

CHAPTER 2

Participating under Unequal Auspices

INTERVIEWING SOME YOUTH VOLUNTEERS who were helping out at a local event, a reporter asks a question that was intended to give a boy a chance to display his generous volunteer spirit:

Reporter: Why are you here today?

Wispy black boy, maybe fourteen years old: I'm involved instead of being out on the streets or instead of taking drugs or doing something illegal.

The wispy boy's response was not a mistake. For poor and minority youth, finding an implicit answer to the question, "Why am I in this group?" was easy: I am slated to do poorly in school and in life, and my after-school group exists for the purpose of helping me defy my conditions. I am a problem. For non-disadvantaged youth, there were other unspoken answers: I am here to help others (and perhaps boost my chances of getting into the college of my choice).¹

Volunteer work was supposed to bring the different types of youth together: even though participants were not equals in the rest of their lives, just getting their hands dirty, doing the work, walking the walk, was supposed to set them on equal footing right now, in the moment. In practice, creating this haven meant learning how to ignore the differences, joining together as equals by leaving the past behind.

This practical solution created its own puzzles and its own form of inequality. It was hard for underprivileged youth to appear entirely civic, self-propelled, and independent, since their programs had to document exactly how much money had been spent on helping them. Disadvantaged youth overheard organizers' constant fundraising efforts, which often included expertly documenting their neediness. Their dependence was publicly visible. It came with a dollar amount. For them, the missions of promoting civic engagement, helping the needy, and transparently documenting their projects' effects blended, often uncomfortably, but sometimes offering surprising insights, almost surreptitiously acquired. If underprivileged youth heard data about poverty and racism, they might see the big picture and feel pride at having beaten the stiff odds, surmounting the obstacles that they faced as members of an unjustly deprived racial or class category.

The non-disadvantaged youth volunteers, in contrast, never heard anyone publicizing the importance of spending money on preventing them from becoming criminals and drug addicts. Their dependence and need for protection was invisible, not subject to public questioning, though one could glimpse, in small, hidden interactions, the dedicated parents on whom they privately, almost secretly depended. According to this second category of youth volunteers, it was urgent that the Empowerment Projects' money be spent in a "civic" way, on helping someone else, not on the volunteers themselves. Many came to the projects hoping to find inspiration, to be touched to the core, deeply transformed. So, initially at least, they might appear to fit the mold of classic volunteers better.

Yet, the non-disadvantaged volunteers, too, had an agenda beyond helping others and seeking inspiration. Admission to a good university is not automatic in the United States, as it is in some other nations; these non-disadvantaged youth had to market themselves to future college admissions offices, using volunteer work to "signal"² that they were good, active, caring, and knowledgeable people. Knowing that they were supposed to feel motivated by pure inspiration and altruism, they nervously questioned themselves and each other about whether they were really involved just to puff up their resumes, to market themselves.

The two sets of youth had different hidden reasons for being there, different sources of pride and shame, different ways of relating to broader political issues, and even different ideas for what community service projects to conduct. The chapter portrays these knots of tensions, showing how social inequality materialized here in a way that may be typical in Empowerment Projects, wherever the implicit rules of engagement for the two distinct sets of volunteers are so very different.

WHAT BRINGS YOU HERE? IMPLICIT ANSWERS

Poor and Minority Youth: I Am Preventing Myself from Becoming a Problem

I kept hearing minority youth making what I thought was a mistake when they described their volunteer work. At first, I thought they misunderstood the question. "Safe Night" was a prophylactically named evening event to provide teens with a safe place to go at night instead of drinking, taking drugs, or having sex. Participants ranged from about eight to fifteen years old.

A middle-aged white volunteer got up in front of the racially mixed group of about 100 youth, passing around construction paper cut-outs in the shape of hands. She asked them to write five things—one on each finger—that they could do to serve their community.

Most gave the standard, expected answers: “Shovel snow for old people, baby-sit, help at a nursing home, go grocery shopping for someone who can’t, help clean up a park.” But many black kids said things like “get a job,” and “do my homework.”

After hearing these apparent misunderstandings numerous times, I saw a striking “pattern in the rug.” These disadvantaged volunteers accurately perceived that they themselves were considered the community problem. Occasionally, impoverished white youth from rural or suburban areas said the same thing. I never heard young people who were neither poor nor minority say it.

Similar prevention programs exist nationwide, in which organizers and youth explain volunteer work in similar terms.

