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Saying YES to Volunteering: Community Building Through Challenge and Change

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Say YES to Volunteering: Community Building Through Challenge and Change

By Melea Smith

As we faced this fall semester with the knowledge that Youth Educational Services (Y.E.S. or YES House) would be operating 100% virtually, apprehension surfaced as to how such a unique, hands-on program could possibly be transformed in this way. In spite of misgivings and unspoken reservations about how Y.E.S. could or might function in a remote realm for an entire semester or academic year, the students showed up. Six student staff members and seventeen student Program Directors embraced the unknown and committed to joining Y.E.S. for an unprecedented academic year and beyond. I am heartened and grateful that these students have joined me (the Y.E.S. Coordinator) in reinventing and sustaining Y.E.S. programs and partnerships in the face of myriad new challenges and uncertainty. Nothing in our program would be possible without the passion and commitment of student leaders, and the time, talent and energy generously offered by student volunteers. With support from the Center for Community Based Learning and several Service Learning and Academic



Internship courses, 75 students signed up to volunteer with Y.E.S. this semester. We may not be physically together on campus this year, but we are working together to find new ways to build and serve the community.

Y.E.S. is a community engagement program operating within the Office of Student Life. Y.E.S. is home to over a dozen student-led volunteer programs that collaborate with local schools and community organizations. During a typical semester, volunteers would be leading art and theater activities for students

at an Arcata Elementary After-School Program or playing Uno or basketball with youth at the Humboldt County Juvenile Hall.

Y.E.S. programming in the time of Covid-19 would need to look much different. How could HSU students continue to participate in Service Learning and community engagement? What could volunteering look like without in-person placements? Would local schools and organizations have the capacity to host



HSU students? How could Y.E.S. students help meet community needs? There were many questions and with the support and innovation of many campus and community partners, we began reimagining pathways for student engagement in Humboldt. Y.E.S. student leaders leaned into the challenge with open minds and a real desire to make a positive difference this semester.

We were motivated to envision what community building looks like at Y.E.S. in an era of physical distancing. The Y.E.S. student staff (Program Consultants) and I planned and facilitated our first virtual retreat. This is typically an intensive three-day training and bonding experience for Y.E.S. leaders, scheduled at the beginning of the Fall semester. Students leave their familiar surroundings and travel with us to a beautiful setting in rural Maple Creek where we share meals around picnic tables, sleep in bunkhouses (and adjust to the lack of cell reception). Students from decades past still fondly mention the Retreat...where big learning occurs, ideas are shared, friendships are forged and memories are made. During

the Y.E.S. Retreat this fall, we were forced to take an entirely different approach. We reviewed and explored workshop materials and experimented with team-building activities via Zoom. Students participated in online scavenger hunts, showcasing tangible items from their homes to reveal aspects of their lives and to learn about others. Karen Young, (Y.E.S. Alumni Class of 1990), shared her joy and wisdom as our impactful guest speaker. Karen is a cultural organizer in Boston, and she discussed her empowering work with taiko drumming and elder women of color. Her enthusiasm and warmth transcended our computer screens and she helped us consider more deeply how to translate community building and equity into virtual settings. I felt a shift in my own attitude and noticed student spirits were also lifted by this sharing. Together we began to hope: maybe this could work after all? Holding our Y.E.S. retreat over Zoom did not compare to learning and laughing in the wilderness, but we experienced glimmers of inspiration and began building those social connections that fuel everything magic at Y.E.S.



I had the great good fortune of working with HSU colleagues this summer to develop a new program, ConnectED, an HSU initiative in collaboration with the Humboldt County Office of Education (HCOE) to support local educators through programming to virtually connect HSU and K-12 students. This effort was organized through the Center for Community Based Learning (CCBL), Youth Educational Services (Y.E.S.), Early Outreach Admissions and HSU academic departments. In the wake of pandemic closures, ConnectED provides opportunities for HSU students and faculty to engage in experiential learning practices, and for K-12 students and instructors to receive enriched learning experiences. Y.E.S. and two academic courses piloted the Pen Pal Program, connecting HSU students with 5th grade pen pals for a semester of letter exchanges.

In fall 2020, five Y.E.S. programs participated in the Pen Pal Program: ART, Environmental Education, Hand-in-Hand, Puentes and Youth Mentoring Program. Thirty-nine volunteers were matched with 5th grade students from two classes at Pacific Union Elementary. Seventy letters containing friendly introductions, artwork, pictures of pets and environmental themes, were delivered digitally to the 5th grade classes. It was heartwarming and inspiring to review the digital cards and handwritten letters.

Several other Y.E.S. programs are collaborating with longtime community partners in new ways. Golden Years will also exchange digital letters with senior residents at Silvercrest in Eureka to fulfill their mission of bridging the gap between younger

and older generations. The Queer Mentoring and Advocacy Program (QMAP) will continue working with students at McKinleyville High School through biweekly Zoom meetings. Study Buddies volunteers will provide 10 hours of online tutoring and the Environmental Education team will create nature-based and environmental enrichment packets to supplement online learning for youth at Jefferson Community Center. The Juvenile Hall Recreation Program (JHRP) is seventeen students strong. In the absence of in-person or virtual connections, volunteers may organize a game drive to supplement the recreational activities available for youth at the hall. Y.E.S. students are just beginning to pilot these virtual volunteer projects and will undoubtedly learn a lot as they go.

