

Mayor's Youth Office

Jane Driscoll, Director

In 1981, Mayor Sanders established a Task Force on Youth to identify concerns, interests and needs of young people. The primary recommendation of this task force was the creation of an office to provide a voice for young people in City government and the community at large. Thus the Mayor's Youth Office was established.

Through various programs over our first four years we have endeavored to help our young people develop a sense of belonging and involvement in their community. By offering a wide range of programs — from youth employment to performing arts — we are attempting to provide them with affordable, accessible opportunities which develop competence and self-esteem, while enabling them to be of service to a community which needs them.

While our goals of youth participation and empowerment have always been quite clear, this past year we have experienced an intangible, not easily perceived difference. The young people in our programs have graduated from participation to leadership, relying on us now for guidance and support, more than structure or implementation. They view the Youth Office as their office, to meet their needs, to create new challenges and opportunities, to develop their own responses to issues that concern them. We are beginning to see youth empowerment in action.

Some of the special programs we have initiated together are listed below:

The Queen City Special

The *Queen City Special*, a community newspaper designed, organized and written by area young people, is now in its second year. The paper has involved over 200 teens as reporters, photographers, graphic artists and editors, and boasts a regular staff of 40 students. Each issue attracts new faces and new ideas. The *Queen City Special* provides youth



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with their own voice and is proof *positive* to the community that delinquent acts are not the only acts in which young people are involved. Teens become aware of issues and events in the community, and not only report on them but often become involved gaining work and life experience. This draws them out of their small peer networks and enables them to learn more about their community and the society which they will one day govern.

In deciding what news to cover, the youth staff also has the power to influence and inform their peers. This decision-making has led to informative articles on the neighborhood crime watch program, school board elections, youth unemployment, nuclear arms and teen suicide, as well as spotlights on student artists, musicians and entrepreneurs and coverage of youth events and activities. Youth and adults alike appreciate the uniquely youth perspective on these stories, many of which are ignored by the regular media.

The *Queen City Special* has had a positive impact on youth coverage by the established media. A research project completed by a

Youth Office intern this spring found that the number of articles on positive youth accomplishments in the local daily newspaper almost doubled between the six months prior to the start of *The Queen City Special* and the five months after the youth paper was started. Concurrently, the number of negative articles on youth decreased slightly. Overall, the daily newspaper paid closer attention to youth concerns after the inception of Burlington's own youth newspaper.

Community businesses and groups are also involved in the day to day operations of the newspaper. *The Queen City Special* is supported almost entirely by advertising from Burlington restaurants, shops and service agencies. Advertisers not only get the satisfaction of supporting and participating in a youth project, but get new customers through the advertising power of the 7,000 copies of *The Queen City Special* which are distributed to a loyal readership every three weeks.

The Performing Arts Program

The Performing Arts Program of the Mayor's Youth Office has united young artists with local professional artists, city government, schools, and the business community. It has provided public showcases for youth to display their talent in all art forms, thereby building their self-confidence, talent and sense of belonging to the community.

