

## **Young People Strengthening Their Community**

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Dorset is situated in North Eastern Tasmania, Australia. It is a Municipal area made up of a superb natural environment with clean air and beautiful scenery, ranging from coastal beaches to patchwork farmlands and temperate rain forests on the surrounding hills and mountains. The area is known for its prolific production of potatoes and forestry activities.

At the time of the 2001 Census, there were 454,841 people living in Tasmania. 6,967 people lived in the Dorset local government area; they formed 1.5% of the state's population.

The Municipality is made up of 12 small towns and the main service centre is Scottsdale with a population of 1922 people.

Although the natural environment is spectacular the geographic isolation of the community poses its own challenges – especially for young people. Some of the challenges that existed before I started working in the area included the lack of access to public transport, little youth specific information in terms of health and well being, limited access to sport and recreation opportunities (unless you played football and netball) and little organised entertainment or activities outside the school setting.

### **Young People in the Community**

Young people are defined by the Australian and Tasmanian Governments as those aged from 12 to 25 years. At the time of the 2001 Census Dorset had 1,178 young people. They formed 17% of the total population of Dorset and 52% of them were under 17.

### **Youth Health Officer**

In late 2001 the Dorset community won a major Australian Government grant to bring additional health services into the area. These services included a mental health worker, a primary health care co-ordinator, some community transport, increased podiatry and speech therapy services and for the first time ever a youth specific health worker was engaged. I won this position of Youth Health Officer and have been working in the position since that time. The young people of Dorset now have someone to work alongside them in the community. As the position had not existed before my employment, and at the time I had a very flexible Manager, I was able to create the position as I went along as no one really had any expectations. I began working in the community from a strengths perspective and was allowed to continue to do so because it brought results. The Council received positive recognition within the community and the funding body was happy.

### **Empowerment**

The goal of my practice is to empower young people to be the strength of the Dorset community. I believe that they already have the resources and tools within them and in their community to be the strength of their community and it is my role to assist young people to realise this and also to advocate for them as valuable members of the whole of community.

According to Saleebey (2006, p.11), "...empowerment indicates the intent to, and the processes of, assisting individuals, groups, families, and communities to discover and expend the resources and tools within and around them."

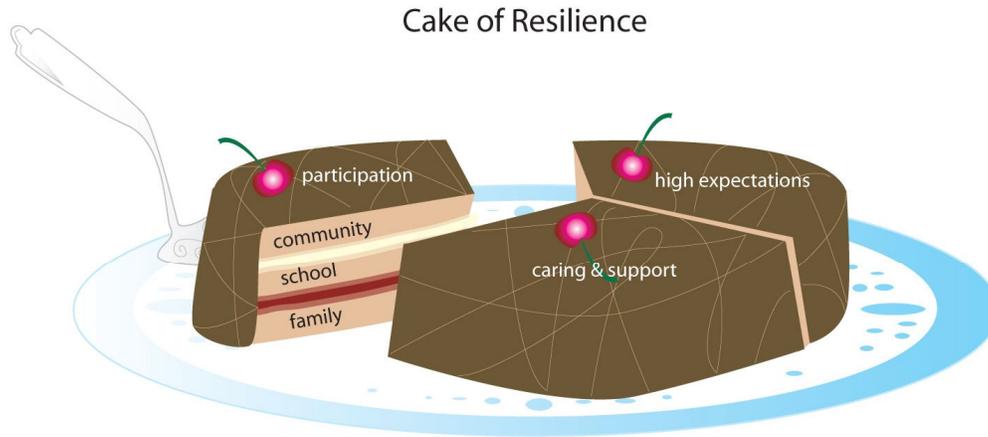
When I first started working from this strengths perspective with young people by translating negative risk factors into protective factors I was unaware of the extent to which the whole of the community could be influenced. This approach has aided in the development of resiliency in youth and has also resulted in increased social capital for the whole community.

Saleebey states (2006 p.247) "In a very important sense, then, fostering resilience and capitalizing on and extending strengths and capabilities is about building community and creating opportunities for belonging and participation. This is where the paths of community development and resilience cross."

Some people try to solve young people's "problems" by looking at the underlying risk factors associated with such things as excessive alcohol use.

