

An Empathic Lens into the Lives of Youth

AN INTERVIEW WITH SARAH O'CONNOR

By EGC's Applied Research and Consulting Team

Sarah O'Connor is St. Stephen's Youth Program's Lead Organizer for Lenox Community. We sat down with her to hear her journey in working with the 2017-2018 Making Youth Voices Heard initiative.

Tell me a little bit about the journey that led you to work with this particular group of youth? How did you end up here?

I've been working with St. Stephen's for the past four years and running the community organizing program with different groups of young people during the school year and summer. Before St. Stephen's, I worked in a few schools through the AmeriCorp program, which is how I knew that I wanted to continue to work with young people.

What was your role in the Making Youth Voices Heard initiative? What made you want to partner with MYVH?

MYVH was a collaboration of a couple of different organizations, and I coordinated the program that about half of the young people are a part of. I think there's a real gap in collaboration and coordination across youth programs in Lower Roxbury, and MYVH seemed like an awesome opportunity to bring people and resources together to be partners in the work that we're doing together in the neighborhood.

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What has been the biggest challenge for you?

It was challenging for our young people to manage other young people participating in another program. It was also challenging initially to build relationships and trust between the

young people and adults who were coming from different programs, and it was challenging, as it always is, to do that kind of work in the Lower Roxbury neighborhood.

However, over time, people got to know each other and build relationships. One of the really cool outcomes of it was to see the way that the young people from St. Stephen's youth programs and from Vibrant Boston really came together as a group and became much closer in working together, way more collaboratively than in the beginning.

What would you say is your greatest joy in the work you've been doing with Making Youth Voice Heard? What are some positive thing that came out of the partnership?

Definitely getting to know the youth from Vibrant Boston and watching them build relationships with the young people in our program. Many of our young people don't necessarily live right in the ten-block radius that was the focus of this project, but it was great to witness the sense of connection they had to each other and to the neighborhood they were in.

It was awesome to get to see the neighborhood through the eyes of the youth who do live there and have grown up there, and for our young people to feel some sense of agency. It was cool to watch their relationship to the neighborhood transform as they got more connected to the people who live there.

What were some main takeaways for you from this project?

Part of the goal of this project was to make legible to an audience the daily experiences that young people have and the ways in which they are experts in their own lived reality. I think bridging the gap is really challenging, and I have some questions about how we do that effectively and responsibly.

We were asking the youth to apply a new lens of study and way of analyzing what is their truth, so that it could be translated to other people for whom that's not their experience, and it was hard for our young people to do that.

I don't know if the skills that they learned in the process are totally replicable for other things that they might be more interested in doing on their own. Nevertheless, I think it was a valuable process for them

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to see a project from start to finish and to understand how a particular kind of research is done.

What is your hope for the Lower Roxbury area of Boston and the teens you're working with and their communities?

The neighborhoods and the people living in them are under extreme pressure of capitalism, gentrification, and really intense inequality that are happening to them without their consent. I would hope that this project moved us a little bit closer to the residents of that neighborhood having the autonomy to decide what happens to their neighborhood and their community.

I want the young people who live there to see themselves as being a part of the future of that neighborhood that does have more equitable access to resources of the city. They deserve excellent public schools, a good, safe place to live, a positive future that they envision for themselves, and the resources to make that happen. I hope that this project is a check in moving us towards that direction.