The Dream Shop, an afterschool program for girls age ten to 15 from an impoverished neighborhood in East Dayton [Ohio], is making a dramatic difference in the lives of the participants, reports Cox News Service. The majority of the families living in the census tract where the Dream Shop is based are poor and Appalachian, with grim prospects for the future and a high teen pregnancy rate. Approximately 180 girls have joined the Dream Shop since it started. . . . Many work on *community service projects* [my italics—notice the very next sentence]. “We haven’t had a single pregnancy yet, and all the girls are still in school,” said [an organizer]. The girls in Dream Shop are educated about a range of health issues, including smoking, dental hygiene and sexuality. “That’s the thing I like about the Dream Shop. It’s like kept me off the street. It’s easy to say ‘no’ whenever I need to,” said Samantha Brower, 15.³

A similar inspiration fuels prevention programs around the country. Here is one from Nevada, where a school district had started a mariachi band, so students could learn to play this kind of Mexican folk music. Critics said the program was too expensive:

Supporters dismiss the critics. They say the program has the power to keep at-risk students—many of whom are Latino—engaged in school . . .

Javier Trujillo, project coordinator for mariachi instruction in the Clark County School District, said \$25,000 was “the average price to keep a juvenile in the prison system per year. Now you apply that same amount of money to education⁴—you’re impacting thousands of student lives.” . . .

“I’m not on the streets trying to do bad things,” said [a student, Edsel] Lemus, who plays the vihuela, a guitar-shaped lute . . . several students boosted their grades . . .

“There are not that many opportunities for at-risk Hispanic kids to be successful,” [the band’s leader said].⁵

Many schools no longer automatically receive funds for music classes, so they have to compete for grants.⁶ Of course, the young musicians, like the young volunteers, may, as a by-product, learn to take pleasure in the music, or the volunteering. Sensual pleasure in the present—in the music itself—may very well overtake the music’s future-oriented utility.⁷ However, as these multiple excerpts from field work show, the public message was very hard to ignore since it was reaffirmed so frequently, by many voices. The sensual feel in the present and the public justifications about the distant future, both felt real.

Seeing the pattern in the rug is easiest when the pattern is interrupted: At Casa Latina, an after-school program for Spanish-speaking 11–14-year-olds, the adult leader Laura sometimes invited youth to help solve the *world’s* problems, rather than only treating the young people as the problem themselves. One day, Laura asked her teens to write messages on a banner that she was going to bring to a pro-bicycle, anti-car rally. When she, and I, and the other volunteers heard this interaction, the jolt of recognition of the absent common pattern made us all laugh aloud:

Laura had written on the banner “La Tierra = La Vida” [“The Earth = Life”] and she also handed out a list of ten incriminating “Facts about the Car”—like pollution, depletion of natural resources, poor working conditions for auto workers, and sprawl.

Most of the kids misunderstood her point. They wrote and drew statements [in Spanish] like “don’t drive drunk,” “don’t ride a bike drunk,” “don’t smoke while riding a bike,” or even, “ride a bike to lost weight!”

Laura’s teens expected to be asked to prevent themselves from becoming problems—not to get drunk, fat, or high. They did not expect an invitation to act as independent civic equals who would protest the world’s problems, and not just fix their own personal problems. They were so unprepared for Laura’s invitation, they misinterpreted it. Everyone knew, but could not say that, whether skating, singing, or fishing (as in other programs nationwide), the funding came with the purpose of preventing them from becoming problems. Without knowing this prediction of future disaster, one could not participate competently in the programs. It was what brought them together—with each other, and with their beloved organizer, Emily—in the first place.

This message delivered a possible moral insult to disadvantaged youth. The puzzle was to act as if disadvantaged participants were in the civic engagement project for the same reasons that other participants were, even

when it was not quite true yet. This was puzzling when, for example, youth from Community House's free after-school program attended evening meetings of the Regional YEP just to have somewhere to go at night. To NOYO's adult organizers, but never to youth participants, Emily sometimes said that some of those quiet participants just wanted to stay away from abusive or unpleasant relatives. Empowerment Talk extends the hope that becoming volunteers will strengthen these youth, protecting the helper from misery, as it did in the case of Daisy, the girl who became an extremely active volunteer after having been close to suicide at age thirteen.

Organizers hoped that the story about civic empowerment would eventually fit youth like twelve-year-old Raul, even if it did not do so just yet. Raul came to meeting after meeting, doing nothing but twiddling his mini-sized Nacho Doritos™ bags, trying to balance one full Nacho Doritos bag upside down on top of an empty one. He never looked up and never said a word except at one meeting, when he mentioned that he was going to Mexico soon, to visit his father and other relatives. Since he did not do any volunteer work, either, it may have been unclear why he attended these meetings. Once in a while, his half-sister Bonita complained about their mother's drug-dealing and mean boyfriends, so organizers guessed that his civic participation was helping him, as a form of therapy, but no one could be sure of Raul's reason for coming, and asking him would be hurtful and extremely tactless.

