

## Extending Support to Disadvantaged Urban Youth in Young Adulthood

Jean N. Scandlyn<sup>a\*</sup> and Heidi M. Grove-Voiles<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>*Departments of Anthropology and Health and Behavioral Sciences, Denver, USA;* <sup>b</sup>*TSI Connection, Denver, USA*

### Abstract

Most young people in postindustrial societies will not full adult status until their late twenties or early thirties and rely on families and institutions for some financial and social support during this period. Disadvantaged urban youth who are not college bound have access to few resources to help them gain the skills, knowledge, and experience necessary to compete successfully in the global economy. This article presents findings of a program evaluation of The Spot, an arts-based, youth driven, grassroots, drop-in center in downtown Denver, Colorado that serves youth ages 14-24, the majority of whom are 18-22. The evaluation provides evidence that a diverse, caring staff, a safe space in which to gather, and a balance between structured and challenging activities and time to “chill” with peers and staff are key components to support young adults as they move toward independence. Over the course of the evaluation, youth participants moved from a role as consultants to one of partners engaged in data collection, analysis and the presentation of results. The evaluation involved the collection of quantitative and qualitative data: this article presents an analysis of the qualitative data to provide context for the quantitative results that will be published separately.

*Keywords: young adults; disadvantaged youth; youth development; youth center*

### Introduction

One suspects, however, that every adult generation expresses public concern (or consternation) about the presumed inability of the next generation to live up to itself (Mouw 2005:257).

In today's postindustrial societies, the end of adolescence is clearly marked with graduation from high school or reaching the age of 18. Attaining the status of adulthood, however, is a more complex process (Jeffrey and McDowell 2004). Most young people in postindustrial societies will not attain full adult status, marked by establishing a separate household and achieving some degree of work and financial stability until their late twenties or early thirties.<sup>1</sup> For young people who have family support and economic resources, this newly designated life stage of “young adulthood” or “emerging adulthood” is characterized as a time of experimentation and exploration in which they develop human and social capital through higher education, professional training, and a variety of paid and unpaid jobs, internships and experiential learning (Furstenberg, Rumbaut, and Settersten 2005; Arnett 2000).

Anthropologists have long noted that a society's members view transitions from one life stage to another with anxiety. Regarding adolescence, parents, educators and youth development

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\* Corresponding Author. Email: jean.scandlyn@ucdenver.edu

specialists in the US focus on how to help young people, who are in the process of gaining independence, autonomy, and developing their personal identity, remain engaged in dominant social institutions of family, school, and community (Roth et al. 1998). Concerns include adolescents' productive use of leisure time, the dangers of peer subculture with respect to substance use and delinquency, and disengagement from mainstream institutions like school or religious institutions (Besharov and Gardiner 1999). In contrast, as adolescents enter young adulthood, adult concerns shift to young adults' ability to achieve independence and make long-term commitments to careers, partners, and children by seeking and securing key opportunities (Furstenberg, Rumbaut, and Settersten 2005), concerns that many young adults share as they focus on obtaining the skills, knowledge, and experience necessary to compete successfully in the global economy (Pew Research Center 2007).

As suggested above, the dominant image of young adulthood that defines this new life stage in post-industrial nations is based on the experiences and choices of young people with moderate to high levels of family and community support and economic resources. But what is this life stage like for young people who have grown up in poverty, who have experienced discrimination based on their race or ethnicity, who have dropped out of high school, whose employment opportunities are likely to be in low-paying jobs, whose families may rely on them for support, or who may already be parents? How do they gain the human and social capital they need to compete in the global economy? Where will they find the resources and support to explore and experiment? These young people are largely invisible in public discussions of young adulthood apart from issues of incarceration, crime, and substance use. While no more able to achieve the economic independence and stability of adulthood on leaving high school than their more affluent or well supported peers, they are more likely to enter young adulthood without a high school diploma or GED, to come from families with few resources to offer them, and to lack access to the structured support of higher education, internships, and stable, well-paying jobs.

Other than faith-based organizations, few non-commercial institutions specifically serve low-income young adults of color if they are not enrolled in higher education. The William T. Grant foundation titled their study of non-college youth "the forgotten half" (1998). The invisibility of the social and economic status of young adulthood is most evident among individuals who leave foster care at age 18. Although all youth exiting foster care are supposed to have a transition plan to help them attain independence (US DHHS 2008), they typically leave foster homes with few material possessions, little money, no housing, and few life skills. Despite attempts to improve transitional services for these young people, 25% will be homeless at some point after leaving foster care and few will have health insurance (Foster and Gifford 2005). For too many disadvantaged young people of color, young adulthood is more likely to lead to incarceration than to higher education (Sheldon 2004).

In the 1990s educators, counselors, and researchers turned their attention to community based youth development programs as a way "to help adolescents become competent, engaged, and responsible adults" (Roth et al. 1998). Successful programs incorporate a youth development model that concentrates on building self-esteem, confidence, and competence in social, academic, and life skills and not just on preventing or alleviating problems such as substance use and teen pregnancy. Programs that have been rigorously evaluated serve inner city adolescents of color in middle or high school (Catalano et al. 2004; Halpern, Barker, and Mollard 2000; LoSciuto et al. 1997; Roth and Brooks-Gunn 2003; Roth et al. 1998) and have been shown to be effective in reducing substance use and gang involvement and to foster positive

relationships with adults (Catalano et al. 2004; Roth et al. 1998). But little attention has been paid to young adults (18 and older) who participate in youth development programs and the role that these programs might play in helping them to develop human and social capital and in providing some support and structure during this transitional period.

