



SUMMER 2008 SPOTLIGHT:

Youth Voice: Listening to Refugee and Immigrant Youth

**"The Heart of a Refugee" by Juana Hernandez (Age 11)**

The refugees	The refugees	The refugees
They leave The ones they love	They walk through The desert	Their feelings are buried In the desert
Searching for a Better future	With No water	Their dreams Die With them
The refugees	Many die of thirst Hunger for the freedom That they never find	I will always Have the heart Of a refugee
They leave their Countries To start a new life		

"Youth Voice" refers to efforts that incorporate the input and participation of youth into planning activities that affect them, or as defined by the Washington Youth Voice Handbook, "the active, distinct, and concentrated ways young people represent themselves throughout society." [6] Adults often assume what youth need, or overlook the importance of intentionally soliciting youth input. Yet, youth themselves—such as Juana Hernandez, the 11-year-old poet quoted above—make clear that their observations and sentiments can be poignant and insightful.

The organization "Youth Engagement and Voice" explains:

*When young people participate in decision-making (as equals) with adults, mobilize and create or change public policy, and take influential leadership roles in organizations and institutions, the benefits accrue to adults, organizations and communities as well as contributing to the positive development of young people themselves. [9]*

In order to highlight the contribution and talent of newcomer youth, this BRYCS Spotlight article focuses on the newly created [Youth Arts & Voices Web page](#), which showcases art by refugee and immigrant youth, along with resources and information about youth arts programming. The Web page is organized around the following broad topic areas:

- **Youth Arts & Voices Galleries:** Across the top of the homepage, readers can find a variety of PowerPoint presentations highlighting the artwork of refugee and newcomer youth in the United States. Next to the word "Galleries," there are pictures of a television, pencil and paintbrush, a painting pallet, a camera, and a video recorder. To view the slideshows of students' work, click on the icon you wish to view and open the PowerPoint!
- **Youth Arts Web sites:** This section provides readers with an array of Web information divided into 15 sections and categorized for easy sorting. It includes a variety of arts resources, from spoken word to sites for refugee and immigrant youth. Information about organizations and funding opportunities is also included.

- **Children's Museums:** There are ten children's museums described, located nationally and internationally, with Web links containing artwork, exhibitions, and general museum information. Art-based competitions, exhibitions, and exchange programs are also listed here.
- **Expressive Arts Programs:** This section describes 14 programs around the United States that focus on arts for youth through formalized programs designed for refugees and immigrants. Programs vary from dance and music, to digital media creation, drawing and sculpting, focusing on diversity and freedom of expression.
- **Highlighted Resources:** Organized according to free downloads or resources available for purchase, this section includes dozens of resources for service providers in the following topic areas: community building, art education models, art education and federal policy, art therapy, art integration, and funding. Descriptions for each resource are provided, along with contact information for further inquiries.
- **Other Programs:** This highlights international art programs and organizations that are operating around the world. Organizations include United Nations agencies such as UNHCR and UNICEF, as well as the programs they support to further art and creative expression among youth, particularly refugees and newcomers. Program descriptions and Web links are included about these international efforts supporting youth and the arts.

Though limited research exists on the specific benefits of arts programming for refugee and immigrant youth, analysis by BRYCS staff [2] indicates that benefits from cultivating the creativity and input of newcomer youth can include, among other rewards:

- Developing identity
- Offering challenge and inspiration
- Positive youth development
- Providing a peer community, and
- Promoting tolerance

**Identity:** Artistic expression—whether written, visual, or other formats—allows newcomer youth to convey, explore, and integrate their cultural and ethnic heritage. The story and accompanying picture for “Forgotten Words”—written and illustrated by two 11-year-old girls—tell the story of a Latin American student who regrets having forgotten her Spanish while in the U.S. She resolves (in English) to work harder to regain her native language skills. [3] Another example of identity development comes from Project CREATE of the Southeast Asian Resource Action Center (SEARAC), designed to help Southeast Asian youth to “bridge their American lifestyle with that of their cultural traditions” by improving communication between the generations through documentation of life stories and collaborative projects. Read more about [Project Create](#), in this BRYCS Promising Practices description.

**Inspiration:** Arts programming can challenge and inspire youth by providing productive mental and physical stimulation, at a developmental period when self-expression can be both necessary and difficult. For youth still acclimating to the language and culture of a new homeland, the arts can provide an avenue for self-expression that is liberated from the constraints and difficulties of a new language. The Milagro STARS program provides comprehensive after-school and summer cultural arts programming for low-income children in Palm Beach County, Florida, by targeting first-generation Americans with limited English proficiency, education, and acculturation skills. Read more about [Milagro STARS](#), in this BRYCS Promising Practices description.

**Positive youth development:** By channeling young people's interests, youth arts can provide prevention and diversion from risky behaviors, by guiding youth towards positive activities. The “Telling Your Own Story” project, a collaborative project of the Maryland Multicultural Youth Center, reaches out to at-risk youth through an afterschool acting and improvisation program that develops identity and teamwork. This collaborative program with the Round House Theatre and the Arts and Humanities Council of Montgomery County, was developed to give teens positive after school alternatives to avoid risky behavior. [7] The value of such programming was underscored by Janet Reno, a Former U.S. Attorney General:

*Young people who are involved in making something beautiful today are less likely to turn to acts of violence and destruction tomorrow. The arts . . . provide opportunities for youth from all backgrounds to do something positive and creative with their talents and their time. We all need to support the arts. In doing so, we are telling America's youth that we believe in them and value what they can be. [5]*

**Community:** By developing a peer community, youth arts can offer a safe space to explore cultures—both heritage and adoptive cultures—and to create community with other youth from both similar and different cultures. The [African Refugee Artists Club and Youth Development \(ARAC\)](#) is an organization of young African refugee artists, founded by Atem Aleu, a Sudanese artist living in Salt Lake City, Utah. ARAC was founded to provide mutual support to young artists, to further their skills as artists, and to enhance their abilities to tell their stories. In 2007, ARAC hosted a 30-day workshop for 20 young artists at the Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya, and ARAC plans to host another Kakuma workshop in 2008.

