

Inviting Organization

evolution is now and open space

The following pages are reprinted from a collection of stories and resources that are shared freely as a browsable 'online book' at www.michaelherman.com.

Please email any comments or questions to Michael Herman at <mailto:michael@michaelherman.com>.

Thank you, and enjoy!

© Copyright 1998-2002 Michael Herman. All Rights Reserved.

Please do not reprint or distribute without permission and full attribution, including web address (www.michaelherman.com) and complete copyright notice. Permission will be granted gladly if you'll just say what you'd like to copy and where you'd like to share it. <mailto:michael@michaelherman.com>.

Youth Action: Organizing in Open Space

It was late October and too cold to be out without coats, but there we were, pacing in the dark of a parking lot. My good friend and colleague, Brian Reilly (Program Officer, The Johnson Foundation) was fuming about being accidentally locked out of his new house. Personally, I was glad to have the time to talk, so I kept pulling his energy back to his work and what he wanted to do with his role in Sustainable Racine, a whole-community redevelopment project in Racine, Wisconsin. Eventually, we got around to his passion for youth leadership. What emerged over the next many months turns out to be one of my favorite stories of organizing in open space.

In line with his passion for youth leadership, Brian had been talking to a number of young people in the community. He really wanted to get them together and get them more involved in the work of Sustainable Racine. We went round and round in the parking lot...intentions, resources, history, opportunities, intentions, invitations, history, intentions, opportunities...and finally to a plan.

Four weeks later we met again, for the first youth conference, and first Open Space meeting, ever hosted by the Johnson Foundation at their Frank Lloyd Wright-designed Wingspread Conference Center. Thirty-five youth, ages 12-22, came to participate in the four-hour meeting. In true Open Space style, they self-organized and self-managed an agenda of 14 of their most important issues. They captured hand-written proceedings and typed a contact list so that they could keep in touch beyond the meeting.

Though their interests and proposed activities were later clustered into six major areas for future work, the dialogue in the closing circle focused on an immediate opportunity for action and recognition. A 23-site, all-Racine meeting was already scheduled for a Saturday, about six weeks later. With that in mind, the group decided to table their main interests and put all their efforts into getting as many of their peers out to represent the youth perspective at the all-community meetings day. Everyone pledged to contact at least three friends.

An estimated 1,000 people showed up to participate the multi-site dialogues, about 100 of those were youth. Another 3,000 people watched on TV. Afterward, 12 out of 100 people selected for the 'visioning committee' were under 25 years old.

This felt like the first success for the youth group, even as they continued to debate whether they were a 'process' or an 'organization.' By choosing to call themselves 'Youth Action,' they made sure that the debate didn't slow their activity. Another direct result of the first meeting was the emergence of a 'youth art' newsletter.

Going back to that first meeting, one of the major issues for the group was skate boarding. So when the development of a new skateboard park hit the newspapers, some members of the group worked to inject their interests into the discussions of donors, developers, planners and architects. In the end, the youth involvement made the front pages of the local papers and the park location has been moved from its proposed industrial park site, to a more desirable downtown park location.

In May, the group gathered for their second large-group session in Open Space and returned to work on their six main issues: art, internet access, the construction of a youth center, skate boarding sites, sexually transmitted diseases, and environmental issues. They also added an important seventh issue: growing their circle(s).

This second meeting was scheduled from 5:37p to 8:04p, in an effort to remind parental chauffeurs that "whenever it starts is the right time" and "when it's over it's over, and when it's not, it's not." (The first meeting had run over by about 20 minutes, for which a number of folks apparently took some heat.) At this meeting, the group grew to more than 60 members who recommitted themselves to looking into similar projects in other cities and to finding adults and other resources within the Racine area.

When they reconvened in July, still in Open Space, they brought the fruits of their research and resourcing efforts and the group expanded to 75, including some new adult supporters. This meeting was also significant in that two girls in the group did the honors of opening the space. (Brian had facilitated the second open space meeting.)

These girls' leadership efforts and open space facilitation work with the group also earned them an invitation to attend a national conference sponsored by the YMCA Earth Service Corps (a cutting-edge youth led, adult supported, environmental- and service-learning program). There, they knock the socks off of an impressive gathering of youth leaders and adult supporters. Folks were so interested in their stories and successes with Open Space, that a block of time was cleared in the conference schedule so that the girls could demonstrate Open Space Technology. They opened a small space there for the 100+ participants...a little too small a space, actually, for one breakout group that focused on 'race relations,' which could have gone on much longer than the scheduled time available.

Currently, it seems that this group is becoming an important cluster of activity within the overall Sustainable Racine effort. They expect to keep meeting formally, in Open Space, every two months or so, with lots of informal, supporting conversations in between. A special meeting with an architect for their proposed youth center is also in the works, with the support of the Sustainable Racine project office. Finally, efforts also are being made to establish a Racine Chapter of the YMCA Earth Service Corps.

This story's come a long way from that cold parking lot and Brian's three-paragraph invitation, last November. And it may be just beginning. If this is something you'd like to see happen in your community, email Michael Herman, who can connect you with Brian and the youth leaders in Racine. You might also be interested in visiting the YMCA Earth

Service Corps (<http://www.yesc.org>) website or emailing YESC Training Director Charlie Murphy.

UPDATE: August, 1998...this just in from Brian, via email...

"Good news--open space as taught to Earth Service Corps people by Dana and Becky replicates itself. I heard from a woman today who has used it several times in Minneapolis! Funny. As in funny-cool, not funny-ha ha..."

UPDATE: May, 1999

In April, 1999, three youth leaders attended one day of the Chicago Open Space Training Workshop, where they shared their learnings and questions with other leaders. This helped them prepare for a presentation they made at the National Town Hall Meeting on Sustainability, in Detroit, Michigan, in May, where they shared their stories and did a short demonstration of the Open Space Tech process. Work continues on the development of their YESC chapter, currently the largest chapter yet established.