In this article, the authors report the findings of a program evaluation of The Spot, an arts-based, youth driven, grassroots, drop-in center in downtown Denver, Colorado. In addition to the results from the 2005 evaluation presented here, the authors draw from their experience doing three years of continuous program evaluation from 2004 to 2006. The evaluation involved the collection of quantitative and qualitative data: this article presents an analysis of the qualitative data to provide context for the quantitative results that will be published separately. Although The Spot serves young people ages 14 – 24, the majority of participants are young adults ages 18-22. What became clear over the course of the evaluation was how important The Spot was to the young adults it serves as one of the few places in which they found support and a safe physical and emotional space to explore their interests and identity, experiment with new skills and behaviors, and develop human and social capital to participate more fully in the global economy on their own terms. In addition to providing evidence that disadvantaged young adults seek out and benefit from community centers that are arts-based and youth driven as much as do younger adolescents, the results of the evaluation contribute to the growing literature on youth participation in evaluation.

### *Young adulthood in postindustrial societies*

All societies mark the course of an individual's life in a relatively ordered sequence of statuses and roles. Although based on biological events such as birth, puberty, the onset of menstruation, birth of a first child, and death, these life stages are foremost social and cultural constructions that respond to changes in economic, social, and historical conditions. This is especially true for adulthood in which there are few rapid physical changes (pregnancy is a notable exception)<sup>2</sup> and the statuses that mark one as an adult – marriage, formation of a separate household, childbearing, and work at a living wage – require significant investment by the individual and his or her family of origin and therefore may not be achieved simultaneously.

By the 1990s in the US, adolescence had become a highly uniform stage in the life cycle (Fussell and Furstenberg 2005). Almost 90% of persons age 16, male and female, live at home, are enrolled in school, and are single and childless with slightly lower percentages of Black and foreign-born adolescents having this combination of statuses. Mandatory secondary education in the US is largely responsible for this change. In contrast, the period between ages 16 and 30 is characterized by great variation in the combination of these statuses both among and within groups by age, gender, ethnicity, and place of birth. High rates of participation in postsecondary education and other types of training, delays in the age of marriage and childbearing, unmarried women having children, and the desire to move out of the parental household without necessarily creating one's own family, contribute to a long period of semi-autonomy when many young people live in nonfamily households, move between their family of origin and nonfamily living arrangements, move in and out of formal education, and change jobs frequently. The result is that in post-industrial nations most young adults do not attain most or all of the markers of adult status until age 30 (Lowe 2001; Fussell and Furstenberg 2005). Responses of young adults reflect the social and cultural ambiguity of this highly variable time of life. In a survey of American young adults by Arnett (2000), almost a third of the respondents ages 26-35, ages at

which individuals have full legal status as adults, answered “yes and no” to the question “Do you feel that you have reached adulthood?”

Historically, a significant change in this period of life since the 1960s is the number of options for combining work, education, and housing available to young adults as they move through their twenties. With this flexibility and ambiguity come shifts in young adults’ connections to institutions. Colleges and universities, the military, and some workplaces offer health care benefits, subsidized housing, and other support to many young adults; however, in the US one’s family of origin is the most common source of economic and social support during this life stage (Arnett 2000; Bell et al. 2007). Moreover, James Coté and Anton Allahaar (1996) argue that characterizing this life stage by its flexibility obscures the decline in real wages for young adults and their marginalization in the service economy. Whereas educational requirements have increased for most jobs, skill levels have not changed significantly. Thus young adults’ higher rates of participation in higher education are a response to changing entry requirements and the structure of the job market rather than the demands of available jobs (Lowe 2001). Declines in relative wages of young adults compared to older workers means that it takes longer for young adults, especially males, to establish independent households (Danziger and Rouse 2007:10).<sup>3</sup>

Black and Hispanic young adults are most disadvantaged in the post-industrial economy. By 2000 the percentage of Americans who graduated from high school and completed two years of higher education increased for all races and for men and women. Since 1990, progress has slowed for youth of color and overall their participation in education and work is lower than that of native-born whites (Fussell and Furstenberg 2005:58). Research on the transition to adulthood clearly demonstrates that engagement in work and education in the early twenties is important in achieving economic independence and stability in the early thirties (Sandefur, Eggerling-Boeck and Park 2005). The ability and character of this participation is highly dependent upon current labor market conditions (Corocoran and Matsudaira 2005). This is particularly true for young adults whose parents are poor or who have little education (Osgood et al. 2005).<sup>4</sup> In a study examining ethnic and racial diversity in young adulthood, Mollenkopf et al. (2005) found that Latino and Black young adults ages 22-32, both male and female are more likely to have children and to be neither working nor in school than their native-born counterparts. They conclude that unmarried mothers “face worse odds in going to school or getting a job” (479). Since parents’ education is a strong predictor of a child’s educational attainment (Sandefur, Eggerling-Boeck and Park 2005), assisting young parents to continue their education has positive long term benefits for young parents, their children, and society.

