

*...President's Remarks...*

# **Moving Ideas to Impact**

*To Change the Odds  
for Youth:  
Charting the Forum's  
Course to 2010*

*by Karen Pittman*

**Annual Board Dinner**  
The Forum for Youth Investment  
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*Somebody said that it couldn't be done  
but he with a chuckle replied  
that "maybe it couldn't," but he would be one  
who wouldn't say so till he'd tried.  
So he buckled right in with the trace of a grin  
on his face. If he worried he hid it.  
He started to sing as he tackled the thing  
that couldn't be done, and he did it.*

— *It Couldn't Be Done* ~ Edgar Guest

This is a somewhat silly way to open a dinner speech, especially when you are standing in front of current and future board members, funders and partners. But I heard it recited a few months ago and I remembered how much I always liked that poem as a child. I was not a silly child. The singsong meter of the poem annoyed me, but I was, and still am, drawn by the message. It sums up my approach to life — matter-of-fact optimism.

Those of you who have seen me at a podium before are waiting for the lights to dim and the rapid fire PowerPoint to begin. (I believe that I hold the U.S. slides-per-minute record.) I will put up a few slides, but my goal this evening is neither to inform you nor inspire you. I am here to ask for your support as I take on the next leg of my journey to do what they say can't be done: Ensure that every young person in this country is **Ready by 21: Ready for college, ready for work, ready for life.**<sup>TM</sup>

I am a "we" person. The Forum operates as a team. So it is significant that I have asked for your support as I continue my journey. This is not a signal that I am leaving the Forum. It is a signal that I am going to get personal — something that I don't usually do. But the journey ahead won't be easy, so I need you to know why you can count on me to see it through.

Ten years ago, when I stepped down as the Director of the Center for Youth Development, which I had founded, to accept a position as the Director of the President's Crime Prevention Council, I used my monthly column in Youth Today to share my story with my readers — again something that I don't usually do. Let me read a few sections from it that explain why it was important for me to leave the organization that I founded and loved to go to the White House:

"I have taken this job not because I am an expert on crime but because I believe that, ultimately, efforts to prevent youth violence and crime are much simpler to achieve if they are preceded by a broad and unwavering commitment to preparation — a commitment shared by all of the individuals and institutions that touch young people's lives.

The odds against our youth are much too high these days.... Targeted, time-limited prevention programs can and do help many young people beat the odds, as people say. But what we need to do is change the odds, not just to beat them....

These thoughts aren't new with me. I have been thinking them since 1970, when I was a student at Oberlin College. At 18, I was immersed in trying to answer the deeply troubling question of why some kids and cousins I grew up with had already taken detours off the road to success. I also wanted to understand why people — students and professors alike — were surprised at how well-educated, well-rounded and "well-adjusted" I was, given my demographics.

As a budding sociologist, I was already rejecting the theories that I had "beaten the odds." True, I came to Oberlin with a diploma from the Washington, D.C. public schools, from an all-black community, co-raised by a widowed mother who worked long hours and a godmother who took me into her home during the week. But I did not feel that I had "beaten" anything. I felt that I was supposed to succeed and had been equipped to do so. The idea that luck had more than an incidental role was insulting. I wanted to, in sociologists' terms, explain the variation.

Twenty-five years later, I can explain the source of my frustration with those who praised me and can label, if not prove, the source of the variation. I had not "beaten the odds." Instead,

others — family, neighbors, church members, teachers and youth workers — had changed the odds by offering me a path of supports and opportunities.

I ended the column with these words:

Young people need environments that offer them nurturing, guidance, rules, structure, clear expectations and consistent limits. They need opportunities to explore, excel, contribute, earn, lead and join. They need high-quality instruction and access to basic care and services. While stern measures are certainly necessary for those young people who have already committed crimes, we will never fully address this country's epidemic of violence without a full continuum of response that includes supports, opportunities and services in addition to sanctions. Only in this way can we truly change the odds for all youth."