2020 was already gearing up to be a big transition year for Y.E.S. After more than four decades operating out of the Hagopian House (YES House), our treasures and supplies have been boxed up and await us in our new location on the ground floor of the Library. The YES House has been the cozy, homey community space for so many students over the years... a place where they have found purpose and a sense of belonging. These long standing traditions will travel with Y.E.S. as we transition to a more centralized location on campus with increased accessibility for students. We look forward to being co-located with several campus programs and the opportunities that may bring. When we return to campus, we will rejoice in welcoming students, campus friends and community partners to our new home on campus, and most importantly, returning to the hands-on experiences that are the hallmark of Y.E.S.

After the shift to online learning in March 2020, I know that community-building is still possible in the virtual realm (it's not as fun and we definitely miss snacking together), but it's possible. Zoom fatigue is real and students have had to quickly adjust to shifts in almost every area of Y.E.S. programming (and in their lives and education). And yet, the students continue to amaze me by demonstrating the community values and connection that exemplify the spirit of Y.E.S. Students may be limited to working together online, but their commitment, camaraderie, support and laughter reveals their ability to bond and learn through doing.

Students who participate in Y.E.S. and other campus programs have the opportunity to build skills, boost their resumes, explore career paths, make connections at HSU and in the Humboldt community, even during adversity. My gratitude and admiration for Y.E.S. leaders and volunteers is immense. They have shown flexibility, willingness and enthusiasm to participate through challenge and change. They continue to make a positive difference.



Ines Morales, Y.E.S. Lead Program Consultant

As I reflect on my time with Youth Educational Services (YES), I get emotional thinking back to who I was the first time I walked into the YES House compared to who I am today. Back then, I was not an experienced volunteer nor had I ever stepped into a leadership role. During my first semester as a Homie Net volunteer (a YES program whose mission is to offer children experiencing houselessness a space to explore their interests and nurture creativity and a love of learning), I had to challenge myself to speak up during program meetings and to step out of my shell to approach our child participants and start fun games. I can still vividly remember and feel the shot of euphoria that ran through my veins at the end of an extremely successful “carnival” we hosted for children staying at the Serenity Inn with their families. I can honestly say that it took this experience for me to instantly discover my passion for working with children and for community activism.



Leading Homlessness Network alongside my co-directors was an unforgettable experience. I watched

my group of volunteers make a difference on a weekly basis, I gained insight into my own leadership style, and I worked on my time management and communication skills. These new skills positively impacted other areas of my life. Through practicing more open communication in my YES role, I found that it was easier to ask for what I needed in my personal life. From friendships to relationships, I found it easier to speak up for myself. The time management skills I have gained through YES have been super beneficial in balancing my leadership role and my academics. I struggled in both of these areas before. I am thankful for all the learning opportunities

YES has provided me. I truly believe that I wouldn't be the leader I am today had I not walked through the YES house door my freshman year.

Andy Padilla, Director of Environmental Education (EE) (Fall 2020)

Prior to attending HSU, I wanted to learn about opportunities that would allow me to get involved with my community and help me gain experience in my desired career field of environmental education. Upon finding Y.E.S., my interest in Humboldt State instantly grew. I am now starting my third year of involvement with Y.E.S.: three semesters as a volunteer and two semesters as a director (student leader).

During my involvement, I've seen Y.E.S. go through many changes and I'm really proud to be part of that change. Like many programs at HSU and in the world at large, Y.E.S. has experienced the challenges of switching to virtual learning. However, in a strange way, these recent challenges added to my experience as a member of Y.E.S. In addition to building the leadership skills directors gain in a typical year, I am also getting experience to help build something, to help rebuild something, and to be a part of something amazing and innovative.

The program I lead, Environmental Education (EE), has its own unique set of challenges going into this year. Our program's mission is to provide local youth with the tools and skills needed to access the environment in their daily lives. I have been very proud to help redesign aspects of our mission to reflect our shift to virtual engagement and the current crises that our communities are facing. The field of environmental education is uniquely hands-on. As such, it takes a lot of care to imagine new ways to make an impact and approach local learners. Y.E.S. and ConnectED (an HSU initiative to support local K-12 students and educators through virtual programming) have provided EE with an exciting opportunity to use a Pen Pal format and continue to provide our community with resources for exploring nature and environmental issues. During our first round of Pen Pal letters, I was excited to share my summer nature experiences with my 5th grade Pen Pal.

The Jefferson Center in Eureka, CA has also requested support from EE to create and prepare science and environmental-based enrichment activity packets that are distributed biweekly to students. EE and the Jefferson Center have a long standing partnership.

We both hope to use this project as a way of strengthening our relationship during these troubling times and to provide continuity for the kiddos who previously attended our in-person activities.

Being a part of EE and Y.E.S. has provided me with lots of great opportunities to explore my passions and future career path. And by gosh, I have found I really like this career path. As such, it has helped me feel confident in being here at HSU.