Thus current research on young adulthood clearly shows the need to actively support disadvantaged youth of color in parenting, education, and employment during their late teens and early twenties. Although not a remedy for the larger political and economic forces that discriminate against young people of color and create barriers to their achieving economic independence, youth development programs that are attractive and responsive to the needs and interests of young adults can assist some of them to attain the skills and human and social capital to compete successfully in the global economy.

### *The Spot*

Responding to several summers of increasing gang-related violence among Denver’s urban young people, Dave DeForest-Stalls, a former Denver Recreation Department Director and

professional football player, and a group of young people who called themselves the “Com’n On Strong” grant-making group came together to found The Spot. “The original motivation to create ‘a place’ came from the frustration of working with ‘high risk’ urban adolescents and ‘having no place in Denver that welcomed them during the hours that were relevant to them, and that was accessible, safe, and fun’” (DeForest-Stalls 2003). The Spot opened in the summer of 1994 and in 1997, the agency purchased its current home, a 9,500 square foot two-story building just north of Denver’s central business district. The Spot is easily accessible by public transportation and is located in Five Points, the center of Denver’s Black community since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Hansen 2008). Despite the outmigration of many Black families from this area as a result of gentrification (Robinson 2007), The Spot continues to draw young people from throughout the Denver metropolitan area. Our survey revealed that 62.5% of The Spot’s participants lived in Denver, with 32.8%<sup>5</sup> living in suburbs to the north and east of the city, some of them traveling as much as an hour and a half by bus. Why and how The Spot continues to attract young people of color who have moved away from the neighborhood is a question for future study.

After a slow start in recruiting and retaining participants, DeForest-Stalls consulted inner city young people to design a program around their needs and interests. These centered on the four elements of hip hop culture: breakdancing, DJing, emceeing and graffiti art. The Spot’s mission was “To help at-risk urban youth, teens, and adolescents have fun and mature into productive adults by providing a safe, supportive night time youth center that encourages respect, creativity, education, employment, and career and youth development.” At the time of the evaluation, (2004-2006), the basic philosophy of The Spot was to “meet young people where they are,” build trust and supportive relationships with staff over time, and through those relationships provide encouragement and direction to gain life skills, education, and employment. Respect is expressed between youth and staff and youth to youth. Young men and women ages 14 to 24, from all ethnic, religious, economic, sexual orientations, and social backgrounds are welcome to participate in The Spot’s activities on a voluntary basis; there is no formal enrollment or membership required. Participants can participate in designing and managing programs through the Youth Council, which at that time met every Sunday. The atmosphere at The Spot is based on mutual trust and respect and an “open door” policy with only a few basic rules such as not bringing weapons (or turning them over to staff while on the premises)<sup>6</sup> and not coming to The Spot high or drunk or carrying drugs or alcohol. One of the central challenges faced by The Spot’s staff members is recognizing and diffusing conflicts and violence and offering young people the opportunity to handle conflict in a respectful, non-violent manner. In early 2003 The Spot merged with Urban Peak, a non-profit agency licensed by the state of Colorado to provide shelter services to homeless and runaway youths.

Participants build self-confidence and skills by expressing themselves through creative activities, mastering life skills, and setting and meeting goals. In 2005 The Spot offered the following formal programs on a regular basis: music recording and production studios, breakdancing, DJ classes, poetry (also known as spoken word), Men’s and Women’s Groups, Graffiti Art, GED, College Prep, and employment programs.<sup>7</sup> Excursions to cultural events and outdoor recreational sites (hiking, skiing), community projects, and block parties were offered periodically. In addition, The Spot has a large gathering room on the second floor equipped with a pool table, a Foosball table, Air Hockey, board games, a large screen television for showing movies, a computer lab, and a kitchen.

On Sunday nights pizza is served and on Thursday evenings there is a barbecue, regardless of the weather, in which participants and staff grill hot dogs and hamburgers outside. Young people can usually get something to eat if they are hungry and often prepare meals and snacks on mid-week evenings. The Spot maintains a supply of personal hygiene products and clothing for participants. Health care services specifically targeted to adolescents and young adults are offered through the clinic on Tuesday evenings and at Urban Peak's shelter. The Spot is located across the street from the Stout Street Clinic, a free clinic operated by the Colorado Coalition for The Homeless. Referrals are made to other local health care providers for more specialized or long-term care and Urban Peak provides assistance in applying for Medicaid and other forms of public assistance including food stamps, shelter with case management and access to its transitional housing program.

In 2005 The Spot had nine full-time staff members: Executive Director, Program Manager, Youth Opportunity (employment) coach, Youth Development and Research Specialist, GED Coordinator, Music Studio Coordinator, Music Studio Assistant, and two AmeriCorps volunteers.

### ***Methods: Participatory evaluation***

In late 2003, the Director of The Spot initiated a comprehensive evaluation of its programs. The evaluation had two goals. The first goal was directed externally to current and prospective funders to provide them with reliable information on the number of young people served at the Spot, evidence of the effectiveness of its programs based on outcome criteria, and the need for additional programs or improvements to existing programs. The second goal was directed internally to better align the Spot's mission with its programs and outcomes by participants, staff, and managers working together to define desired program outcomes (Friedman, Rothman and Withers 2006). The latter goal demanded a participatory approach in which participants, staff, and managers identified appropriate outcomes, designed data collection tools, and provided input into the analysis and interpretation of data (Flores 2008; Minkler and Wallerstein 2003).