**Tolerance:** Youth arts programs can promote tolerance by challenging stereotypes, humanizing those who seem different, and making connections across ethnic barriers. For example, the PBS television show *In The Mix* created “Teen Immigrants: Five American Stories,” a half-hour special to “introduce viewers to the hearts and minds behind unfamiliar faces, helping them break down negative stereotypes, celebrate diversity, and gain tolerance and understanding across lines of color and nationality,” and emphasizing “what everyone has in common, encouraging them to interact with peers from other countries.”[8]

One of the refugee youth producers from the documentary “One Family” expresses this sense of community and tolerance regarding her co-producers in the Global Action Project—youth who experienced war in Bosnia, Burundi, Serbia, and Sierra Leone:

*We share things; we respect each other, even though we're from different countries. Now we're together, we're living a life in this strange country, without having fear. We're just walking like one family.[4]*

Giving refugee and immigrant youth the chance to provide input in a new culture can generate both feelings of powerlessness and empowerment: overcoming the hurdles of language and culture can be disorienting, while recognition of a youth's voice within his or her new country can produce feelings of accomplishment and of being at home in a new land. This new BRYCS [Youth Arts & Voices Web page](#) is one way of providing a forum for refugee and immigrant youth to showcase artistic accomplishment, complemented by a collection of resources for encouraging creative youth expression in newcomer programming.

In the words of Atem Aleu, founder of ARAC:

*The world of art helps people see life differently, for both artists and those who see their work. Art truly has the potential to change lives, and this is never more true than for refugee artists and for those exposed to their powerful storytelling. I know because it has changed my own life and continues to do so.[1]*

## Resources for Incorporating Youth Voice into Programming

- BRYCS' [Positive Youth Development Toolkit](#), published in June 2006, highlights many organizations and programs integrating youth voice in their decision-making and planning processes.
- [Involving Young People: Documenting Youth Participation Strategies for Newly Arrived Communities](#), published in 2001 by the Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues (Australia), includes sections on the barriers and process of participation, personal and social development, and models for “Best Practice”, in a context focusing on newcomer youth programming.
- The National Resource Center for Family Centered Practice and Permanency Planning – [“Youth Voice” Resource Page](#) presents a thorough listing of more than 50 print, audio, video, teleconference, and Web-based resources for child welfare providers.
- [Youth Voice: A Guide for Engaging Youth in Leadership and Decision-Making in Service Learning Programs](#), produced by Learn and Serve America, addresses topics such as youth voice models, youth/adult partnerships, and cultural consciousness.

## REFERENCES

1. African Refugee Artists Club and Youth Development Web site. <http://www.brycs.org/clearinghouse/clearinghouse-resource.cfm?docnum=2449>. See BRYCS Youth Arts & Voices, under the [Youth Arts Websites / Refugee & Immigrant Artists Sites](#) for more on Atem Aleu.
2. BRYCS. (2007). *Helping Refugee Youth Find the Right Path*. <http://www.brycs.org/clearinghouse/Highlighted-Resources-Helping-Refugee-Youth-Find-the-Right-Path.cfm>.
3. Chin, N. (2003, September/October). Forgotten words. *Stone Soup*. <http://www.stonesoup.com/archive/writing/818>. See BRYCS Youth Arts & Voices, under [Children's Museums](#) for more on the "Stone Soup Museum of Children's Art".
4. Documentary Project for Refugee Youth. *One Family*. <http://www.brycs.org/clearinghouse/clearinghouse-resource.cfm?docnum=0333>. See BRYCS Youth Arts & Voices, under [Highlighted Resources](#) for more on *One Family*.
5. Farnum, M., Schaffer, R. and Carlson, K., Eds. (1998). *The YouthARTS Toolkit: Art Programs for Youth at Risk*. <http://www.brycs.org/clearinghouse/clearinghouse-resource.cfm?docnum=2052>. See BRYCS Youth Arts & Voices, under [Highlighted Resources](#) for more on the YouthARTS Toolkit.
6. Fletcher, A. (2006). *Washington Youth Voice Handbook: The what, who, why, where, when, and how youth voice happens*. Olympia, WA: CommonAction; 2006 (12-13).
7. McEwan, P. (2008, March 19). Students learn to express themselves through acting. *Gazette.net*. [http://gazette.net/stories/031908/montsch03221\\_32357.shtml](http://gazette.net/stories/031908/montsch03221_32357.shtml). The Maryland Multicultural Youth Center is part of the Latin American Youth Center (LAYC) family of organizations. See BRYCS Youth Arts & Voices, under [Expressive Arts Programs](#) for more on LAYC.
8. PBS. (1999). Teen Immigrants: Five American Stories. *In the Mix*. [http://www.pbs.org/inthemix/educators/5\\_stories.html](http://www.pbs.org/inthemix/educators/5_stories.html). See BRYCS Youth Arts & Voices, under [Youth Arts Websites / Television](#) for more on *In the Mix*.
9. Youth Engagement and Voice Web site. <http://www.youthengagementandvoice.org/about.cfm>.