

Youth with a Voice: Engaging Young People in Rural and Small Town Community Development

The case studies featured through the **NADO Research Foundation's** "Youth with a Voice" series highlight small towns and rural communities that are effectively engaging young people in planning and community development projects. By recognizing and valuing the tremendous energy and optimism students bring to local development efforts, these communities are building stronger and more lasting bonds between young people and their hometowns. Visit http://www.nado.org/youth_voice/ to learn more about the projects featured below, including expanded case studies, student interviews, and lessons learned that can be applied to other communities seeking to incorporate young people into the planning and community development process.

Biddeford, Maine

Biddeford, Maine's 2011 Downtown Master Plan includes the words "youth" or "students" 157 times over its 217 pages. This was not an accident, but rather a demonstration of this New England mill town's strong commitment to including young people and students in its visioning and community development efforts. In 2008, in conjunction with the Orton Family Foundation, the city began what was known as the *Heartworks* planning process, which included community storytelling, neighborhood meetings, and the development of the Downtown Master Plan. The result of this initiative has been not only the publication of the Downtown Master Plan, but also the blossoming of strong community relationships, an appreciation of the city's shared history and values, and a boost to local economic development.



Photo credit: Victoria Eon



Photo credit: Orton Family Foundation

Local high school students were active participants throughout the planning process, participating in community meetings, interviewing relatives and community members about their lives and recollections of Biddeford as part of a class project, and organizing historical and cultural tours of the city's mills. Victoria Eon, a graduate of Biddeford High, notes how the storytelling process and student-led tours of the mills created a new connection to her town and fellow students. "Engaging in these conversations has brought me closer to my peers. I'm excited that they are excited, and proud that they—at long last—feel proud of their humble roots."

To read the full Biddeford case study, visit: <http://www.nado.org/youth-with-a-voice-biddeford-me/>

Brownsville, PA

Feeling a close connection to their hometown and a strong desire to make it a better place to live, a core group of eight students comprising Brownsville Area High School's Students in Action (SIA) club came together to brainstorm ideas about how they could best improve their community. The team decided to launch a project that would establish a park downtown with a stage for outdoor performances. Dubbed "Operation Falcon Revitalization" (after the high school mascot), the project aims to spark life into the dormant downtown district by providing a community gathering and entertainment space. At school, the SIA team drew up blueprints and with other students constructed a model of the stage and the surrounding park area and have been actively involved in fundraising for the project, seeking both public and private support.



Photo credit: SIA team



Photo credit: SIA team

For their ongoing efforts, the SIA club has been recognized nationally by receiving a Jefferson Awards gold medal for community service in the Pittsburgh region two years in a row. More importantly, participating in a project like this has had a major impact on how the students view themselves and their community. The students have felt part of something bigger than themselves and discovered a newfound faith in their hometown. "This project symbolizes a brighter future where I can one day raise my own family, and give my children the same experience my grandma and mother had when they were growing up [in Brownsville]," remarks Brownsville High senior Chelsea Gump.

To read the full Brownsville case study, visit: http://www.nado.org/youth_brownsville-2/

Visit http://www.nado.org/youth_voice/ for more information about these youth initiatives, including expanded case studies, student interviews, and lessons learned that can be applied to other communities seeking to incorporate young people in the planning and community development process.



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