



In Service to the Common Good

*Bahá'í Youth
in Their Own Words*

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Preface

Early in 2005, the National Spiritual Assembly asked a task force of volunteers to continue the narrative about Bahá'ís and social action, begun in 2004 and published as *In Service to the Common Good: The American Bahá'í Community's Commitment to Social Change*.

Composed mainly of young adults, the task force focused on Bahá'í youth: their concerns; their views on the world and their place in it; and the role they are playing, or preparing to play, in promoting social change in the United States. The volunteers investigated these issues through interviews, an online survey, and research in the literature on youth.

What the task force found was a pattern of commitment to service. Whether singly or as part of organized initiatives, young Bahá'ís are learning to offer their insight, energy and dedication to the communities in which they live.

Moreover, adults and Bahá'í institutions support them in a variety of ways, including through the creation of programs designed to develop youths' capacities, whether they are members of the Bahá'í Faith or of the community at large.

As in last year's report, the information and stories that follow are a small sample of a larger reality. What could not be told here is the story of the thousands of young Bahá'ís who, heeding the guidance of their teachings and of the institutions of their Faith, are preparing themselves through study and action for the larger role they will play in our nation's future.

"The foundation of all their accomplishments," writes the Universal House of Justice, the Bahá'í Faith's highest governing body, "is their study of the teachings, the spiritualization of their lives, and the forming of their characters in accordance with the standards of Bahá'u'lláh...." Specifically, the House of Justice says, "It is the obligation of a Bahá'í to educate his children; likewise it is the duty of the children to acquire knowledge of the arts and sciences and to learn a trade or a profession whereby they, in turn, can earn their living and support their families. This, for a Bahá'í youth, is in itself a service to God...."

It is often said that America's youth are its future. It is equally true that young people even now enrich our lives as they prepare to assume in full measure the responsibilities implicit in their high destiny. We commend these glimpses of their stories to your attention, in the hope that you will share our optimism and excitement about our common future.



THE NATIONAL SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLY OF THE
BAHÁ'ÍS OF THE UNITED STATES
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In Service to the Common Good:

Bahá'í Youth in Their Own Words

"...is there any deed in the world that would be nobler than service to the common good?"

~ 'Abdu'l-Bahá

When asked to choose from a list of goals for their lives in the future, nine out of ten young Bahá'ís say “doing service.”¹ They say they want to “make a difference in the world,” and to dedicate themselves to education, good health, having strong friendships and a “close relationship with God.” Nearly 60 percent of those responding said they have done or plan to do a year of service, a program for young people administered in the United States by agencies of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States, and one which operates domestically and internationally.

“Helping others” is a big part of the definition of service to these young people, and the world seems to call for their involvement in many different areas. One group of youth produced a list of concerns about society that included “poverty, racism, environmental destruction, extremes of wealth and poverty, religious fanaticism, closed-mindedness, war, terrorism and the need for world peace, AIDS and other diseases, and putting into action the equality of men and women.”

Bahá'í youth see in these concerns a summons to action and a framework for their preparation for service: More than 60 percent say they hope to choose, or have already chosen, a field of study that fits with their Bahá'í beliefs.

Why are young Bahá'ís so adamant about service? Partly it is because young people tend to be concerned about others, and about society and its challenges: In his 2001 study, *Real Teens*, George Barna, a

well-known Christian researcher, found that 62 percent of his respondents listed “how much the church is involved in helping poor and disadvantaged people” as an important feature of the congregation they would choose after leaving home. This involvement serves as a good practical measure of the “heart” of the congregation, Barna says, and of the community that develops within it.

Service—At the Core of Bahá'í Teachings

Service is also part of the basic teachings of the Bahá'í Faith. Bahá'í youth consistently reference passages on this subject that can be found in the Bahá'í writings: “*Be anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in, and center your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements,*” is one example. “*All effort and exertion put forth by man from the fullness of his heart is worship,*” says 'Abdu'l-Bahá, son of Bahá'u'lláh, founder of the Bahá'í Faith, “*if it is prompted by the highest motives and the will to do service to humanity. This is worship: to serve mankind and to minister to the needs of the people. Service is prayer.*” “*Service to humanity is service to God.*” “Undoubtedly,” the Universal House of Justice tells Bahá'í youth, “it is within your power to contribute significantly to shaping the societies of the coming century; youth can move the world.”

Such statements, reinforced by their own observations, have created a sense among many young Bahá'ís that constructive change in society is not only necessary but possible:



The 2005 Research Project

For nine months, between March and December 2005, Bahá'í youth and young adults talked with their peers regarding their thoughts and feelings about the world they live in and their place in it. They did this using a survey they created and administered to people aged fifteen to twenty-two via the Internet and over the phone, and which garnered responses from more than 1,000 young Bahá'ís; and they interviewed a number of young people associated with organized programs of service and development.