— *Changing the Odds*, February 1995

Let me say that again — we will never fully address the challenges facing this country and our youth without providing a full continuum of responses. Only in this way can we truly change the odds for youth. As you have often heard me say, “*Problem-free is not fully prepared.*”

I believed this ten years ago when I wrote it. I believed it twenty years ago when I left a research job at the Urban Institute to join Marian Wright Edelman at the Children's Defense Fund because she and I both knew, even before the data showed it, that the way to reverse the rising teen pregnancy rates among black teens was to press forward to improve their life options.

I believed it when I left the Clinton Administration and joined Rick Little at the International Youth Foundation (IYF) on his quest to help other countries create foundations to support young people's development.

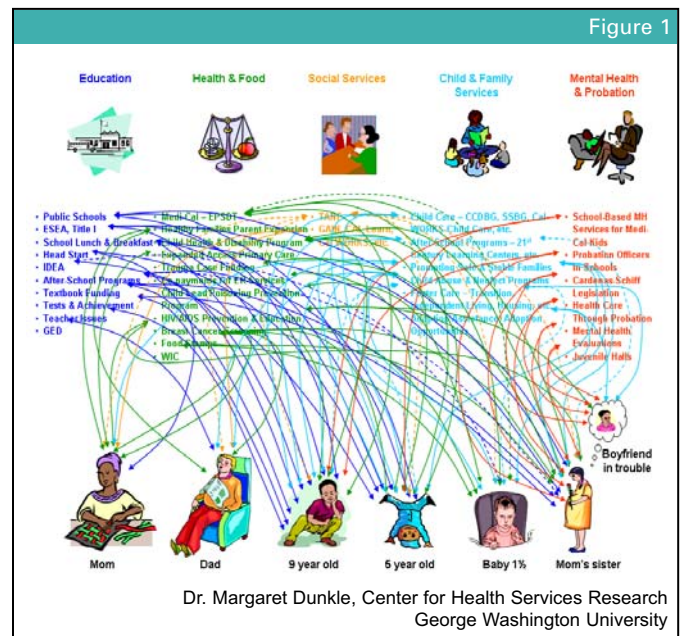
I believed it when Rick and I were asked to take leave from IYF for six months to help General Powell establish America's Promise and challenge the country to ensure that all children have five fundamental resources — a safe place, a healthy start, a caring adult, a marketable skill and a chance to serve.

Forty years ago I took my first steps inside the Capitol, as an “underprivileged” but confident teen. Tonight, as we dine at the footsteps of the Capitol, I stand before you as a privileged but less confident adult. My matter-of-fact

optimism is wavering. I am pleased and proud that there is bipartisan support for the Federal Youth Coordination Act. But I am concerned that we have to struggle harder every year to muster the public and political will needed to, at best, make small payments against our social contract with our children.

I need to see improvement in my lifetime. I simply cannot live comfortably in a country in which — as Dr. Michelle Gambone's research has shown us — only four out of ten young adults are doing well. That's not four out of ten in Southeast D.C. or in rural Mississippi. That's nationally. The odds against young people in poor urban and rural areas are even worse. Incremental approaches simply will not work.

Youth policy and programs in the United States are extremely fragmented. It confounds policy makers, confuses the public and leaves parents and young people scrambling for supports. Margaret Dunkle, at George Washington University, has made a science of mapping the actual ways that programs flow into families. The result is scary (literally) as this spaghetti chart of the services provided to a Los Angeles County family shows (see Figure 1).



This level of fragmentation doesn't just happen in public systems. The “silo effect” is a common lament across systems and settings and across research, practice, advocacy and philanthropy. We have to change the odds. We have to do it now. We have to do it together: Policy makers and advocates, researchers and practitioners, youth and adults, Republicans and Democrats.