However, according to Benard (1991), "To be successful, prevention interventions must focus on enhancing and creating positive environmental contexts-families, schools and communities that, in turn, reinforce positive behaviors." Benard (1991) also suggests that the development of protective factors in

these environmental contexts happens in three areas – caring and support, high expectations and participation. See Figure One.



**Figure One**

It is the environmental context of participation in the community and the area of participation that I focus on in my work practice to develop resiliency in youth that leads to increased social capital within the whole community.

### **Social Capital And Reciprocity**

According to Putnam in his landmark book *Bowling Alone*, “social capital refers to connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them.” (2000 p.19) Putnam (2000 p.8) refers to “social capital...as...networks of reciprocity.” Putnam goes on to highlight reciprocity as a major component of social capital. Not necessarily you do something for me and I'll do something for you but more the spirit that if I do something for you then someone else, some other time will do something for me. It's larger than just an interpersonal connection between two people. In addition, Benard (1991) encourages us to let go and to create a system "...based of reciprocity and sharing rather than control”.

### **Fewcha**

The main strategy I use in my work practice to empower young people to be the strength of their community is through a “youth advisory group”. They call themselves “FEWCHA”! The word is not an acronym – it's just their way of spelling “FUTURE”!

The group was established in September 2001. They were made a special committee of the Dorset Council and they meet together on a regular basis to plan and implement activities, programmes and projects that enhance the health and well being of the young people of Dorset and consequently the whole Dorset community.

Currently the group has 25 members aged between 11 and 17. They come from many of the towns from across the Municipality, are an equal mix of males and females, and attend a number of different schools. They meet about every three weeks in one of the towns around Dorset. They have a President, Vice-President, Secretary and Treasurer. Minutes are produced from each meeting and are circulated within the group and minutes are also included in each report that I give to Dorset Council meetings.

Two representatives from the group attend each Council meeting and report back to FEWCHA on the content of Council meetings. A representative from Council attends FEWCHA meetings and on occasion all of FEWCHA goes to Council or all Councillors attend FEWCHA meetings. There is a strong sense of connection and support between the older members of Council and the younger members of FEWCHA. They value each other and the contribution that each is making to the whole of community.

According to Kretzmann & McKnight (1993 p.29) in Saleebey (2006 p.248), "The unique energy and creativity of youth is often denied to the community because the young people of the neighbourhood are all too often viewed only in terms of their lack of maturity and practical life experience. Categorized as the product of "immature" minds, the legitimate dreams and desires of youth are frequently ignored by the older, more "responsible" members of the community...Given the proper opportunities, however, youth can always make a significant contribution to the development of communities in which they live. What is needed for this to happen are specific projects that will connect youth with the community in ways that will increase their own self-esteem and level of competency while at the same time improving the quality of life of the community as a whole."

FEWCHA have not only developed specific projects that have connected them with their community, increased their own self-esteem, level of competency and the quality of life of the whole community but they have won both national and state awards for several of these projects which I will now discuss.

## **Projects**

### **1. The Wheel Deal**

Young people and youth service providers throughout Tasmania have consistently raised transport as an issue for young people. In response to this, the Office of Youth Affairs in Tasmania initiated a transport project on behalf of the stakeholders. One of the outcomes of this transport project was the Tasmanian Youth Transport Strategy, which recommends a number of options to improve transport for young people. One of the key recommendations is that...

*Community Transport Brokerage project be encouraged to improve the sharing and availability of community transport resources.*

This recommendation was targeted for a pilot project and the Dorset Council and FEWCHA won the tender for the pilot for Tasmania. The Office of Youth Affairs and the Department of Infrastructure, Energy and Resources provided \$48000, as well as policy support to resource the pilot.

Once completed and evaluated, it was expected that the pilot would assist in the process of informing the way transport options might be improved for young people in all parts of the State, with particular focus on young people in rural and isolated areas.

FEWCHA and the Dorset Council employed a Transport Services Officer. This Officer conducted a transport audit of the area. This included not just being aware of all the transport options that are available but also identifying which services held which type of licence and therefore where they were or weren't allowed to travel and with whom. A transport specific youth needs audit was also conducted.

The transport officer, FEWCHA and myself then got together to brain storm possible solutions to the transport issues based on the needs that had been identified and the resources that we had available to us.

The aim of the project was to make better use of existing services rather than to develop new services. Many different options were considered before the concept of The Wheel Deal was settled on and the name created by FEWCHA.

