I want people to have a space to be able to speak up about things as a community instead of as an individual.

So let me ask you,

Do you care about your community? ♦

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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