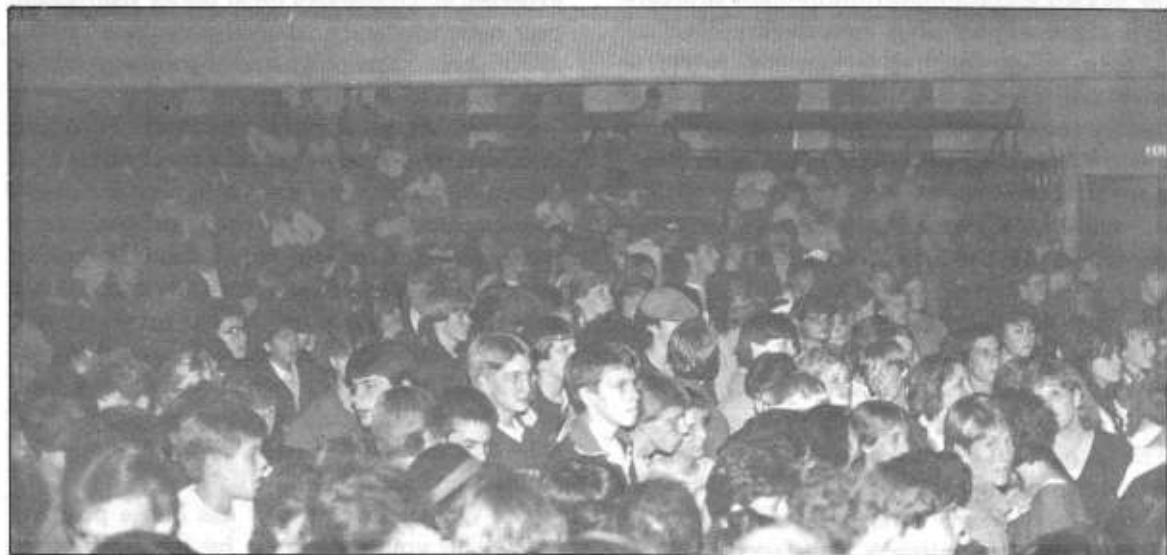
Most of the projects are the result of ideas brought to the Youth Office by young people. The Office encourages this input and works with these youths through all stages of an event

helping them to develop their concepts and to utilize appropriate professionals as resources. The young artists involved are instrumental in planning and carrying out the events from beginning to end. This intricate involvement teaches them the ways government and businesses operate and shows them how to work with the system to achieve their goals.

For the fourth year, we have sponsored **Teenage Band Concerts** in Battery Park showcasing young musicians, vocalists, dancers and actors. This ongoing concert series provides the first opportunity for many teen artists to perform and to be seen by professionals. It also offers an outlet for youth especially among the bands, who are not interested in sports or other creative arts programs.

Last fall at the third **Battle of the Bands**, 11 bands performed for the 1,000 plus crowd, and the Youth Office received calls well before planning even began from businesses and members of the music community who wished to participate. As well as judging the event, they publicized it, reviewed it, and donated prizes that are especially coveted by the young musicians, including a professional demo tape. Many groups spend all year practicing for the competition and others have gone on to professional performances.

Posters for the Battle, as well as all our other events, are designed by aspiring graphic artists, giving them the opportunity to display their talents. Young technicians are trained by professional volunteers in lighting and sound operations while aspiring promoters learn



Audience at the Third Annual Battle of the Bands.

about event planning and decoration with the help of local businesses and agents.

An event which tackles the problems of drinking and the segregation of teenagers is the **First Night Teen Event**. First Night, a non-profit organization, began two years ago to offer New Year's events in non-alcoholic settings. It was a great success but there was one age group noticeably under-represented — the teenagers. First Night asked the Youth Office to address this concern. Working together, we filled the gap by sponsoring "First Night for Teens" in the City Auditorium with teen-made videos, teen bands, dancers, breakdancers, and movies for small children. This first year, over 8,000 persons of all ages attended the event. Teens, parents and younger siblings attended the same event without feeling the constraint or uneasiness too often assumed under such circumstances in our society.

Dance Troupes

Dance Troupes — This past year, breakdancing was very popular and there were a number of young teens who wanted a showcase for their abilities. The dancers lacked structure to develop and share their talents, so the Youth Office worked with them to establish a group which they call The Breakers. They have since performed and given workshops at Youth Office events in low income areas and housing developments.

The Breakers expanded their horizons to perform at schools and festivals in Burlington and beyond. They regularly receive invitations from other parts of the State and mix their volunteer work with paid employment to everyone's advantage. The Breakers also went to New York City to work with a group of Breakdancers there. They then worked with the Youth Office to raise funds to sponsor this group to come to Burlington for a series of workshops and performances. Many of these **New York Breakdancers** were black, poor, and had never left the city. This exchange enabled them to see and communicate with people who live in a very different environment, yet who share many of the same dreams and obstacles. Of course, this was true for Burlington's Breakers as well.