Because the majority of the young people who participate in The Spot's programs have experienced discrimination, marginalization, and other negative interactions with mainstream institutions, e.g., schools, police, juvenile justice, child protective services, and foster care, the current executive director of The Spot had several concerns as we began the evaluation. First, the evaluation must be designed to serve the needs of The Spot's participants and not treat them merely as subjects of research. Second, the executive director was concerned that the data be collected in a way that respected young people's autonomy and did not undermine their trust in the Spot's staff or their sense of safety. Both concerns contributed to our commitment to involve the young people at The Spot in the evaluation process.

In the first year of the evaluation, we thought that youth would serve as consultants in the development of the survey instrument and as subjects in providing information through the survey, the count, and informal interviews (Checkoway and Richards-Schuster 2003). The initial draft of the survey was developed from the survey used by Campa Consulting in the fall of 2001 and early spring of 2002.

It was then presented to the Youth Council where it was pre-tested and revised using their comments and suggestions on content and wording. All of the staff and managers and members of The Spot's board of directors then reviewed the survey. What we did not anticipate was that a core of participants would take on active, steady roles in collecting, entering, and analyzing data,

moving from their ascribed role as consultants to a self-determined role as partners, eventually participating in presenting findings of the evaluation at the annual meeting of the Colorado Public Health Association in 2005. During the first year, two young women volunteered to help with the count with three or four other young people working with us on a more casual basis during the week. These young adults sat with the evaluator each night, entered participants' information on the sign-in sheet and ensured that no one slipped into the building without being counted or being counted more than once. Each subsequent year a group of 3-4 young people assumed the role of research assistants.

As a consequence of the potentially negative connotations of research in this population, the evaluation team did not seek approval from the university's Institutional Review Board the first year (2004) and all data were collected for internal use only and reported at the aggregate level. Throughout the evaluation, the evaluation team incorporated procedures to secure informed consent of participants, protect their confidentiality, and ensure that their participation was voluntary. Participants' and staff members' responses to the first year's survey and count were so positive, that they requested that the evaluator submit a proposal to the Institutional Review Board of the University of Colorado Denver so that subsequent data could be published. The data presented here are from 2005, but are informed by the results of the previous and following year's findings.

In February 2004 the evaluator met with the Executive Director of the Spot and all staff to complete a logic model exercise. Through this exercise the team identified outcomes directly linked to current programs that they wanted to measure in the evaluation. With the evaluator, this group developed an evaluation plan that built on a previous evaluation completed in 2001 by Campa Consulting. This plan was used for the next three years.

#### Unduplicated Count

From April 25 to April 28, from 5:30 p.m. when the doors opened until 10:30 p.m. when they closed, each person who entered The Spot was asked to sign in giving their first name (which could be a street name or false name as long as they were consistent), their date of birth (to aid in eliminating duplication), age, gender, ethnicity, if it was their first time attending The Spot, and the year they first attended the Spot if it was not their first visit. Once duplicates had been eliminated, only non-identifying information (age, gender, ethnicity and Spot attendance) was entered into SPSS for analysis. Because of variation in the number of participants during the week, data were collected from Sunday through Thursday evenings (in 2004-2006 The Spot was closed Friday and Saturday). A bowl of candy served as a small incentive for signing in.

#### *Participant survey*

From May 4 to May 8, each youth who entered the door was asked to complete a four-page written survey, not to disclose any identifying information on the survey, and, when they had completed it, to place it into a cardboard box. The evaluator or a staff member was available to assist young people in completing the survey if they requested help or appeared to need assistance. The survey took participants from 10-15 minutes to complete; although it generated a large amount of useful data that will be reported in a subsequent publication, it was too long and cumbersome for this population despite our having it reviewed and pre-tested by the youth council. Despite this, only five individuals refused to complete the survey each night (total of 10), resulting in a refusal rate of 4%. Survey responses were coded and entered into SPSS 12.0 for analysis. There was no identifying information collected on the surveys. A total of 128 surveys were completed. Participants received \$2 in McDonald's gift certificates as an incentive for completing the survey.

### *Observation of programs and interactions*

The evaluator was present in the building for each day of the count and survey from opening to closing, with the exception of five hours for a total of 45 hours of observation. Each evening, the evaluator rotated through the various program sites at The Spot and spent the remainder of the time sitting in the lobby supervising data collection and observing interactions and conversing with staff and participants. General observations throughout the evening and informal interviews with staff and participants were recorded as field notes at the end of each evening's session. Identifying information of those observed or interviewed were not included in field notes. Field notes were entered into Atlas.ti for coding and analysis by the evaluator.

### *Findings*

Through the logic model exercise and the first year of the program evaluation, the following research questions emerged that guided the analysis of data collected in 2005:

- What are the characteristics of the young people who come to The Spot and what numbers of young people does it serve?
- What is the pattern of participation (frequency, duration) at The Spot and how do these patterns affect selected outcomes?
- What is the relationship between having a positive relationship with staff and positive and negative outcomes?