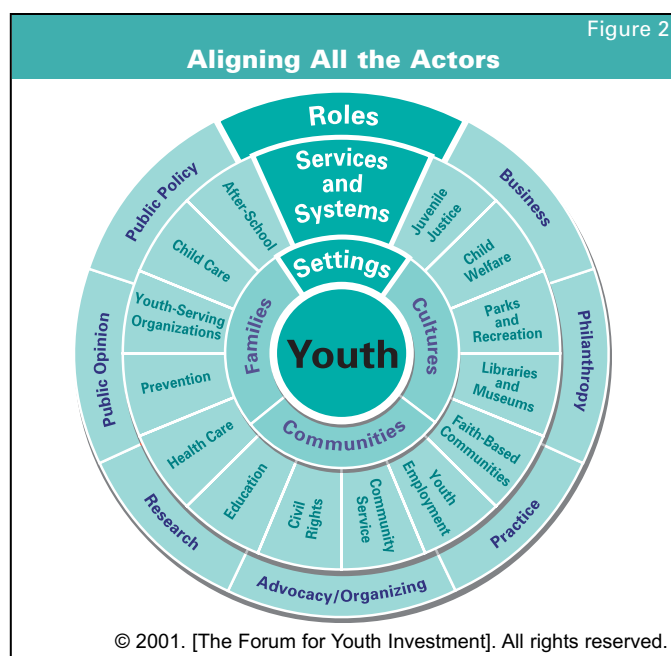
I may be getting wiser as I grow older, but I'm also getting bolder and more impatient. Let me shift from "I" to "we" now and tell you a bit about what the Forum is doing and why we need your help.

## Who We Are, What We Do

When I and my colleagues — Merita Irby, the Forum's cofounder, Thaddeus Ferber and Nicole Yohalem, veteran staffers — first launched the Forum it was in response to a market analysis and interviews with dozens of leaders in this country who focus on youth as their day job. The key themes: Fragmentation, information overload and a dearth of youth development concepts in the places where they were most needed.

We responded to what we perceived to be largely information and communications gaps — a failure to communicate a common set of youth-centered (versus system-centered) goals, a failure to translate youth development research into policy and practice, and get it implemented in all of the systems and settings where young people spend their time — schools, libraries, community centers, businesses, homes (*see Figure 2*).

We created the Forum to help decision makers link and align their goals, strategies and actions to increase the quality and quantity of youth investment and youth involvement. Our tagline: *Helping organizations that invest in youth invest in change.*



Our name captures our focus:

- We **frame ideas about youth investment and youth involvement** in ways that create a clear sense of urgency, possibility and direction for broad groups of stakeholders.
- We **lead, join and create forums that bring broad groups of stakeholders together** to increase their awareness, knowledge and commitment to change the odds for youth.

In our first year as the Forum, we reached out to over 100 organizations, partnering with some, providing information supports to many, developing materials that demonstrated how the Big Picture approach informed issues such as high school reform, program quality improvement, pregnancy and delinquency prevention, and civic engagement.

At the end of the year, our Advisory Board listened to our accomplishments, complimented us on their quality, took note of their breadth and depth and said, "STOP! Your ideas are powerful. But they are not enough to create change. Get Focused. Get Grounded. Get Results. Spend some resources informing all, but focus your efforts on finding those who share your vision and sense of urgency. Then stick with them long enough to make sure they turn the ideas into action."

When advisors like Peter Edelman, Larry Aber, Shay Bilchik, Sarah Brown and Wendy Puriefoy speak, you listen.

In 2002 we refocused our efforts, laying the seeds for key national partnerships and looking for concrete, long-term ways to connect with people doing this work in communities. We yoked our work to a few communities that shared our commitment to increasing youth investment and youth engagement through a merger with Community IMPACT! USA, a national nonprofit that was supporting a small network of local change makers. And we established ourselves as an independent organization with a strong board that could help ensure we had the strength to deliver on an ambitious agenda.

Over the past three years we have worked to establish a \$3 million organization staffed by about twenty reasonably diverse, mostly female, mostly young enthusiasts who, combined, help the organization blend lessons from research, policy and practice together.

Our name still captures what we do. But we coined a new tagline — *moving ideas to impact* — to remind us of what we must do better.