Recently, another young dance troupe, **Contrast**, specializing in modern dance, has formed. They have had several shows already awing their audiences with the originality of their choreography.

Programs for Young Children

Programs for Young Children — Child care is in scarce supply in Vermont, where for every five children needing care only 1.8 can find a space and Burlington is no exception. We believe that child care is a service for children and parents which strengthens, supports and complements the family, the school and the community and that the availability of quality, affordable child care is a priority. For these reasons, the Youth Office initiated the development of a new child care center in the downtown area, now called **The Burlington Children's Space**. A federal block grant appropriated by the Mayor and approval by the Board of Aldermen covered the one-time construction cost of this center. Not only has the Children's Space become self-sufficient by working with the private sector but the City receives rent from the Children's Space for its use of City property. The success of the Children's Space is displayed through its variety of programs and ability to have a well-paid (for child care) highly qualified staff while offering the lowest child care rates in Burlington. Thanks to a sliding fee scale, approximately half of the families served by the Children's Space are of low to moderate income. The center also offers infant and part-time care and has a significant percentage of special needs and protective service children. All of this is possible through the many partnerships the Child-



Members of Contrast, a dance group.

ren's Space has with state and local agencies, private business and the community.

In other outreach projects for younger children, the Mayor's Youth Office planned several Valentine's Day parties in the Riverside, Northgate and Franklin Square projects. Volunteer Committees from the projects helped decorate and supervise the events and a local troupe of young dancers, the Streeteens, performed. The Mayor's Youth Office also sponsored a December Holiday Party and a Halloween Party in the City's Memorial Auditorium. Over 400 children and their families participated in the Holiday Party. Local magicians, jugglers, singers and dancers, including the Streeteens, volunteered performances, and a university sorority helped supervise the party and serve food. Fundraising was also coordinated through the community, including donations of ice cream, cookies and gifts for the children. The annual Halloween Party, co-hosted with the Burlington Police Department, attracted over 800 children and their parents, who played games, dunked for apples and visited a "haunted house."

Teen Center

Teen Center — Since the Mayor's Youth Office started four years ago, we've talked with many, many teenagers about their concerns. The need for a community youth center has come up time and time again. Teenagers have told us they want a place to socialize, meet, play games, eat, hang-out or participate in programs they choose — or even organize themselves.

In response to this, we worked with some young people to submit a proposal to the City for a **Teen Center** in Memorial Auditorium. The Mayor recommended and the Board of Aldermen approved Community Development Block Grant funding for the center in late May.

It is now scheduled to be constructed by the Burlington Area Vocational-Technical Center at Burlington High School. We are very excited about having teenagers be this intricately involved with the establishment of the center and of having this be a cooperative venture between the School Department and the City. It is a rare opportunity and one that is most appropriate for this type of project.

The Teen Center will provide an outlet for many of the needs of Burlington youth. It will:

1) serve as a socializing center where adolescents can meet and interact in a con-

genial, relaxing atmosphere. There will be a concession counter where they can buy food or non-alcoholic drinks and listen to music. The food and drink prices will be cheap enough to fit their limited budget, yet enough to help cover the cost of operating the center.

2) serve as an employment training opportunity. By having adolescents involved with the management and organization of the center, they will learn valuable skills and earn income. It will also allow them to identify with a center that is truly theirs.

3) serve as an events center. Adolescents need a center where they organize and engage in events specifically tailored for themselves such as dance nights, movie nights, plays and performances, games nights or competitions, youth concerts, etc.

4) serve as a recreation center where adolescents can play educational, and leisure games at minimum or no cost. Such games will include board games, card games, pool, chess, checkers, darts, shuffleboard, etc.

