

AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE:

INTENSITY COMES TO SONOMA, AND EVERYBODY GAINS

Tree of Life youth team fuels capacity-building in northern California priority cluster

Nothing prepares you for intensity like ... intensity. That's something the newly A-stage Sonoma County cluster got quite a taste of this summer—thanks to youths from the 3-year-old Tree of Life initiative in northern California.

Tree of Life, sponsored by the Southwestern Regional Training Institute, aims to develop the capacity of young people ages 15 to 25 so they are able to teach and serve the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh more effectively.

Sonoma was at the time a new B-stage cluster aiming to launch an intensive program of growth by January or February 2010. (It instead launched in November 2009.)

To get there the friends there were learning new skills and applying them through “those very efforts and activities contributing to growth everywhere,” said cluster institute coordinator Patricia Rosett.

In fact, she said, “We had just spent almost a full month in a new neighborhood, Valley Oak, knocking on doors, talking about children's classes, and revisiting these same families, establishing relationships, ... establishing a presence.”

But did those efforts rise to the level of intensity required for success in an IPG?

Gearing up with training

The friends would soon find out, in what Auxiliary Board member Ria Costant termed a “five-day intense period” hosting a team of Tree of Life youths and coordinators.

The young people were among a carefully chosen cadre of 44 participants and coordinators who had undergone five days of capacity-building themselves an hour-plus to the east in Sacramento.

Some had trained in Ruhi Book 3 to teach children's classes, some in Book 5 to animate junior youth groups, and a few in a vision-building program to understand the nature of the Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Program.

They also had engaged in evening programs where they could share stories, experiences and talents.

Now they were fanning out to Sonoma and three other northern California clusters to serve where the local believers felt their skills and enthusiasm could be put to best use.

“When we learned that the Tree of Life was coming, knowing the importance of this opportunity both for the youth to learn from their experiences here and for the community to benefit from the additional resources and enthusiasm, we took



▲ The entire group of Tree of Life Initiative participants poses for a photo before departure. Photo by Ryan Azad

the initiative,” recalled Rosett.

Bold and trusting action

“We acted boldly, and with trust in the assistance of Bahá'u'lláh, to invite the families at Valley Oak to children's class workshops three days in a row during the Tree of Life.

“The attendance (25 children) and support of the families was a confirmation.”

Rosett said the youths' participation in this workshop, “including some of our own youth who were a part of the Tree of Life, generated an unparalleled excitement and enthusiasm amongst all involved in this activity—children and families in the community, and youth and adults involved in the class.”

Excitement spread to the entire Bahá'í community, she said, “as the news was so lovingly and beautifully shared in the nightly newsletter and later in the cluster reflection meeting.”

To Bijan Nafea, cluster development facilitator, the results were immediate.

The cluster youths involved in Tree of Life “gained experience in conducting children's classes as well as what and what not to do with the junior youth group.”

Other believers found new ways to support the core activities. Among them: prayer, funding, rides to and from activities, and copying materials.

“We realized that there is more capacity in the commu-



nity than we originally anticipated,” said Nafea. “The core team is still taking advantage of these extra capacities.”

And the core team itself? Costant said the daily process of “planning in the morning, action during the day and reflection in the evenings” will serve the cluster agencies well now that the IPG has been launched.

By the time that launch came, they had “already modeled and experienced teaching campaigns in receptive neighborhoods,” she said.

That includes, said Costant, learning “how to organize teaching campaigns with intensity, how to mobilize groups of individuals, find ways for people to plug in, ask for assistance, and more.”

To be carried forward

Such gains, said Nafea, are proving sustainable as well.

At the reflection gathering soon after Tree of Life, the core team “used examples from the initiative to motivate the friends to further action,” Nafea recalled.

“With the Tree of Life visit fresh in their minds, there were several more friends that were motivated to go door to door during the expansion phase.”

In addition, he said, “Many of the youth are now collaborating with the adults in the core activities.

“In this way the youth learn from the adults’ experience and the adults learn from the youths’ boldness, experimentation and enthusiasm.”

And core activities begun or

enhanced during Tree of Life are thriving.

“As of now, the children’s class at the Monte Vista and Valley Oak complex are ongoing, with regular devotional meetings or home visits with the parents of children,” said Nafea.

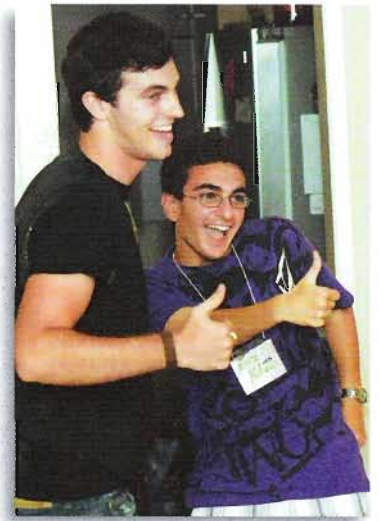
“The best news is that the junior youth group at the Cypress complex is meeting twice a week. There are still 15 participants and the animators are now working on a coherent approach to start other core activities.”

The animators also are “working with a school adjacent to the Cypress complex to have access to a class at the school,” he said. And a study circle has recently started with a few of the participants.

Accompaniment of friends new to an activity as been a key to this success, said Rosett.

Not to mention a spirit Tree of Life kindled.

“The youth in the Tree of Life Initiative are so carefully accompanied through their training, so well prepared for this field experience,” said Rosett, “that when they arrived in our community they had a fire burning so brightly that their work—individually and as a team—took on a life of its own.” ■



▲ Race Irby (left) and Niaz Nafea perform a skit advertising their “Power of Love Bar” during the five-day training. Photo by Ryan Azad

Shared tasks, opportunities solidify Tree of Life

Top down. Bottom up.

In both directions the third year of the Tree of Life youth initiative fostered capacity-building.

Tree of Life aims to develop the capacity of young people ages 15 to 25 so they are able to teach and serve the Cause of Bahá’u’lláh more effectively.

Five days of training this summer in Sacramento led to five days in the field aiding expansion and consolidation efforts in four northern California clusters: Sonoma County, Yolo County, South Alameda County, and Sacramento.

This year, said Auxiliary Board member Ria Costant, “the youth initiative came under the umbrella of the [Southwest Regional] Training Institute, which also enhanced both Tree of Life and the training institute, I believe.”

The move relieved Auxiliary Board members, and others they enlisted in the past to oversee the initiative, of much of the responsibility they formerly bore for Tree of Life.

In turn, the organizing team—Bob Henderson, regional insti-

tute coordinator for northern California; Kevin Trotter, junior youth program coordinator for northern California; and Auxiliary Board members Vahid Motazedian and Costant—ceded much responsibility to coordinators, the older youths and young adults who trained and supervised Tree of Life’s youth participants.

“This year, more than any of the previous years, the youth coordinators had increased responsibility, which was a very effective way to decentralize coordination,” according to a report on this year’s Tree of Life learnings.

“More decisions that needed to be made were pushed away from organizers and into the capable hands of the coordinators.

“Youth coordinators that are effectively accompanied and empowered become the natural leaders of the youth teaching teams, especially during the service days.”

Capacity-building, meantime, flowed upward: Former participants became coordinators and former coordinators eagerly took on organizing roles.

“The progression of youth from year to year, which thus far was unplanned, allows a youth to start in one year as a participant, become a strong leader within a teaching team, participate as a youth coordinator for the Initiative and eventually contribute as an organizer,” the report noted. ■