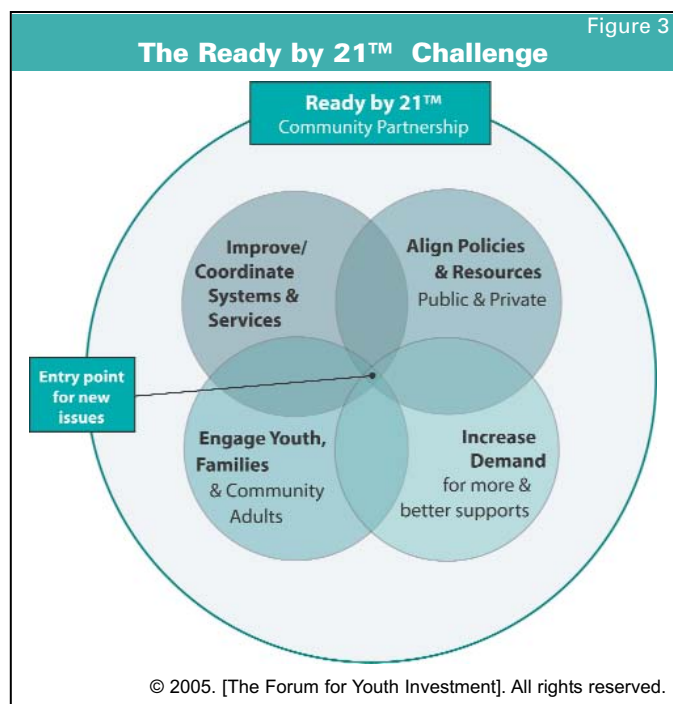
Thinking differently is hard. Getting people to think from a youth-centered rather than system-centered perspective requires ongoing education and reinforcement. But acting differently is harder and acting together is harder still.

To get results, the Forum cannot simply frame ideas and present them and get people to discuss them in the comfort of hotel conference rooms. We have to help stakeholders across the country — from parents to program developers, policy makers to the voting public — change the way they do business. Specifically, they have to change the way they *do* change.

We have to find change makers and then somehow follow them home. We have to help them move ideas to impact by linking and aligning the stakeholders, structures and strategies currently in place in order to create the capacity to sustain the *Big Ticket, Big Tent* change needed to support *Big Picture* improvements in opportunities and outcomes for children and youth.

We have to do a better job of getting our ideas into real-time state and local efforts to not only commit to:

- engaging youth and families;
- improving and coordinating systems and services;
- aligning policies and resources; and



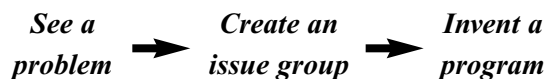
- increasing overall community demand for more and better supports,

but to do so at scale, toward the same goals, on the same schedule, with the right people on board (see Figure 3).

This means helping those within a sphere work better together (such as cabinet secretaries coming together to create a strong children’s cabinet, single-issue community coalitions coming together to create shared agendas). It means helping those engaged in one sphere recognize the value of connecting to the others (such as school district administrators engaging students and families and linking with community resources).

Most importantly, it means finding a core group of change makers willing to assume responsibility for connecting all the dots and calling the hard questions to slow the pace of incremental, fragmented actions that “add on” but do not necessarily “add up.”

We have to stamp out the crisis-driven change philosophy that says:



We’ll know we’re doing business differently when new problems are brought to the center of broad and deep community partnerships rather than used as an excuse to create a new policy, new structure or new ad campaign.

## Where We’re Going, Who We Want to Be, Why We Need You

I’ve painted a pessimistic picture of the state of child and youth policy and practice in the United States. But I am not pessimistic. I, and the Forum staff, are inspired by your work and by the work of the people you represent and support in states and communities. We’ve spent the last few years finding change makers and we’re learning a lot.

We’re working with state-level change makers like Steve Patrick and Bob Stark at the New Mexico Community Foundation who saw an opportunity to set a series of linked events in motion and grabbed it to create structures that help diverse stakeholders come together to push for innovations in a state with few extra resources. The Forum is helping them “change the odds” as they (see Figure 4):

- Create a Children’s Cabinet to align policies and resources across and within public systems;
- Create a statewide Youth Alliance that is bringing young people together in their communities and across the state to identify problems and solutions and work with legislators and the Children’s Cabinet to plan change;
- Strengthen the capacity of the New Mexico Forum for Youth and Community to improve the quality and coordination of youth programs and youth work; and
- Create Regional Point Organizations that can be hubs for community convening and capacity building in a very rural state.