The Wheel Deal transport hotline is a free call youth transport hotline. Young people requiring transport can call an 1800 number, which is answered by a message bank that is checked regularly (Monday to Friday 9.00 – 10.00am on regular council opening days) by Dorset Council administrative staff. Young people identify where and when they need transport and the transport co-ordinator brokers a transport deal with local taxi and chartered bus companies, provides information about existing transport options or investigates other flexible solutions. Cost of the transport is negotiated between the transport co-ordinator and the young person, with The Wheel Deal subsidising the bulk of the cost. The general guideline used is that the young person pays 1/3 and The Wheel Deal 2/3 of the total cost.

At the end of the pilot period The Wheel Deal was nominated in the Tasmanian 2005 Local Government Awards for Excellence. As a result, it won the Community Development Category prize as well as the overall prize as the winner of the 2005 Local Government Award for Excellence.

The project was considered to be a success and further funding was sought to try and secure sustainable funding for the project. This is still in process! However, the model is being held up as a possible option for rural communities as part of the core passenger service review that is currently being conducted on a statewide basis.

A youth transport project was created by young people that meets their exact transport needs.

## 2. The Kameleon

In 2001 FEWCHA acquired a van from the Department of Health and Human Services for free. It was an ex-dental van. The group dreamt up the idea of having a place where young people could hang out and that could travel to where young people were with health information, resources and entertainment relevant to their needs. FEWCHA decided to call this place The Kameleon.

FEWCHA received a grant of \$12200 to get The Kameleon to an operational stage. It was launched as part of National Youth Week celebrations in April 2002. The Kameleon then visited community events and activities across Dorset. Very little time was available in my schedule to take the Kameleon to the streets for "drop in".

FEWCHA then entered The Kameleon in the Heart Foundation Local Government Awards and won the best rural and remote community project for Tasmania and Australia and the best overall project for Tasmania in 2002.

In July 2003 FEWCHA hosted "Big Decisions for the FEWCHA" a major consultation day for young people in Dorset. Young people asked for a place to "hang out" in their towns. FEWCHA put The Kameleon up as an initiative proposal to the Foundation for Young Australians. The Foundation funded FEWCHA initially for \$50000 and then another \$25000 because of the success of their initiative and the group itself.

FEWCHA and Council then employed a Youth Outreach Officer to take The Kameleon not only to community events and activities but also to towns in Dorset allowing young people wide access to health information, resources and something to do! Since the employment of the Youth Outreach Officer The Kameleon has visited many towns and community events in Dorset. The numbers of young people accessing The Kameleon is high – especially in smaller isolated towns.

In June 2005 more funding was required to continue the important work of The Kameleon and the service that it provides to the young people of Dorset. The Dorset Council agreed to financially support the ongoing operations of The Kameleon for the 2006-06 and then 2006-07 financial years for \$43000 each year. The Council also voted to assess the ongoing financial support of The Kameleon at the beginning of the 2007-08 financial year.

Since The Kameleon became fully operational in mid May 2004 it has impacted upon young people in towns across Dorset and been present at community events. From January to June 2006 The Kameleon has visited 51 locations with an average visitation of 14 young people.

Every stage of the development, implementation and success of this project has been about FEWCHA and their ideas to meet the needs of the young people of Dorset. They have been supported to make their ideas a reality. The Kameleon provides a point of reference for young people, someone to help with issues, a safe place to chill out and it is informative, fun, raises awareness and gives young people something constructive to do.

## 3. Severely Isolation

Several groups of young people from the North of Tasmania applied for a grant of \$20000 from Tasmanian Regional Arts to do a regionally based project called Net Connect. Each group of young people decided the type of artistic medium they would like to use. FEWCHA chose film. The group titled their film *Severely Isolation*.

*Severely Isolation* is a documentary written, directed, and filmed by members of FEWCHA. *Severely Isolation* follows world-renowned naturalist Nigel Fimbottom (a David Attenborough type character) around the rural municipality of Dorset for a quirky observation of the area's townships and people. The theme that drives *Severely Isolation* is about breaking the stereotype of rural communities being socially stuck in the Dark Ages and that they have nothing to offer.

One of the project aims was to link regional/rural and/or isolated young people, with international peers living in similar situations around the world. This link up would occur via the Internet. FEWCHA decided that they would like to link with young people living in New York who would experience isolation in a completely different way to them.