5) serve as a referral, and counseling center. Several days a week, some youth-serving organization will have a representative available in a meeting room. The adolescents would not feel pressured to talk to the representative, but feel confident and reassured that such services are accessible. This program would be a service to young people and the service organizations as well. A main concern many of the organizations have is that adolescents do not readily come to them. With a representative available on "their own turf," initial use of the service would be made more casual and more likely.

6) offer educational programs. These might take the form of weekly workshops on various topics including dance, drug abuse, self defense, arts, etc.

Elderly Programs

Elderly Programs — The elderly and physically disabled who are living alone often have little or no consistent contact with the community they live in. They have certain needs that have to be met to insure their safety in the event of an emergency or illness. Two of our programs address these concerns.

For some of us, a snowstorm blankets the world in a winter wonderland. For others, snow and ice can virtually imprison them in their homes. **Operation Snowshovel** recruits youth and other volunteers to shovel the

sidewalks and driveways of elderly and physically handicapped residents of Burlington. Over 150 people participated in the program last winter.

Burlington DIALogue, a pilot program funded through a United Way grant, match volunteers with senior citizens to provide a daily telephone contact. This contact reduces the impact of isolation, makes a daily check on the person's physical and emotional well-being, provides supportive conversation, and offers referrals to social and community service when needed. DIALogue has served as an emergency service twice, the volunteer alerting local authorities. However, it has evolved from a five-minutes-a-day check to a 30-minutes-a-day friend, alleviating the problem of human loneliness.

Diversion Programs

Diversion Programs — The Youth Office often works with the Department of Probation and Parole, and similar programs to place juvenile offenders in community and service work. In one instance, a teen convicted of shoplifting wrote an "Open Letter," published in *The Queen City Special*, about why her actions were wrong and warning others not to follow her path. Another time, the Department of Probation and Parole had several persons who had committed minor infractions of the law and had to do community service to repay their debt to society. The Youth Office worked with the Department to have these individuals help sponsor and operate a free roller skating party for 215 youth from the housing projects, low to moderate income neighborhoods, and community agencies. These and other diversion projects offer the offenders a chance to make restitution at the same time as they teach them patterns of volunteerism and involve them in helping others.

International Workcamp

International Workcamp — The Youth Office sponsored its third International Peace Workcamp last summer. Volunteers from France, Germany, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Honduras and many other nations, came to Burlington to perform community services and work for international peace and understanding. Colleges, businesses, and community members provided housing, food, transportation, cultural exposure, and discussions with area residents and government officials.

The volunteers immersed themselves for three weeks in Vermont's social and political life. Most of their time was spent laboring on service projects which included rehabilitation work at the Riverside housing project and painting of the Chittenden Community Action Food Shelf. In addition, they shared meals with community residents and attended social events and government meetings.

As well as providing valuable services to our City, the Workcamp helped these international youth, local youth volunteers, and other community members to see the world in new ways. In turn, peace is promoted through mutual understanding on the personal level and through shared experiences in the community.

Education

Education — To improve the educational opportunities for Burlington's youth, the Youth Office works with educators, members of service organizations, businesspersons, local artists, parents and others on a two-tiered approach. The Mayor's Office and Youth Office work through the existing system by working with the school board, teachers and parents, by serving on committees to study methods for improving Burlington's educational system, such as a Task Force on Exemplary Education, a budget advisory board and a committee on truancy and the drop-out problem.

Summer City Campus

Summer City Campus, a two-week seminar for teenagers which offers courses in journalism, photography, video, dance, poetry and other art forms is one such program. Created to offer teenagers training in areas with little representation in the local school system, it provided information, experiences and skills development, while enabling the dozens of teen participants to work with local professionals in their fields of interest. The fact that these professionals are local, available, and approachable by young people on an ongoing basis is crucial to the continued success of this program. As well as building skills and knowledge, community ties are strengthened. "City Campus at Noon," in which some campus participants and other teens performed in lunchtime arts performances in City Hall Park, was another component of this program. Young poets, musicians, actors, and artists shared their talents in this downtown location, making the performances accessible to a wide audience.