

Faces & Places - Kids Unlimited, Medford

This month we'd like to highlight one of our partner organizations Kids Unlimited. Tom Cole, Executive Director of KU exemplifies the passion it takes to build a community-changing youth development organization. Rather than tell you about Tom's passion, we'd like to share the following letter Tom wrote to the Oregon Education Investment Board's Youth Development Council in support of all afterschool and youth development organizations in our state. We think this letter exemplifies the power of not only youth development, but also the passion it takes to create a quality and impactful organization.

Dear Ms. Bell:

I am writing this letter on behalf of Kids Unlimited of Oregon, a non-profit youth development agency located in the Southern Oregon region, serving primarily vulnerable communities in Medford and White City. Our agency provides a multitude of programs that operate 7 days a week. Each week our agency provides services to over 1,200 kids. Those services range from daily after school and summer programs, teen entrepreneurial and leadership programs, college preparatory assistance, mentoring, case management and a long list of enrichment programs that range from culinary arts, robotics, film, sports and many more which help to substantiate the Unlimited in our agency's title. While our services range in demographics, serving youth ages 5-20, our primary services are based in economically distressed communities and have a high percentage of Latino youth and family involvement.

KU started as a grassroots movement in 1998 out of recognition of a tremendous void in the ability of kids from high poverty elementary schools to access quality after school programming. Besides the obvious barrier of money, these schools also represented a complacent climate around parent engagement with little to sometimes no PTA's and in many of the schools, families battled not only the struggles of culture and language, but often even more pervasive, the culture of poverty. We believed then, like we believe now, that we must provide places after school to extend learning, provide basic meals in some cases but always work to support the premise that many kids need more support in order to overcome deficits they can't control, so that they can ultimately strive and believe in the values of education. Our belief system, that all kids deserve the opportunity to be successful, has helped to embed Kids Unlimited into the culture of our Jackson County communities. For cultures of poverty, we have become the voice of advocacy in our community. In the communities and districts we serve, the number of Title I schools are greater than the number that are not. YDC (Youth Development Council) can provide that advocacy on state level.

YDC can and should be an advocate for youth who are vulnerable and while that definition can sometimes be very broad, it should always include those youth who are failing in traditional systems, many as a result of their inability to access opportunities and services critical to embracing the aspirations of higher education. I feel strongly that YDC can be a conduit for reinforcing an overall belief that kids are capable of dreaming, believing and accessing opportunities that lead to life sufficiency. One of the obvious struggles in education is the reality that the institutions of learning need to figure new ways to solve problems but even more importantly, new ways to define the problem. YDC

can be an advocate for innovative strategies like the work of the promise neighborhood and other research based movements that have proven the importance of multi-system involvement necessary to impact youth suffering from poverty.

Over the years, I have been extremely proud of the accomplishments of our kids; witnessing children growing up in our programs beginning in Kindergarten and growing with us through graduation of high school and now into college has been powerful and has reinforced the impact of the services we provide. Our first groups of college graduates represent not only the first in their family to ever graduate from high school, but for many of our Latino families, they are first generation with no higher than elementary educations. The longevity of our relationships to families and the history of our organization's service evolution has taught us much about the needs for supporting kids and their families and helped us to define and substantiate the need for additional systems of care to help families and children that can no longer be dismissed as minority in numbers. The ever shifting dynamics of poverty and rapidly growing Latino population demand a more comprehensive strategy for impacting change.

In 2003 our agency met a young lady, new to our community, who had recently moved with her family from Southern California. Her name was Yaremi Mejia. Neither of her parents spoke English nor did they have any formal education. Both parents while extremely supportive were limited in what they could do to ensure success for their child as both limited understanding of how a school system works coupled with the financial reality of working two and three jobs in order to sustain their family prohibited them from being engaged. Yaremi joined our after school programs while she was an elementary student and through it received help with her homework while providing her with a daily environment with capable adults who helped to provide the necessary support in order for her, like many students similar to her, feel like they can return to class with the belief they can achieve and more importantly know they had support to navigate difficulties.

The after school program provided many things for Yaremi. It was the first place she learned to dance, be a part of theatre and film and take her first field trip. She learned to use a computer and often the after school program's media lab at our center became the place that she could have the resources and support to keep up with middle and high school demands. While Kids Unlimited provided her with daily homework help, weekend programs, summer camps, tutors, mentors and lots of other engaging programs, it most importantly provided an opportunity. One of the first programs that she gravitated to was a Rotary Kids Unlimited youth basketball program we call pass to play. Its' goal was and still is, to connect kids to the sport of basketball by removing barriers, making them feel a sense of belonging and most importantly attach them to something that helps reinforce the goals of education.

In our community as in many communities, kids of poverty are often under-represented in programs because of both financial and in the case of our Latino culture, language barriers. This year Yaremi Mejia graduates from South Medford H.S. and will be the first kid in the history of her family to go to college. She has accepted a full ride scholarship to play basketball at Portland State University. She was an All State basketball player and a member of a historic basketball team from South Medford that made history with a first ever state championship and a perfect 30&0 season. She was the point guard. She is the first Latina in the history of this state to have this honor and the first to attend a division 1 university on a basketball scholarship. While basketball was an opportunity presented to her that kept her connected, it was the focus on education that truly allows her to recognize both dreams. This relationship to leveling the playing field and recognizing how important community based after school programs are to the success

of our kids is imperative. The composition of families, economics and community are changing rapidly in this state and the recognition of the needs that are required to connect kids to education are so much greater than the institution of schools can ever begin to provide.

We believe that YDC has a responsibility of understanding that the assets required for youth to be successful far supersede a "one shoe fits all model" and that by supporting the mission of providing vulnerable youth with the resources necessary to navigate the obstacles of poverty, in order to create a greater rate of success not only for those kids but dually our schools and community. We believe that a responsible strategy to supporting youth success is to support all strands of education and development. It is just as important to support the continuum of adolescents in middle and high school as it is to begin with early childhood. The challenges of each stage of development are difficult but it is critical to support the work of youth development agencies so they can collectively work with parents and kids to create social change among populations that desperately need support systems in order to overcome barriers of poverty. It is a movement that does not work from a polarized silo but rather a more inclusive perspective of the necessities to navigate the holistic barriers that prevent success for youth. We hope the YDC will support and advocate for the advancement of community based programming. As our community dynamics change, we must recognize that the cultural and economic landscape for kids in the 21st Century require a more responsible strategy for ensuring that the hope of education can be realized for all.

Sincerely,

Tom Cole

Executive Director

Kids Unlimited of Oregon

Website: <http://kuoregon.org>