Once FEWCHA had finished their film they sent it to New York to some young people who were working on a project called Art Smart. The young people from Art Smart sent images of their work back to FEWCHA.

The work from each of the groups in the North of Tasmania and their international partners was produced into a DVD presentation which went on a Road Trip around the North of the State. The DVD

was viewed by school groups and communities across the North and was also shown at an exhibition at the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery in Launceston, Tasmania.

FEWCHA also decided to enter their film into the Reelife Short Film Festival in Sydney, Australia. This Film Festival is a creative project of Vibewire Youth Services, a non-profit media organization providing creative and media opportunities for young people. Reelife provides an accessible and inspiring channel for young filmmakers to present their stories and ideas on issues that are important to them.

Out of a shortlist of 15 films made by people under 25 from across Australia, winners were selected by a panel of industry professionals for various prizes. *Severely Isolation* won the Best Film by Under 18's.

FEWCHA President at the time Michael Shea went to Sydney to collect the award on behalf of the group and said...

"I am shocked that the film won against so many others in Sydney. It went down well in Tassie when we took it round to all the schools that were involved in the Project. But to be recognised at the national level for a film we made about the isolation issues that young people face in Tassie is surreal. It's excellent because the film highlights just how much skill and talent young people from small rural communities have. It gets the message out there."

#### **4. Mobile Fun Box**

Skate Parks are expensive! Bridport, one of the 12 towns in Dorset already has a skate park that is managed by Council. Since I started as the Youth Health Officer in 2001 the need for the development of further skate spaces in Dorset has been continually identified.

A skate space committee was formed consisting mainly of young people. These young people raised money and community awareness of their cause. They put on a skate exhibition day in a local car park and raised money by riding their bikes to a skate park in Launceston – over 70kms away and then on another occasion riding their bikes from Launceston to Hobart some 250kms over two days. This committee of young people eventually merged with FEWCHA who have continued to push to achieve the reality of a skate space for other towns in Dorset.

It became evident to the group that achieving skate parks for each rural town that wanted one would be an impossible task because of the finances required. By chance the group came across the design for a mobile fun box – a skate park element that came in a transportable form. The group decided that this would be the perfect solution to their skate park needs. The fun box could be transported to each town on rotation that had an appropriate space. This could meet the needs of many more young people than just locating another skate park in another town!

The spaces where the mobile fun box is located can also be used for other purposes when the mobile fun box is not there. Also, each time the mobile fun box comes back to the town it has a fresh feel about it – increasing the likelihood of the space being a positive environment for young people and the community long term.

The small towns of Derby and Branxholm had existing "old" tennis courts that were under-utilised. Fencing around these courts was modified to allow the mobile skate equipment to enter these areas. The town of Winnaleah had a tennis court that had a broken surface. Finances were secured to re-surface this area.

Funding these adjustments and for the actual mobile fun box, came from fundraising at events co-ordinated by young people, the Dorset Council, Sport and Recreation Tasmania and the Foundation for Young Australians.

FEWCHA has had a strategic partnership with the Foundation for Young Australians for the last three years. Part of this partnership has included the Foundation assisting the group to obtain the mobile fun box. The Dorset Council has a partnership agreement with the State Government and part of that agreement included Sport and Recreation and the Dorset Council working together to obtain this mobile fun box. FEWCHA made strategic use of these partnerships to meet the needs of the young people of Dorset.

The actual mobile fun box was sourced from Skate Ramps Australia in Victoria and is the first of its kind in Tasmania. The mobile fun box is transported by the vehicle purchased from funds secured by FEWCHA for towing the Kameleon.

The total cost of the project to date has been \$40000.

The official launch of the mobile fun box was held in one of the regional towns and over 100 people turned up to celebrate the day. Professional skaters also attended the day and there was live music. The mobile fun box is now on a three week rotational journey around the regional towns of Dorset.

This project was designed and achieved by the young people of Dorset and meets their needs as identified by them! It was nominated for the Heart Foundation Local Government Awards and received a highly commended award. It is currently being judged in an Active Towns competition.