### *Characteristics of the participants*

In 2005, results from the survey showed that participants at the Spot ranged from 14 to 25 years of age with 61.4% of those surveyed in the 18-22 year age group. One-third (29.7%) of participants were female and two-thirds (68.8%) male with 8.6 % identifying themselves as GLBQT and an additional 1.6% responding that they were unsure if they were GLBQT. The majority of young people gave their ethnicity as Latino (18%) or African American (43%) with an additional 18% checking multi-racial, 16.4% Euro/White, 1.6% Native American and 0.8% Asian/Pacific Islander. Participants are a mix of those new to The Spot (less than six months 34.4%) and those who have been coming longer (six months to two years 33.6%). Fully one-third of participants (32%) reported that they have been coming to The Spot for two years or more.

### *Observations and informal interviews*

Formal and informal observations as well as interviews provided contextual data to understand and interpret the survey data and to observe changes in individual behavior and attitudes over time, both the two weeklong periods in 2005 and over the three-year period of the evaluation. The following results are presented in the first person from the point of view of the evaluator.

### *Basic Needs*

From my observations and informal conversations it was clear that many of the young people at The Spot were not meeting or barely meeting their basic needs for food, clothing, and shelter and physical safety. Not only was attendance highest on nights when formal meals were served, young people eagerly consumed any food brought to the facility and often complained of hunger or reported not having eaten all day. Although according to the survey only 9.9% of the participants literally living on the streets, an additional 22.6% lived in temporary housing

situations such as sleeping at a friend's apartment (couch surfing) or living with a relative that was not their legal guardian.<sup>8</sup>

### *Space to "Chill" and Resources for Creative Expression*

As indicated in the survey, participation varied in frequency from those who dropped in at The Spot once or twice a year to those who spent two to three evenings there each week. Participation in programs varied highly as well. After spending every evening for a week at The Spot I could recognize the regular participants and identify newcomers. Those who identified themselves as new to The Spot were greeted by a staff member and given a tour of the facility by a staff member or long-time Spot participant and introduced to other young people.

The Spot combines formal, organized and adult or expert led programs with an informal, drop-in center. Some participants used The Spot primarily as a place to visit with friends, check their email or work on projects in the computer lab, get something to eat, or just "chill." These participants often entered and exited the facility several times each evening. When the weather was good, the area on the corner outside the front door and the adjacent sidewalk served as extensions of the facility, with groups of young people and sometimes staff members clustered together talking. Some participants came only for specific events or activities, for example, to breakdance or step dance or for the poetry, Men's or Women's groups. Others came primarily on Sunday or Thursday evenings to get a meal. Attendance was highest on these evenings. The GED, Graffiti Art, and music programs, in contrast, are highly structured. Whenever I visited the GED classroom across the street, the atmosphere was one of "quiet industry" as I recorded in my field notes, with participants working in small groups but more typically by themselves or with the teacher or a volunteer coach. The walls of the lobby, hallways, and upstairs recreation area are covered in original graffiti created by The Spot's participants. When a participant or group of participants wants to create a new mural, they must present a formal proposal to the program staff for approval. The art changes approximately once each year.

The music program is housed on the first floor with state of the art music recording equipment in a series of recording rooms for single musicians and one for groups with an office from which activity can be supervised and assistance offered. Participants must sign up in advance to use the studio facilities and on most days a line forms thirty minutes before the doors open, especially on Sundays when sign up for studio time for the week begins. Participation averages 20 young people nightly. In 2005, the director of the music program was a musician with a degree in music production from a local university and provided instruction from beginning to advanced levels in music composition, arrangement, recording, and production. The program is limited primarily by staffing: when the director is not able to be there, the studio may be closed. Based on my observations, those participants who used the music studios valued the facility and its program and respected the structure that was established. Participants actively contributed their energy and labor to building and refurbishing the recording studios in 2003-04. In 2005, over 28 young people contributed to a compilation CD titled, "Changes" that sells for \$10 to raise funds for The Spot and showcase its programs. The only negative incident I recorded in my fieldnotes was the disappearance and probably theft of a keyboard from the studios.

### *Belonging and Ownership*

Many of the participants who visited The Spot two to three nights each week on a regular basis developed a sense of belonging and ownership of The Spot that was evident through formal and informal observations. With an anywhere from 30-70 young people participating in various

activities at The Spot each night, the building's facility was subject to a high level of wear and tear. Because The Spot's limited funds were used to pay staff salaries and other program costs, janitorial services were minimal and staff members were required to contribute to cleaning and routine maintenance of the facility. Whereas participants frequently dropped candy wrappers on the floor or left used paper plates and empty soda cans lying on tables or the floor, they also responded positively (with only minimal grumbling) to staff members' request to put away their trash or clean up at the end of the evening. More significantly, I observed over twelve instances in a two-week period when a young person took the initiative independently pick up trash, take full trash bags to the dumpster, or sweep common areas such as the entry or general recreation area. The following excerpt is from my field notes of March 21st:

At about 7:30, when everyone has finished eating, Robert comes downstairs with a broom and begins to sweep and clean up. He moves the couch away from the wall and sweeps the accumulated dust, cans, and other trash from behind it. All the time he keeps up a running dialogue about how dirty the Spot is, how people leave their trash all over the place and don't clean up after themselves and generally don't treat the place with respect. He links this to the disappearance two weeks ago of a small keyboard from Chris's office [director of the music program]. "Why would they take that? It's just stupid. This place is for everyone. It's free. It doesn't cost us anything. To steal it just wrecks it for everyone. It's just stupid. We should all take really good care of this place." And shakes his head.