We’re working with Amy Averett and Suzanne Hershey, local change makers in Austin, who saw the Forum’s “Dashboard” tools for taking stock of policies and programs (see Figure 5) and brought over twenty agencies, organizations and initiatives together to create

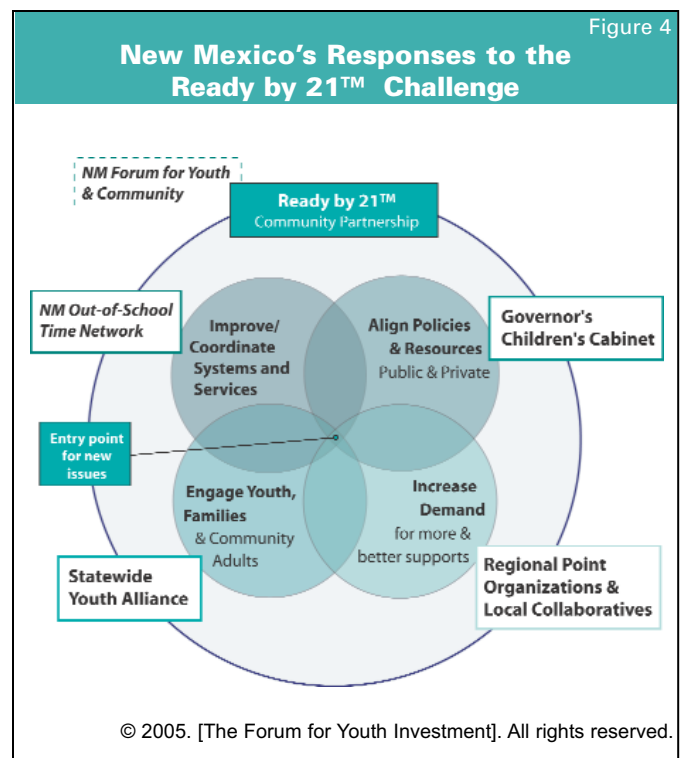


Figure 5

| Defining Outcomes that Cut Across the Age Span |   |   |   |  |  |   |
|--|---|---|---|--|--|---|
|  | EARLY CHILDHOOD<br>(0-TO 5-YEAR OLDS)               | ELEMENTARY<br>(6-TO 10-YEAR-OLDS)                                     | MIDDLE SCHOOL<br>(11-TO 14-YEAR OLDS)   | HIGH SCHOOL<br>(15-TO 19-YEAR OLDS)  | YOUNG ADULTS<br>(20-TO 24-YEAR OLDS)   |   |
| <b>Developmental Areas</b>                     |   |   |   |  |  |   |
|  | <b>LEARNING<br/>(BASIC AND APPLIED ACADEMICS)</b>   | All young children ready to learn                                     | All children developing basic skills & competencies                                 | All youth are succeeding in school   | All young people are fully prepared for higher education or work                                       | All young adults enter workforce or higher education with marketable skills   |
|  | <b>THRIVING<br/>(PHYSICAL HEALTH)</b>               | All young children fully immunized                                    | All children meet physical standards for developmental age                          | All youth develop proper nutrition, hygiene & exercise routines                | All youth are engaged in physical activity & avoid risk-compromising behaviors                         | All young adults have good health & health habits                             |
|  | <b>CONNECTING<br/>(SOCIAL/EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING)</b> | All young children have appropriate attachment to a significant adult | All children have positive self awareness, ability to express themselves            | All youth engage in socially acceptable behavior & have a healthy self-concept | All young people have a sense of Independence as well as positive relationships with those around them | All young adults Foster personal & social growth in the people In their lives |
|  | <b>WORKING<br/>(VOCATIONAL CAREER EXPERIENCE)</b>   | All young children have awareness that adults work                    | All children have positive attitudes toward the employment of adults in their lives | All youth are aware of possible career paths that give them hope and purpose   | All young people make a successful transition to adulthood   | All young adults are employed with a living wage and benefits                 |
|  | <b>LEADING<br/>(CIVIC AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT)</b> | All young children feel supported by a community around them          | All children accept rules & social boundaries                                       | All youth demonstrate attitudes & behaviors of civic responsibility            | All young people are involved in programs to give back   | All young adults are making a difference in their community                   |

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Figure 6



Photo courtesy of Ready by 21™ Austin, 2005

Ready by 21™ Austin — committed to coordinating resources and engaging over 400 youth in the process (see Figure 6).