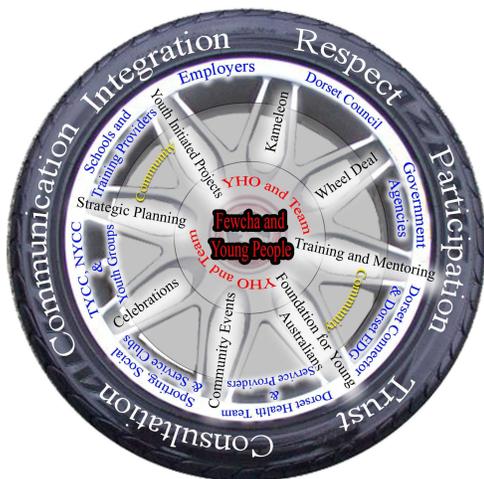
**Winning=Capacity Building**

It may sound arrogant to speak about winning awards and large grants for projects. However, it's not about the winning or even about the entering or writing submissions for funding. The winning process is about capacity building. The first grant the young people won for The Kameleon for \$8600 encouraged them to believe that their dream of turning the ugly old dental van into an outreach van could become a reality. When they won the Heart Foundation Local Government Award for Australia for The Kameleon they knew that other people believed in them. It increased their belief in themselves and what they were doing. It increased their capacity to apply for more significant grants to bring even bigger dreams into reality. Success has not always been guaranteed but more success than failure has kept the resilience balance in the black!

**Policy**

The above projects and many others have been conducted in partnership between the Dorset Council, community groups, funding bodies, FEWCHA and myself as the Youth Health Officer. There are lasting outcomes for Dorset as well as for the young people who have been involved in the group since its inception. However, funding is always tenuous! FEWCHA decided that they should act strategically and applied for a grant to employ a consultant to develop a Youth Policy for Dorset. As part of this policy FEWCHA developed a model of youth participation.

This model was named by the group the "Real Wheel" model of youth participation. In the centre are FEWCHA and young people in Dorset closely surrounded and supported by the youth health officer and team. The spokes of the wheel are the projects that the group is involved in including...The Kameleon, The Wheel Deal, Training and Mentoring, the Foundation for Young Australians, Community Events, Celebrations, Strategic Planning and Youth Initiated Projects. As the activities of the group increase, these spokes will increase further adding strength to the "Real Wheel". On the outside on the wheel are the organizations that support FEWCHA and young people in Dorset. These include the Dorset Council, Government Agencies, Dorset Connector and Dorset EDG, Sporting, Social and Service Clubs, the Tasmanian Youth Consultative Committee, the Northern Youth Co-ordinating Committee and other Youth Groups, Schools, Training Providers and Employers. Where the rubber hits the road FEWCHA have named up the values that drive the "Real Wheel" as Consultation, Communication, Integration, Respect, Participation and Trust. This model strongly informs the policy that the Dorset Council has now adopted. See Figure Two.



**Figure Two**

they achieve the ideals and objectives that they set for themselves. The projects have met needs as identified by the young people themselves. If they were living in a different place and in a different time then another set of projects would be appropriate. The critical factor is that the opportunity to participate has been provided and that the young people have slowly built up a sense of hope as they have trusted themselves more and more to participate in their community with a sense of reciprocity and not control!

The objective of the policy is to "Ensure that the Dorset Council consults with and involves young people in its decision making processes and activities.". The policy includes elements on Youth Participation, Young People, Service and Support, Values, Council's Commitment to Young People, Key Principles Endorsed by Dorset Council, Working Together and Planning and Review.

FEWCHA successfully uses this policy to lobby Council for ongoing funding and support for their projects, activities and initiatives.

**Why**

These projects and initiatives have been successful. However, in practice it is not about the projects but about the outcomes achieved in terms of growth and development of the young people and the community as

According to Saleebey (2006) "...the central dynamic of the strengths perspective is precisely the rousing of hope, of tapping into the visions and the promise of that individual, family, or community.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the young people who have been involved in FEWCHA have developed a sense of hope and a future that they may not necessarily have had before. The group have developed significant projects, organised and/or participated in whole of community events, written successful grant applications, attended trainings within Tasmania and interstate, developed meeting skills including chairing meetings and writing minutes, represented young people at community meetings, sought the opinions of other young people, developed presentations, attended and reported to Council meetings and given service to their community etc. The group has grasped these opportunities for growth and development with both hands.

Since the group's inception some young people have moved on, as further academic education is only available to those who move out of the area. One of the original members of the group is about to enrol to do a Bachelor of Social Work – she would like my job – that's succession planning!