Regular users of the breakdance studio and of the music studios took responsibility for keeping those areas clean and usually picked up after themselves without formal direction from staff members. Analysis of my field notes reveals that regular participants were most likely to engage in physical maintenance activities and to respond quickly to staff requests for assistance. On one occasion a young woman teasingly reprimanded a young man when he put his feet on the seat of the couch in the lobby: "What do you think you're doing? I don't want to sit on that couch after your dirty shoes have been there. Your momma wouldn't let you do that at home – don't do it here!" Some of these behaviors may have been initiated in response to my presence; nonetheless, these young people wanted to show me, an outsider, that they cared about The Spot and knew how to do this and what constituted "proper" behavior. It also marks their tenure – they have been coming to the Spot for many years and consider that they have an investment of time and energy that gives them some authority over other participants

### *Caring Relationships and Support for Change*

Relationships with staff members were important in motivating and reinforcing changes in behavior, e.g., non-violent conflict resolution, completing high school or obtaining a GED, leaving the streets, and resolving legal issues. A key example occurred on a weekday evening when I was supervising administration of the survey. Althea<sup>9</sup> and Brianna, regular participants who had been helping me with the survey sit next to me, behind the desk we have set up in the lobby. From my field notes:

Later in the evening, a young woman with her baby and her friend come downstairs. The young woman is holding the baby with its head down, which incenses Althea. She tells her very directly that she shouldn't hold her baby that way, that she'll give it brain damage. The young mother takes offense and gives her a very aggressive and challenging stare, telling Althea to mind her own business as she walks angrily out the front door. Althea is visibly getting angry and is struggling with whether to chase after the mother or not. Brianna is telling her to sit down and ignore her. But Althea gets up and flies to the door with Brianna and Cherie keeping her from exiting through the door. Althea shouts some things to the mother through the door, but eventually sits back down at the table. She says that the mother had no

right to get angry with her because she was right and trying to protect the baby from the mother who clearly didn't know what she was doing. Brianna says that although she thought the mother was wrong, too, you didn't see her getting in a fight. "I don't fight with stupid people. It's not worth it." I praise Althea for her restraint. She says that she wishes that Susie [staff member] were there to see her not get into a fight.

This incident and Althea's restraint in not pursuing Diana was repeated several times that evening and related to Susie who provided support and reinforcement for Althea's control of her behavior. Through the incident I learned that Althea was known for her temper and physical aggression and that finding other, non-violent ways for resolving conflict was something she had been working to change.

Although staff members did make formal appointments with participants to discuss goals, projects, and difficult events in their lives in private with confidentiality, the majority of interactions was informal, of short duration, spontaneous and took place in public spaces. For example, I observed an interaction between a staff member, and a young man whose girlfriend was pregnant. He asked how the girlfriend and the baby were doing and then discussed how he was doing. They discussed how he was responding to his girlfriend's moodiness, his concerns about finding a better job and their housing situation. The staff member encouraged him to attend the Men's Group where they could discuss these issues at greater length. Whenever another staff member saw Evelyn, she would ask her about her progress toward her GED. These conversations took place in public spaces in a way that other participants could observe the interaction and sometimes, if it was something the young person did not want known, hear, thus involving the community in discussing common issues and reinforcing behavioral norms.

For the staff, ensuring a safe environment by walking through the large facility periodically and being available to respond to possible problems was always in tension with meeting one-on-one with youth in need of counseling or support. Fieldnotes show that on every day the evaluator arrived before the doors opened there were 1-3 young people waiting outside the front door waiting to meet with a staff member. One of the most frequent codes in the notes is "family" linked to "The Spot" or "the staff." Staff members expressed concern that changes in the composition of the staff were disruptive and hard on participants and thus they encouraged young people to establish relationships with more than one staff member.

### *A Sense of Community*

Relationships with peers are very important to participants at The Spot for friendship, support, and sharing of resources. Young women and men would gather around babies and young children, watching the children for each other, playing with them, sharing clothing and other material goods, and, in the course of these activities, discussing discipline, feeding, health care, and other aspects of child care. One young woman chose to breastfeed her infant, a rare practice in this group of young women. Her example served as a source of extensive discussions of breastfeeding, sexuality, and how parenting affected relationships with their partners.

Although the GED program was housed in a classroom across the street from The Spot, participants would often stop by The Spot before or after their session and graduation was a time of celebration on both sides of the street. One evening I observed a group of five or six young women sitting on the platform in the breakdance studio. At the center, Brianna was braiding the hair of another young woman, Tiffani, who would be graduating with her GED the following day, which occasioned much good-natured teasing in the group. Everyone voiced their opinions on what Tiffani should wear to graduation and several said that they would be there to cheer for her. When I attended the graduation ceremony that weekend, these young women were indeed

there, cheering loudly as Tiffani crossed the dais and smothering her with hugs and kisses when it was over.

In addition to the GED graduation, during the evaluation I also witnessed celebrations of other significant life events: the presentation of a new baby, the departure of a participant who enlisted in the military, the return of a young man who had been in jail, the celebration when a young man achieved a month without smoking marijuana, and a young woman's decision to complete her GED. Although not all of these changes are sustained or goals completed, they serve to reinforce the value of individual initiative and effort and to provide positive examples.

