

Celebrating Community Progress, Strengthening Community Potential

By Karen Pittman, July 2005

"Now is the time to reach out throughout America... to gather in the best lessons that are out there, to gather in the energy that is out there... to give inspiration to all communities." These words, spoken by General Powell, kicked off a high visibility national competition to identify the "100 Best Communities for Children and Youth." Sponsored by America's Promise and Capitol One, the on-line competition encourages communities across the country to profile the policies, resources, programs and collaborative structures they have put in place to ensure the well-being of their young people and to document the progress they have made at supporting a full range of positive outcomes for youth — helping young people grow physically, socially, emotionally, personally, ethically, civically, vocationally and intellectually.

The America's Promise Alliance contest joins the ranks of dozens of other "Best" contests — CNN/Money's Best places to Live, Forbes' Best Cities for Singles; Entrepreneur's Best Cities for Entrepreneurs. But this contest stands out, even among the few that focus on families.

Child.Magazine crunched government and association numbers on the 100 largest cities on six issues: Schools, child care, clean air, crime, health and playmates (percent of children under 5). Denver and Minneapolis were in the top five. But so were cities like Miami and Orlando, because of improvements made in instructional quality and reading scores and efforts to reduce crime that included expanding after-school programs. The Child survey gets points for finding ways to give credit for effort and improvement. Cities like Detroit (rank 34) and Milwaukee (rank 33) were rated higher than Tuscon (rank 70) or Nashville (rank 82). But Child focused only on the 100 largest cities. It started with the numbers. It didn't give communities a chance to speak for themselves.

If we are going to "give inspiration to all communities" as General Powell suggests, we have to find ways to signal that all communities are important and that all communities can improve. Most importantly, we have to find a way to signal that the Best communities for children are not necessarily the wealthiest or even the most crime-free. They are those in which all adults — from the mayor to mothers and fathers to the park maintenance crews — are committed to ensuring that young people have the five fundamental resources that have become the hallmark of the America's Promise campaign. The Forum is an active member of the America's Promise Alliance. And, as some of you may remember, I was one of the lucky team of recruits who worked with General Powell to get America's Promise started. I now serve as a trustee charged with shaping its future.

The Forum worked closely with the America's Promise research team to ensure that this contest is not a contest of numbers (although communities are asked to provide data on their progress in supporting children and youth), but a contest of promises. Promises made and promises kept. Promises held by broad-based partnerships that will not be derailed by changes in administration or tempted to change course because the "hot problem" has shifted from violence to literacy to obesity.

Former Congressman Gephardt was the honored guest at the Forum's annual June Board dinner at which we celebrated progress on the bi-partisan Federal Youth Coordination Act and announced our commitment to build national and local partnerships with organizations and communities dedicated to ensuring that every young person is Ready by 21: Ready for college, ready for work, ready for life.™

The Congressman assured us that we were "striving for the right things" and left us with these words:

...in America we are stuck in the past. We operate all of our institutions as if it were a hundred years ago. To me, the great challenge is how we change these institutions. This is how we get scale. I used to think health care was hard to do. Education is harder. Human development is much harder.

I urge you to do three quick things before you go on to your next task:

- Skim my remarks (<http://www.forumfyi.org/Files/KPMovingIdeas.pdf8>) from the Forum's Board dinner in which I spell out what I believe is necessary for communities to do to meet the Ready by 21™ challenge.
- Download the 100 Best Communities application (http://www.americaspromise.org/100Best/100best_appintro.cfm) and take it into your next collaboration meeting. At a minimum, use it as a way to reflect on your efforts and your progress.
- Count the number of collaborations/coalitions/partnerships you are a part of and/or know about. Understand that this is a part of the problem — fragmented planning and advocacy lead to fragmented, short-lived solutions. Think about how to add up and align these efforts.

The America's Promise Alliance contest will give communities a chance to shine. But the true test is whether communities will use this opportunity to assess and strengthen their long term capacity for Big Picture change. That takes more than a few initiatives. It takes changing the ways community stakeholders do business. It takes changing the way community stakeholders DO change.

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Karen Pittman is executive director of the Forum for Youth Investment.

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