Focusing on potential, by attributing more capabilities to them than he or she currently has, is, as noted in the introduction, a normal part of any good nurturance. In Empowerment Projects, however, this normal nurturance took a peculiar form. Caregivers' normal, gracious, gentle, barely perceptible tact transformed an organizational mandate, with high financial stakes and many spectators watching as organizers doled out all the not-yet-quite-well-deserved praise. Here, the stakes were not just about the individual's feelings of self-respect, but the program's survival. Programs publicly had to demonstrate that they had made the volunteers more independent, within a short time frame. Others were watching as well; there were youth volunteers who were there not for the purpose of preventing themselves from becoming problems, but to solve problems outside of themselves. Those volunteers, who were usually in the "non-disadvantaged" category, were supposed to be equals to the disadvantaged youth. The non-disadvantaged youth were not supposed to be using civic participation as a form of therapy, and had to learn that different rules applied to the disadvantaged youth. They had to learn to hear lavish praise of the quiet, inactive volunteers like Raul and filter it through this unspoken knowledge, in order to understand the organizers' habit of attributing independence to disadvantaged youth when it was not true—at least not yet.

Tactful, wise organizers were skilled at marching through youth volunteers' resolute silence; such organizers patiently waited for months and even years till the curative effects of civic engagement caught hold, if ever. In the meantime, these skillful organizers let meetings keep going *as if* youth participants were *already* active civic volunteers. For example, after one year's annual Martin Luther King Day celebration in January, several disadvantaged youth still wanted to keep meeting through the winter. This puzzled but pleased adults, so they complied with the request, even though the youth volunteers who had begged to hold the meetings then proceeded to sit in stone silence at the meetings that they themselves had requested:

Sheila [adult leader of Martin Luther King Day planning committee this year]: Do you want to do a community service project? (No one answers.)

Emily [the much-beloved Community House leader]: What's the weather gonna be like? Does anyone know? (No one answers.)

Emily: What do you think about doing a community service day? (No one answers.)

Sheila: Should we do something on April 8, like last year? What day is that? Is it a Saturday? (No one answers.)

Emily: Do you want to do a project?

Kid: Like a walk-a-thon, bowl-a-thon, slide-a-thon?

Another kid: Or a bike-a-thon, or that kind of thing? Like we did last time?

Emily: Yeah, or a run—we'd just have to figure out which and reserve a space and get sponsors. So what do you think, guys, should we do something like that? (Kids say yes, whispering.)

After another meeting like the one with the Doritos tower, Emily told me:

A lot of my kids couldn't follow the Regional YEP meeting at all. In the car on the way back [she drives kids in her own car], they were asking, "Huh, what happened? What did we decide?"

NE: I've heard the same thing after other meetings. But it's hard to make those meetings do all things for all kids, because some kids just whizz so quickly, I can't even follow.

Emily: Exactly! And most of my kids aren't going because they're really into it—a lot of them are going because they just don't want to go

home. It doesn't hurt to go, and I figure maybe something will rub off on them.

Most organizers braved magnificent silences like Raul's and the post-Martin Luther King Day volunteers'—carefully not pressuring youth participants into exhibiting any discernable reasons for attending meetings, not prying into their mysterious reasons for participating. Some day in the future, it may or may not become clear, but in the meantime, showing respect required assuming that no one can fully know why anyone else volunteers, and no one should ask. *Not* asking was the usual, acceptable organizational style. To me, this seemed like a respectful way of harmonizing the Empowerment Projects' crisscrossed missions of promoting civic engagement and helping the needy.

Some organizers, however, made volunteers' active, verbal, articulate participation mandatory—a disrespectful violation of the graceful organizational style. For example, Miracle, an African American girl, had never spoken in a meeting. At a Regional YEP meeting one day, she said something!

Cindi, another teen volunteer: Erin, that should go in the minutes that Miracle said more than five words!

Davey: Hey, are you making fun of her??

Tandy: She never *talks* and she's so *nice*.

Erin [this year's paid adult organizer]: She *is* sweet.

(Miracle burrows deep into her hooded sweatshirt and looks down, as if she is about to cry.⁸)

At another Regional YEP meeting, Erin asked for volunteers to head a committee. When no one stepped forward, Erin clumsily “volunteered” Miracle, saying, “You’ll have to do it some day. You’ll have to say something in a meeting some day. What do you think, kids, doesn’t she?” Once again, Miracle scrunched up her long neck and burrowed her head into the oversized hooded sweatshirt that she always wore. Erin’s goal was to make Miracle into a “leader,” but Erin got the organizational style wrong. She was being too direct. Rob Strauss, Erin’s boss who often attended meetings, scowled, as did several youth participants.

Non-disadvantaged Youth: We Are Here to Help Other People, Not Ourselves

At every meeting of the socially diverse Regional YEP, organizers told participants that they were doing community service *just by coming to meetings*. This message did not make sense to the non-disadvantaged

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