When asked to give feedback by SMS for this paper some responses were received from past and present members of the FEWCHA. The group was asked "What does the group mean to you?..."

"It's a good way to keep up to date with what is going on in our community, and being able to have our say in up coming projects that may affect us. Organising events to keep young people amused is always good too because we know what they want. Yeah!"

"Invaluable life experience. Expand horizons and learn new skills. Meet new people. Was lots of fun."

"Empowerment of young people. Involvement in the community. Opportunity to exceed and excel."

"It's a chance to meet new people, experience new things and help out in the community."

"It allows me to have an opportunity to have a say in our community. It also gives us a chance to do what we want also to hold cool events for young people of our age."

"A chance to change things. Opportunity to better myself. A fun learning experience I can share with my peers."

"It's an opportunity for the youth of the area to be heard about issues that effect us. A chance to learn about leadership and sometimes keep us entertained in a constructive way."

"Creates links between young people and older citizens.

Contributes positively to the community.

Teacher young people life and leadership skills in the early stages of life.

Develops the four C's of creativity, confidence, co-operation and commitment.

Gives a broad range of experiences and opportunities for the young people in Dorset.

Is a support network of friends.

Is an opportunity to step out of our comfort zones and try new things, mix with new people and form new ideas.

Gives you an insight to how organizations operate.

Motivates people!

Is a positive environment that motivates people (sometimes by the use of food!)."

Taking another look at the theory of Benard (1991), as illustrated here in Figure Three,



**Figure 3**

The focus of the development of resilience in the context of FEWCHA is the intersection of the “Community and Participation” section of Benard’s work. And as Benard states that, “The natural outcome of having high expectations for youth is the creation of opportunities for them to be contributing members of their community.”

Through FEWCHA’s activities we aim to tip the balance in favor of the positive. According to Werner, “The range of outcomes, is determined by the balance between risk factors, stressful life events, and protective factors (Werner and Smith, 1982 in Benard, 1991). Furthermore, this balance is not determined only on the basis of the number of risk and protective factors present in the life of an individual but on their respective frequency, duration, and severity, as well as the developmental stage at which they occur.

According to Werner then (1990), “As long as [this] balance between stressful life events and protective factors is favorable, successful adaptation is possible. However, when stressful life events outweigh the protective factors, even the most resilient child can develop problems”.

FEWCHA is shifting the balance by involving young people in participation on many levels within their community. Benard (1991) argues,

“Shifting the balance or tipping the scales from vulnerability to resilience may happen as a result of one person or one opportunity...individuals who succeeded in spite of adverse environmental conditions in the families, schools, and/or communities have often done so because of the presence of environmental support in the form of one family member, one teacher, one school, one community person that encouraged their success and welcomed their participation.”

So instead of looking at the underlying risk factors and “problems” that the young people of FEWCHA may have we instead spend our time focusing of developing resiliency in these young people that has and will continue to result in increased social capital within the whole community. There is hope!

### Research

As a consequence of this understanding from my practice and reading, I decided to enrol to do my Masters in Social Work by research. I began to conceptualize my ideas around youth and their community participation. As I began reading in this area I found evidence to support my current work practice as I have shown that youth participation does build resilience and social capital within young people and the communities that they belong to.

Putnam eloquently explores the habits of 20<sup>th</sup> century Americans and shows the decline in social connectedness between individuals and therefore social capital within American society. I’ve wonder if young people’s participation in FEWCHA and groups such as these for example, will lead to long term participation in their community? This long term participation could take several forms – secretary of the local hockey club, volunteer at play centre working bees, working for volunteers abroad, chairperson of the bowls club when they are 65. These questions will remain unanswered until members of this group grow older.

However, if it doesn't matter exactly what the actual activity that builds resilience – high expectations, caring and support or participation - and the sphere in which it occurs is flexible – family, school or community - then it must be possible to explore this idea by talking with adults in the community who are active community members and asking them about their experiences as young people.

My research question then becomes...Does community youth participation lead to active community participation in adult life?

I will keep you posted in regard to the answer!

So, the goal of my practice has become two fold...to empower young people to be the strength in the Dorset community and to build life long active community participation in young people. Therefore building greater systems of reciprocity and a community, and consequently a world with a stronger sense of connection and hope!

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