More than two-thirds of respondents say they feel “very well prepared for the uncertainties and challenges to come;” nine out of ten have adopted the goal of “making a difference in the world,” and three-quarters of them say it is true or absolutely true that “one person can make a difference in the world.”

Three quarters of respondents agree that “one person can make a difference in the world.”



“The service to humanity I committed myself to was the juice that fueled my life.”

A Matter of Identity

Young Bahá’ís identify with their faith, which impels them toward service. Three-quarters of survey respondents were raised in Bahá’í families, although 14 percent of them say their “parents are/were Bahá’ís but I feel like I discovered the faith on my own.” Some 84 percent of respondents say they “love being a Bahá’í,” 86 percent say they are “excited about the future of the faith,” 64 percent say their “friends know about the Bahá’í Faith because I’ve told them about it,” and 77 percent indicate “the Bahá’í Faith is one of the most important things in my life.” “During a typical day I pray,” report nearly two-thirds of respondents; 82 percent say their “religious beliefs have helped me to form my personal identity.”

A twenty-one year old expresses her understanding of service this way: “Freeing myself from as many thoughts and desires of my own (as I can), having love for my fellow men, pure intention, and humility as one servant of God and being able to offer myself for humanity.”

Another youth attests: “*For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required.*” This quotation explains why I choose to act in the ways I do. I know that I have been given many opportunities for a

reason and it is my task to translate those opportunities into actions that will allow me to serve humanity. I used to think that service consisted of doing something outside of myself that was beneficial to the life of another... I have expanded my understanding to include the attitude with which I engage in everyday activities... My service right now is to strive for excellence

in my academics. This does not exclude me from performing concrete or physical service, but it allows me to be ‘okay’ with not doing the same sort of services that I am accustomed to... because the academic skills that I am acquiring will enable me to be of more useful and knowledgeable service in the future.”

Twenty-three year old Anisa writes, “The faith inspires me to serve and if it wasn’t for the faith I don’t know if I would do it at all. But deep down, when I think about me and who I am, I do it because it makes me different and for the better.”

Finally, a 21 year-old muses about his own path, saying “I found my life was constantly finding service opportunities; they were right in front of me and taking the step was all I had to do. The decision was an easy one, too, since I was surrounded by my friends who were encouraging me to serve... It was then I realized that... the service to humanity I committed myself to was the juice that fueled my life.”

Organized Action

About half of those surveyed say they “organize to take action on issues of social justice that concern me most” and 45 percent report they are “very involved in charity or service projects.” The program profiles that come later in this booklet offer stories of

just a few of those organized initiatives, which range from discussion and networking conferences for young adults to international service programs which have been formalized with not-for-profit status. Let us look, however, at what these young people are learning through the process of organizing to address their concerns, and what kinds of support they receive—or do not receive—from the adults and local Bahá'í communities in which they live.

No Boundaries

"The world is contracting into a neighborhood. America, willingly or unwillingly, must face and grapple with this new situation," wrote Shoghi Effendi, then head of the Bahá'í community, in 1939. Writing to the Bahá'ís of the United States three years earlier, he foresaw that "A mechanism of world inter-communication will be devised, embracing the whole planet, freed from national hindrances and restrictions, and functioning with marvelous swiftness and perfect regularity."

Contemporary literature has expanded on these themes, in light of what has been learned in the intervening decades. *New York Times* columnist and author Thomas L. Friedman, for example, in his latest book *The World Is Flat*, advances the view that boundaries which once separated people have been erased by new technologies for managing communication and work flow, and suggests that, by using these technologies, shared goals can be accomplished in ways scarcely imagined in even the recent past. Friedman quotes Carly Fiorina, former head

of Hewlett Packard, as saying the future of collaboration and communication will be "digital, mobile, personal and virtual."

Other writers have noted that the current generation of youth is unlike any previous one in terms of their technological savvy, their saturation in media of all kinds, and their multi-tasking abilities (CBS News, 2004; Lyons-Cavazos, 2004). They were the first generation to grow up with hundreds of cable channels (notable among them, MTV), computers in the home, cell phones and the Internet. They are accustomed to fast-paced media and communication, and their ability to use the tools at their disposal, often simultaneously, makes them "totally plugged-in citizens of a worldwide community."

(CBS News, 2004)



Bahá'í youth are using these technologies to pursue their goals of service. One such venture is Insights, a two-year-old initiative created by two friends in their early 20's to help their peers to find commu-

nity, seek advice and share experiences about major life choices—career, family, sexuality, their place in an increasingly complex global society, etc.—and explore the application of the Bahá'í Faith's principles to all these issues.