### *Discussing Race and Ethnicity*

The evaluation sparked many active discussions among staff, participants, and the evaluator about racial and ethnic identity. Conversations often began as young people provided information for the nightly count:

“I'm Black, what do you think?”

“I'm a mutt -- White, Black, Indian, you name it.”

“What do you mean, what's my ethnicity?”

“I guess I'm White.”

“I don't like that question.”

The discussions covered question such as where these labels came from, why they persist, why funders and researchers are so obsessed with them, and why they are hard to define in any consistent way. On several occasions young people discussed their experiences with racial profiling, attitudes of strangers to them based on their supposed racial or ethnic background, and their own attitudes towards various groups of young people in the city.

Several Black and Latino(a) participants spoke to me at length about how important it was for them to have a place that respected their ethnic or racial background and culture and did not equate it with gang culture. At The Spot, youth subculture, i.e., breakdancing, graffiti, hip hop music, rap, anarchist symbolism, and spoken word performance were valued and expressed openly in contrast to more mainstream venues where it was highly commercialized or prohibited. In Denver, graffiti is heavily penalized and laws prohibiting it are strongly enforced.<sup>10</sup>

In formal interviews, all the staff members of The Spot emphasized the importance of staff diversity and its effect upon who participates in programs. For example, staff members noted that there had been a measurable increase in the number of young women coming to The Spot since the addition of two women staff members. The number of Latino/a youth attending declined when there were no Latino(a) staff members. Whereas individual participants might not seek help or develop strong relationships with staff members who matched their ethnicity, having a diverse staff sent the message that men and women of different sexual orientations, different youth subcultures, and different ethnic backgrounds were welcome.

### *Discussion*

The Community Action for Youth Project asserts that, based on research, the following five key elements are necessary for adult development: adequate nutrition, health and shelter; physical

and emotional safety, challenging and engaging activities and learning experiences, multiple supportive relationships with adults and peers; and meaningful opportunities for involvement and membership (Connell, Gambone, and Smith 2008:289-290). Successful elements of The Spot's program match findings from other program evaluations and from the literature on youth development.

Qualitative data from the evaluation clearly shows that young people who participate in The Spot's programs are often barely meeting their basic needs. Although few of the young people at the Spot will say that they are homeless, many are homeless or marginally housed, frequently hungry and lack access to preventive health care and health care education. These conditions relate to larger structural issues of poverty and institutional neglect that are beyond The Spot's mission and resources. Providing referral to housing services through Urban Peak and health care through its clinic the Stout Street Clinic links these young adults to important services. The Spot and programs like it should realize the potential of providing food for this population. As will be reported in the survey, cooking classes were one of the top programs that respondents said they would like to see at The Spot. Instruction in nutrition and active participation in meal planning, shopping and cooking would go a long way to improving overall health and well-being and is something that could incorporate informal discussions around parenting, budgeting, and assessments of young adult's living situations.

The Spot clearly provides a place that young adults feel is safe both physically and emotionally, a finding that is supported by survey responses. More importantly, young adults are able, with the support of the staff, to try different ways of handling conflict and resolving or living with differences. The open discussions of race, power, social class, and other thorny issues of American urban life and the ability to express experiences and emotions through art, dance, spoken word, and music with respect but not censorship are invaluable to young people who often silenced or ignored.

These activities challenge and engage the young adults who come to The Spot. Emilio, a young Mexican-American man who is now 21, began coming to The Spot when he was 14 to breakdance. Not only did he become an accomplished breakdancer, he now teaches breakdancing, choreographs programs, for the past year served as a full-time AmeriCorps volunteer at The Spot, and is moving to a permanent paid position with a local social service agency. During the course of the evaluation we heard many young people who came to The Spot to make recordings in the hope of becoming the next big rap star. They stayed, learned to create and produce CDs and to market them and left with an expanded vision of what opportunities were available to them, a key aspect of adult development (Catalano et al. 2004; Roth and Brooks-Gunn 2003).

Half of the young people lived outside the city and county of Denver, some of the traveling as much as 90 minutes by bus to come to The Spot, sometimes several times a week. When I asked one young woman why she traveled so far she replied: "These are my homies, my family. I need to see them." Whereas some of the young people come only to participate in a particular activity, for example, breakdancing, others come primarily for companionship and community. Providing a mix of structured and unstructured activities is essential to the development of these relationships. As Halpern, Borker, and Mollard (2000) note in their evaluation of youth programs in Chicago, through casual encounters with participants staff members are able to model and reinforce norms and behavior expected in mainstream institutions while at the same time showing respect for the expression of their individual and collective style.

Finally, perhaps the most difficult element to provide consistently is meaningful involvement. We were surprised at how interested a core group of young people become in the evaluation but we should not have been. Our surprise shows how much we assume about their abilities and interests and how we may dampen our expectations. Whereas some of the young people participated in collecting data because their friends were doing it or they liked the novelty, others became engaged in the process and what it meant: data that would support grants, data that could tell us more about who they were and what they needed and wanted, the anticipation of watching patterns emerge and then discussing their meaning and significance. Most importantly, they felt they were contributing to a project that might make a difference. As a result of working on the evaluation one young woman completed her GED and started attending college classes. Although she had to withdraw when her son was born, she has held steady employment since then and says that she will return to college.

