

# YOUTH ORGANIZING COMES OF AGE\*

by Bill Alexander

## Albuquerque: Bombast, Energy, and Planning

During a recent national gathering of hardscrabble youth organizers here, veteran youth worker Rudy Chavez casually noted that **Youth Development, Inc. (YDI)**, his 30-year old community-based youth services agency, has an annual budget of \$20 million....A hand belonging to 20-year old youth-organizer Fernando Abeyta shot into the air.

Abeyta—wearing a black beret and fresh from a months-long youth-led campaign of marches, rallies and protests over the number of teens allowed to be together at an Albuquerque mall—questioned YDI’s “relevance” to the “very political” problems faced by today’s teens. He labeled organizations like YDI, which provides temporary shelter, free meals and counseling, as proverbial “bandaid groups” that don’t provide solutions to long-festering problems, but are only in business “to perpetuate themselves”...

Both YDI and the **SouthWest Organizing Project (SWOP)**, Abeyta’s group, are based here—but because of their generational and philosophic differences, they inhabit different worlds. The mall campaign was organized by SWOP, which in a good year has a budget of \$250,000. “*We were thrown off guard by the staggering amount of money they [YDI] are getting,*” said SWOP organizer Karlos Schmieder, 24, after the session with Chavez. “*We are very political. We call boycotts!*”, says co-founder Jeanne Gauna of the 20-year old SWOP. “*We don’t take government money on principle because there are restrictions – you can’t put politics in their stuff. From what I’ve seen, you get hooked on government money.*”

Chavez, who has put in 28 years at YPI, makes no excuses for the fact that 70% of YDI’s budget comes from federal grants....“*We offer womb-to-tomb services for 20,000 youth in the state of New Mexico,*” he says proudly. But youth organizers believe that engaging in political action and strategies for social change, not just care and counseling, is essential to youth development....That belief brought organizers here in January [2001] from as far away as California, Rhode Island, New York, and Mississippi, under the aegis of the D.C.-based **Center for Community Change**. They talked about youth-led or youth-driven efforts that have racked up modest successes in areas such as juvenile justice reform, environmental justice, education reform, youth services spending, and police brutality....Some of their efforts include:

- *Participating in the massive Seattle street demonstrations against the World Trade organization* – which drew from the ranks of youth organizing as well as as environmentalists and anti-child labor advocates – were activists from the Albuquerque-based Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice (which includes SWOP)....

- *The 1996 passage of the Measure K ballot initiative in Oakland, California, to establish the Oakland Fund for Children and Youth, which allocates 2.5% of the city’s unrestricted general fund for services that benefit youth. The Kids First! Campaign...was driven by youth organizers...who collected over 30,000 signatures....*

- The creation in 1998 of the **South Bronx Community Justice Center**...after a more than four year campaign of youth mapping and surveys, protests and rallies focused on overcrowded detention facilities and the high incidence of minority arrests. The campaign was waged by the Bronx-based **Youth Force**.

- *Mississippi’s Southern Echo...has effectively maneuvered into the state’s legislative public policy arena by helping community-based groups in rural and low income Delta communities marshal their forces—with an emphasis on youth—to be heard on education reform issues.*

Along the way, the youth activists develop marketable leadership skills. SWOP's Karlos Schmieder designs and maintains SWOP's website...At Youth Force, 18-year old Aubrey Rogers, a staffer in the Teens and Tenants component, is shooting and producing a video on the wretched living conditions of low-income residents of Bronx housing projects.

### **Money on the Way?**

[Not so long ago] no youth-led campaign "had a budget of more than \$400,000." Youth Force...has burst through this glass ceiling somewhat with a budget of \$600,000. More help is on the way. "*We now have 260 proposals vying for \$600,000 in grants for youth organizing projects and initiatives...*", avers the **Jewish Fund for Justice's** Amanda Berger, who is also co-founder of the about-to-debut **Funders Collaborative on Youth Organizing (FCYO)**. The collaborative boasts 20 members and counting, like the Ford, Surdna, Edward W. Hazen, and Third Wave Foundations. Vera Miao, FCYO project director, hopes to raise \$5 million over 5 years for grantmaking, capacity building, and administration.

What they will be paying for makes some people uncomfortable...It's now a new ball game, says Robert Sherman, Berger's co-founder of the funder's collaborative. "*We need to get young people involved in developing policy and funding flow,*" maintains Sherman, a **Surdna Foundation** program officer. He points out that his foundation's goals were revised last May to focus on youth activism: "*Effective youth development and concrete social change go on the same timeline.*" Sherman cites the Alameda, CA-based Home Project, comprised mostly of high schoolers, as an active group that...built their own skate park and opened their own employment office.

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## **RESOURCES FOR YOUTH ACTIVISTS**

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