

## Building Community through Photos and Activism: A Youth-Driven Movement

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The House of Teens (HOT) got its start in 2007 as an after-school program for health promotion and obesity prevention in New Britain, Connecticut. This program was funded through two Healthy Tomorrows grants, the first of which funded Community Health Center, Inc., a system of 13 federally qualified health centers serving predominantly Latino patients. The second grant funded the establishment of a teen center at the New Britain YWCA, and now the East Side Community Center, a renovated building in one of the city's poorest communities.

Program organizers knew that giving teens leadership opportunities in the program as well as a voice in decision making could help keep them engaged in after-school activities and physical activity. Thus, over the past decade, the program has evolved into a sustainable youth- and community-led movement, identifying and addressing problems confronting New Britain's most disadvantaged teens. HOT is now an access point for services such as family planning, stress reduction, and fitness, as well as a place where teens can make their voices heard through advocacy and participatory research. In partnership with the YWCA, New Britain High School, and others from the business community, the space offers teens a comfortable, safe and positive environment to call their own. The

program is dedicated to helping girls aged 13-19 achieve their personal goals while simultaneously gaining leadership skills. The core elements of the program include: 1) collaboration and coalition building; 2) youth advocacy and research; and 3) policy change.

### FINDING A VOICE THROUGH PHOTOGRAPHY

The HOT project is grounded in community-based participatory research (CBPR). CBPR integrates the insights and contributions of all community members from teens to academic researchers, administrators, health professionals and government leaders. A central element of the program is PhotoVoice (PV). Teens use PV as an advocacy tool to share their stories.



**Image 1:** Teen Photovoice on Barriers to Physical Activity: "In our neighborhood, we saw eyesores such as bad smelling dumpsters that make us unhappy. These discourage us to exercise in our neighborhood."

Using data gathered through PV, HOT participants are able to speak directly to policy makers about inequitable conditions in their community through photographs and propose strategies for improvement through collaborative action and policy changes. The PV process also offers participants an opportunity for individual reflection and group discussion, acknowledging the recognition that they are experts in their own lives and have valuable knowledge to impart to those in authority.



**Image 2:** Teen Photovoice on Barriers to Physical Activity: *“After the pools closed in our neighborhood parks, people stopped going to parks to play in them and began damaging the area with graffiti and other kinds of vandalism.”*

PV has also given youth an opportunity to actively contribute to policy change dialogue. For example, it was the youths’ voices that started the policy conversation around reopening city pools. Photos of closed pools in predominately Latino neighborhoods suggested that the deterioration of neighborhood parks deprives teens of memories as well as safe places to exercise. This prompted a discussion with the city’s Recreation Superintendent. On his

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<sup>1</sup> Hannay, J., et.al. Combining Photovoice and Focus Groups, Engaging Latina Teens in Community Assessment *Am J Prev Med* 2013;44(3S3):S215–S224

recommendation, teens drew up a petition to reopen the pools, signed by more than 100 community residents, and presented it to the city’s Common Council. The Mayor has recognized the impact of PV, using it herself in a project to investigate homelessness in the city and she regularly calls on teens as youth activists for a variety of city initiatives. This type of civic engagement can lead to life-long engaged citizens. As one participant said, “If the pools do get opened, it will feel good, but aside from that, it feels good that we worked this hard and we let our voices be heard. And we’re teens!” <sup>1</sup>

## SUSTAINING AND GROWING A YOUTH-FOCUSED COMMUNITY-WIDE INITIATIVE

Maintaining and growing a program as complex and multi-faceted as this one is not without its challenges. A decade worth of change and growth offered several lessons learned for organizers and teens: <sup>2</sup>

- **Partnerships are critical.** Maintain core partners, but always look for opportunities for new partners to help further the mission and engage a broader slice of the community. Ensuring a shared mission of service to teens has kept HOT partners at the table and actively engaged for over a decade. As the focus on policy increased, the coalition expanded to include partners from higher education, the City of New Britain, and the business community.

<sup>2</sup> Hannay, J. *The House of Teens (2007-2018): The Evolution of a Youth-led Movement for Individual Empowerment and Community Revitalization* (Unpublished Article)

- **Use the community-based participatory research (CBPR) approach to build a knowledge base—and keep adding to it.** By making teens, parents, and community residents full partners in the work, the program tapped into the powerful reservoir of community knowledge and built a nationally recognized body of research.
- **Treat teens' Photovoice research the same as any other high-quality scientific data.** The qualitative data generated by teen researchers must be collected and analyzed according to the same rigorous standards as any other quantitative or qualitative data.



**Image 3: Teen Photovoice on Barriers to Healthy Eating:** "Individuals should make healthy decisions about eating but junk food gets in the way. They purposefully make it look nice, so people could be attracted to it. They make it cheaper. Healthy food should be marketed the same way."

## GROWING IN SIZE AND MISSION

Blighted buildings have been an ongoing concern since the inception of the PV project. The idea of turning vacant buildings into something useful became a successful outcome. A PV participant in 2009 envisioned a "House of Teens" (HOT) and that dream has become a reality almost a decade later. In early 2018, HOT moved into its new

home: a 2,400 square foot renovated building that has become a hub of revitalization. The center allows for the expansion of after-school and summer programming. Partners are co-located and provide coordinated services and access to health, education, and career development resources and connections. The program's longer-term goal is to make the center a place for community revitalization; a place where teens and their families can congregate to define needs and use PV and other interdisciplinary collaborative strategies to help find solutions. Two five-year grants and dedicated partners willing to support the program consistently, even during gaps in outside funding, helped HOT to sustain and grow. Most importantly, the movement owes its success to the teen researchers and activists, who, together with their parents and community residents, are making their voices heard in advocating for a healthier New Britain.

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