

Those Determined to Teach Do Youth

By Karen Pittman, June 2005

More than fifteen years ago, I began using a twist on an old saying as a way to get discussions started about the status of youth work and youth workers in the United States. We all understand the disrespect shown to teachers and students in the adage: "Those who can, do. Those who can't, teach." Needing to communicate my message quickly, I added a third phrase: "Those who can't teach do youth work." That statement pretty well summed up public sentiments about the paid and volunteer staff that chose to work with young people in informal settings — community organizations, summer recreation programs, diversion programs, second chance employment training centers.

I stopped using the revised adage a while ago as the conversations about youth workers and the youth development field moved from multi-purpose rooms with folding chairs to hotel banquet rooms and foundation-sponsored retreat centers. In hopes of showing just how far we have come, I used the phrase again in opening remarks to the 30-odd after-school and youth work veterans who were invited last November to Wingspread (one of those retreat centers, this one sponsored by the Johnson Foundation) to call for the development of a national youth work system.

Youth work, to be sure, is still less understood than the teaching profession, but it is finally being recognized as a vocation that calls for complementary, but not identical, skills, orientations and aptitudes. To be sure, there are youth workers who are good teachers, and teachers who are good youth workers, but the basic demands of the jobs are different because of intentional differences in the structure of these settings and the purpose of the work. For those working in socially and economically impoverished neighborhoods across the country, the need for good teaching and good youth work is so great that it is difficult to do one well without doing a lot of the other.

So it was with great surprise that I read a recent Washington Post article ("A D.C. Teacher's Day in the Rose Garden," April 21, 2005) about this year's National Teacher of the Year award going to someone who is best described as an outstanding teacher-youth worker.

This year's recipient is Jason Kamras, a 31-year-old math teacher at John Philip Sousa Middle School in Washington, D.C. Sousa is a crumbling facility, deep in the heart of the city's poorest neighborhood, where 90 percent of the students are on free or reduced lunch and virtually all are African American. This is the first time a D.C. teacher has ever won this national award. Teachers from the District's southeast schools rarely win local teacher-of-the-year awards, much less receive national recognition.

According to the Post, "Kamras made bridging the inequities in staffing and other resources between urban and suburban schools a priority." He took his students to outings. He began "early bird" advanced math classes to prepare students for the standardized tests. He made time after school to encourage their hobbies. He encouraged his students to take photographs of community life and got their prints displayed in city offices. He found time for one-on-one tutoring and activities with his students, including Wendall Jefferson, with whom he played chess once a week, using the time to learn about his family and his goals.

In the article, Kamras explained his blended approach to teaching/youth work by noting that his resolve as a new teacher to not let “negative factors shape my perspective” caused him to learn to “engage students and bring their natural love . . . for their hobbies into the classroom . . . and use that as a catalyst.”

The lines between school and community need to blur if we are to help the young people in our nation’s capital and elsewhere be ready for college, work and life. Their futures depend on having a human chain of adults (including family and neighbors) with linked arms ready to help them with real problems, remind them of their real potential and connect them to real pathways and possibilities. They need teachers who do youth work, youth workers who do teaching, family members who are advocates, advocates who dine with their families, peers who have hope and hope for their peers. Jason Kamras was applauded for going above and beyond the norm to be a jack-of-all-trades teacher and youth worker to his students who need both and for being an innovative educator spearheading changes in instructional practices that helped the whole school. I applaud him.

But we will never have enough Jason Kamrases to change the odds for underserved youth in this country until we recognize that he was and is, out of sheer determination, doing two jobs and supplementing both with his own money. We need more teacher-youth workers. We need youth worker-teachers. We need more adults paid, positioned and motivated to blur the lines so that teaching and learning — about academics, about work, about life — can flow freely in neighborhoods where they are too often choked by multiple poverties.

Maybe next year we’ll have two awards — National Teacher of the Year and National Youth Worker of the Year — we’ll smile when we realize they are two sides of the same coin. Let the blurring begin.

Read More:

A D.C. Teacher’s Day in the Rose Garden: Math Innovator Is First From City to Be Declared Best in Nation. Fernandez, M., & Haynes, V.D. (2005, April 21). The Washington Post. Retrieved May 5, 2005, from www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/04/20/AR2005042002997.html.

Reflections on the Road Not (Yet) Taken: How a Centralized Public Strategy Can Help Youth Work Focus on Youth. Pittman, K. (2004, Winter). New Directions for Youth Development. pp. 87–99. For information, visit www.josseybass.com/WileyCDA/WileyTitle/productCd-0787978612.html.

Presentation from Doug Nicholls, General Secretary of the Community and Youth Workers Union (CYWU) in England. The Forum for Youth Investment. (2003, March). Washington, DC: The Forum for Youth Investment. Retrieved May 5, 2005, from www.forumfyi.org/Files/DougNicholls.pdf.

Learning Opportunities for Children and Youth: Expanding Commitments, Blurring the Lines . The Forum for Youth Investment. (2002, April). Washington, DC: The Forum for Youth Investment. Retrieved May 5, 2005, from www.forumfyi.org/Files/BlurringLines.pdf.

Pittman, K. (2005, November). "Don't Be Left Out Standing in Your Field." Washington, DC: The Forum for Youth Investment. A version of this article appears in [Youth Today](#).

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

June 15, 2005