



Exeter

In rural Exeter, young issue-oriented activists hone their skill

01:00 AM EDT on Friday, August 10, 2007

By Brandie M. Jefferson

Journal Staff Writer



Shamin Mohamed Jr., 19, Jade Adebo, 17, Sara Ketabi, 16, and Alyssa Hargrove, 16, study together at Camp Canonicus.

The Providence Journal / Gretchen Ertl
Gretchen Ertl

EXETER — They hear it all the time, but it’s really starting to resonate.

“People say, ‘You are the future,’ ” 16-year-old Alyssa Hargrove said, looking out at about 50 children and young adults spread out in the conference center of Conanicus Camp in Exeter.

It may sound cheesy, the New Jersey resident conceded, “but we really are.”

The group was midway through the week-long Youth United for Global Action camp, a retreat that gives activist-minded young people from around the world tools they can use to organize and motivate their peers back home.

Campers came from across the country, Canada, the Dominican Republic, the United Kingdom and El Salvador for workshops and discussions where they brainstormed about fighting poverty and raising the standard of living for children around the world.

Not your typical summer camp.

But the students who sat in a room surrounded by posters with political definitions — advocacy: to stand up for and argue in favor of a cause; the G8: a working group of the eight most powerful countries in the world — were not typical campers.

“All it takes is one action to make a dream into a reality,” Shamin Mohamed Jr. said.

He would know.

When he was 15, the Toronto resident decided he wanted to do something to make life better for the more than two million children who are infected with or affected by HIV/AIDS worldwide, and to educate all young people about the disease, how it’s transmitted and how it isn’t.

Four years later, the Children’s AIDS Health Program has grown into a worldwide organization that has used the arts, sports and games to empower sick children in South Africa and, later this year, in India to take control of their lives.

Mohamed started down this path because no one else was taking it, he said. “It was a topic I was really interested in, but no one wanted to talk about it.”

He was in good company yesterday afternoon.

In the middle of the room littered with candy wrappers, flip-flops and copies of proposed legislation, members of the group debated how they might effectively engage local in politics, even though it may be eight years until they can cast a ballot.

Clare Ramirez-Raftree, a 10-year-old from Cranston, had been drawing on her legs before settling down with the Education for All act. The aspiring anthropological historian’s favorite activity so far?

“I liked the exploitation workshop.”

Youth United for Global Action, or YUGA as the T-shirts read, is a subset of Warwick-based Plan USA, a philanthropic organization founded in the 1930s to support children whose lives had been disrupted by war.

They organize workshops, demonstrations and circulate petitions, but one thing YUGA does not focus on is fundraising.

“We want young people to know that there’s a lot more to do than raise money,” Laura Brazee, a YUGA coordinator based in Providence.

Participants focus primarily on global poverty, HIV/AIDS, child exploitation and sustainable development; big issues that help some of the students put their own lives into perspective.

“I used to think I was poor,” 17-year-old Albert Saldana said, leaning back in his chair. But learning about global poverty through YUGA, “It just shocked me.”

After feeling frustrated for being one of just a few students at the school improvement seminars he attended, the senior at the Met School in Providence joined three like-minded students to form

Organized Youth for Educational Alternatives. Funded in part by the Bill and Melinda Gates foundation, the group works to help raise the level of discourse between students and administrators at alternative schools.

And like YUGA, Saldana said, “We encourage young people to know that their voices can be heard.”

For more information on Plan USA/YUGA, visit www.planusa.org. For more information on the Children’s AIDS Health Program, visit www.LetsStopAids.org. For more information about Organized Youth for Educational Alternatives, visit www.oYea.info

Exeter

bjeffers@projo.com