And, hopefully with funding approved next week from Atlantic Philanthropies, we'll have dedicated resources to expand our learning network to include a handful of other states and communities.

These leaders and many others are already trying to change the way their states and communities do business. Our job is to challenge their plans and support their efforts to create effective structures that increase community capacity for sustained change toward complex common goals.

We need to support the current generation of change makers already out there by getting them the information, tools and on-the-ground supports that will help these champions get the supports they need.

*Toward this end, over the next year the Forum is committed to finding the funds to (see Figure 7):*

- **partner deeply with no more than ten of these state and local change makers** to learn what it takes to create the capacity for sustained change so we can share the lessons more broadly, effectively and efficiently and get them ready/positioned to share with others as well.
- **partner with at least ten national organizations that represent and support the state and local stakeholders** — corporations, funders, educators, advocates, community foundations, United Ways — and believe in the goal so that the messages and supports don't flow from the Forum but come directly from these networks.
- **deepen and tighten our research, documentation, communication and relationship development efforts** so that we are on task all the time, mining local partners for real stories of what it takes and what it nets, providing national partners with what they need, brokering connections.

These tasks increase the likelihood that change makers get the tools and supports they need. But it will take a national challenge to get them the mandate they need to stay the course.

*Toward this end the Forum is committed to using the next year of focused work as a base for building the broad national partnership needed to issue a formal challenge to the country to change the odds for youth.*

Before December 31, 2006, we, the Forum staff and board, hope to be standing on a stage with you, with those who could not be here, and with the communities where change is happening, to report on our progress, renew our commitments and to challenge and support every community and stakeholder group in the country to join us to reaffirm the fundamental social contract every citizen needs to make to ensure that every young person is **Ready by 21: Ready for College, Ready for Work, Ready for Life.™**

We have a lot of work ahead of us to be ready to issue this challenge.

To be credible, we will have to offer the details of coordinated actions that have been taken within groups, across our groups and together as a whole. We will have

Figure 7

**Create a Strong National Partnership to Issue the Ready by 21™ Challenge to the Country**

| Improving & Coordinating Systems/Services  | Increasing Youth Engagement & Community Demand | Linking & Aligning Policies & Resources |
|--|--|---|
| <p><b>Partner with national nonprofits, funders and corporations</b> that represent key stakeholder groups to ensure that messages flow through them, not just from the Forum.</p> |  |   |
| <p><b>Focus our research, writing and communication efforts</b> to ensure that we mine the partnerships for lessons, examples and champions.</p>                                   |  |   |
| <p><b>Partner with state and local change makers</b> to support their efforts, learn what it takes, create networks, tools and examples for others.</p>                            |  |   |

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to show that these actions have netted real results in the capacity of communities to sustain change — real shifts in structures and strategies and stakeholder priorities. These report-outs will have to come from community change makers as much as from national organizations. This cannot be seen as a top-down effort.

To move forward, we will have to demonstrate that the challenge to all communities is being issued by those who have the resources to follow through — elected officials, corporate leaders, private funders, individual champions.



We will have to demonstrate that this movement is not about the Forum, that it is guided and funded through a broad national partnership that is moving ideas to impact through multiple interconnected routes.

To be successful, we will have to remember that the goal is to increase the quality and quantity of youth investment and youth involvement. This is not just about helping communities support their young people. It is about helping young people support and improve their communities (*see Figure 8*). They have the passion, the optimism and the perspectives we adults need to stay the course.

Martin Luther King, Jr. said: *“When you are right you cannot be too radical, when you are wrong you cannot be too conservative.”*

Conversations with youth and adult change makers across the country leave us confident that we are right. We need your help to create a radical, bipartisan movement to change public will and public policy. Together, I know we can change the odds.

I thank you for your efforts and look forward to your continued support.



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