Discussions of race and ethnicity and the divisions among groups of young adults in urban Denver that was on-going in 2003 and 2004 motivated young people at The Spot to take action to bring some of those groups together. Although “street kids” or “grunge punks” had been active in creating The Spot in the 1990s, most of these young adults now hung out at Sox Place, a faith-based drop-in center several blocks from The Spot. A core group of participants from The Spot planned a summer block party, to be held on the street between The Spot’s facility and Urban Peak’s administrative building. Approximately 250 young people attended the first block party. Participants supplied the time and energy to organize the event and to raise funds to rent a dunking booth. They worked hard to obtain the dunking booth because they felt that dunking staff and board members from The Spot would help unify them. In this respect, participants at The Spot recognized the power of such a “rite of status reversal” (Turner 1995:177-178) to reconnect individuals across lines of status differences, i.e., organizational hierarchy and race and ethnicity.

## **Conclusions**

The challenge these programs face is working with young adults who may not have the basic education, life, and social skills to compete for scholarships and internships to help them gain those skills but also to expand their awareness of the opportunities that are open to them (Halpern, Barker, and Mollard 2000). Programs like The Spot are most successful when they not only help young people gain skills and knowledge, but then link that competency to leadership, as with the case of the breakdancer described above. The group that organized the block party could be encouraged to extend their efforts to work with city government on race relations.

Involving young people not only as consultants on evaluations and program planning but as partners and even directors places them side by side with professional staff so that they are exposed to different types of work but also can see themselves in those roles. For younger youth who attend The Spot, space to be themselves away from gangs and school may be sufficient; for young adults, more opportunity for leadership is critical.

Youth programs cannot make up for the structural barriers to economic and social independence that are extending a period of partial dependency for all young adults in industrialized countries. But they can be a critical resource for disadvantaged urban youth who have limited access to the institutional resources such as higher education, paid and voluntary internships, and entry-level jobs that lead to career advancement.

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## Notes

1. Social norms of marriage and child-bearing are also commonly used by social scientists to measure the achievement of adulthood, but are strongly heterosexist and do not represent the desired goals of every individual so we have excluded them here.
2. Pregnancy is an exception in that a woman's body undergoes rapid and intense changes during pregnancy, labor, and lactation that do alter her physically and are socially observed through dietary changes and ritual. However, it is generally the first pregnancy and birth that mark a permanent change in a woman's or a man's social status and role to that of parent. Subsequent pregnancies and births are less dramatically marked.
3. Wages for females rose between 1969 and 2004, so that in 2004, by age 26 approximately half of females earn incomes at the poverty line or higher. In contrast, wages for males during this period declined, so that it now takes them longer to earn incomes at this level (Danziger and Rouse 2007:10).
4. In the same volume, Ted Mouw (2005) studied the effects of six different pathways to adulthood to see if the pathway itself, i.e., the sequence and timing of events such as graduating from college, having a child, getting married, living with parents or independently, affected outcome variables (education, poverty rate, income) at age 35. He found no significant effect for the pathway itself: all of the differences could be explained by each factor alone. Thus improving education, reducing early parenting, and providing job opportunities that make it possible for young adults to establish independent households are all important in increasing outcomes by age 35. The sequence in which they are achieved is not, however, critical.
5. The figures do not total 100% because 4.7% of respondents did not answer this question on the survey.
6. Youth would get the weapon back at the end of the night based on the understanding that the weapon was a survival tool. Firearms were the exception: they were not returned to the young person. A staff member would drop the firearm at the police station without revealing where it came from.
7. The Spot participated in the Youth Opportunity Program of the US Department of Labor and later, when this program was restructured, the Workforce Initiative Act (WIA).
8. The data on living situation break down as follows: friends 7.0%, relatives 15.6%, parents 39.1%, streets 2.3%, foster or halfway house 1.6%, motel 0.8%, shelter 0.8%, own place 23.4%, multiple places 7.0%, and no response 2.3%.
9. Participants have been given pseudonyms to protect their privacy.

10. In 2006, Mayor John Hickenlooper convened a citywide summit to discuss the rising incidence of graffiti in the city and formed a Task Force charged with making Denver “graffiti free” in three years through provision, abatement and enforcement (Graffiti Task Force 2007).

### Notes on Contributors

Jean N. Scandlyn, PhD is a Research Assistant Professor of Anthropology and Health and Behavioral Sciences at the University of Colorado Denver and a Visiting Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Colorado College. She currently serves on the board of directors of Urban Peak in Denver, Colorado. She received her BA from Middlebury College in 1975 and her PhD in anthropology from Columbia University in 1993. She has worked with homeless, runaway, and disadvantaged youth in Denver since 2000 and is currently developing research on adolescents and young adults who have migrated from rural to urban areas of Bolivia.

Heidi M Grove-Voiles is a Family Advocate for Family to Family in Denver Colorado. She received her BA from Metropolitan State College of Denver in 2003 and is a candidate in the MA in Community Counseling at Regis University. She has been working with homeless, runaway, and disadvantaged urban youth in Denver since 2000 and is currently releasing a curriculum on gang intervention. She is also the Co-Founder of TSI Connection, a grassroots youth organization working with disconnected youth.

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