The gatherings bring together 100 or more young people at a time, but Insights was "hiding in plain sight," in the words of one participant, possibly because there is neither infrastructure nor advertising for Insights conferences. Young people find out about Insights events through word of mouth, email, an increasingly effective website and instant messaging. These technologies are also employed in sustaining a



Nearly half of Bahá'í youth say they organize to take action on social issues, and 45% report they are "very involved in charity or service projects."

One reason consultation is so important is because so much of what Bahá'í youth do is their own initiative; no one tells them to take action.



"virtual" community of interest between events.

Orien Aid is another of the programs profiled below. While on vacation from Maxwell International Bahá'í School in British Columbia, a 19 year-old student visited a classmate in Rwanda. He saw a need for volunteers to help with building a clinic; his approach to meeting that need led to the formation of Orien Aid in January, 2004

with a group of fellow graduates from the Maxwell School. The first group of volunteers, who came from seven countries in three continents, were in college or had recently begun careers. Through email and cell phone, they were able to come together to meet a shared goal.

The other initiatives profiled in the pages below likewise draw on a pool of young people who are scattered throughout the world and who rely on technology and certain guiding principles

to create communities of interest and carry out their service.

Consultation is the backbone of the groups described in the pages that follow. Bahá'í youth use consultation to choose topics for Insights workshops, to carry out daily debriefings during overseas service projects and to inform their decisions in every other aspect of their service. Consultation ensures participants' safety and their programs' success.

Indeed, in many areas of their lives, young Bahá'ís reach out to others in their efforts to find answers: Nearly three-quarters of survey respondents say they have "meaningful conversations with my parents," while almost half say they "have needed a mentor in my life," 56 percent that they "will likely rely on Bahá'í mentors along the way" and 51 percent that "it is easy to find a Bahá'í mentor if you need one."

Collective learning and capacity building lie at the heart of the organized activity of many Bahá'í youth. Orien Aid, for instance,

Guiding Principles

For many young Bahá'ís, it is not so much what they do, as how they do it. *In Service to the Common Good: The American Bahá'í Community's Commitment to Social Change* (2004) describes five guiding principles that shape the emerging, worldwide pattern of Bahá'í development. Each of the programs identified in the current review shows the application of one or more of these principles.

Consultation: "A process of collective decision making and action, devoid of adversarial posturing while dispassionate and democratic in spirit, is an indispensable feature of every Bahá'í undertaking."

Participatory Learning: "Promoting collective learning and organizational capacity-building ensures the sustainability of projects."

Organic Growth: "Successful social initiatives best begin with simple actions at the local community level that gradually grow in complexity."

Moral Development: "Creating moral awareness and moral responsibility is a prerequisite to enlightened and just action."

Unity, Equality and Justice: "True social advancement is made possible when every member of society can trust that they are protected by standards and assured of benefits that apply equally to all. The realization of justice is dependent upon participation by all social actors."

In Service to the Common Good (2004)

has made a five-year commitment to its partners in Rwanda to achieve sustainability. Orien's model is based on working hand in hand with local residents, rather than simply doing good works and "giving hand-outs," as one participant calls the work of some other groups he observed in the field.

Organic growth, for these programs, means seeing an opportunity and, through consultation, following its lead. The Karen Wallace Service Project began slowly: "Every year we go to Asia because we lived there when the kids were little," says one participant. "This year (2005) was our fourth trip... (On) the first trip we did some teaching at the school and some physical maintenance work. From there it began to develop. My kids were telling other kids about it (and) they wanted to take it beyond what they did last year. That's how the dance workshop came up. The schools in Yasothon (Thailand) all know about us now, and we're requested to do more there than we can during our two-month stay. We've met the governor and so many amazing things have come out of it."

Moral development is reflected in the words of a 13 year-old Umoja Souljah: "The Umoja Souljahs is a great group for young black males to get in touch with their ancestors and learn more about them and to better themselves. And once they get inside they'll say, 'Well, I didn't know this was happening,' and they'll start opening their minds more and then they'll think about what they are doing the next time they are going to get in trouble."

Her own moral development can be heard when this young volunteer speaks: "How do you try to tell someone about



nutrition when they haven't eaten for the past two days? How do you teach someone about trust when ten years ago, their neighbor killed their entire family? How do you teach children's classes with no crayons, no paper, no Internet, no resources? You have to rethink everything from an entirely different perspective and not make assumptions from our luxurious lives back home. It's a humbling experience, and you find that everyone you came to 'teach' is teaching you."

Finally, young Bahá'ís' concern for *unity, equality and justice* is integral to the contribution they hope to make. Their approach to every situation includes questions like: What issue will we address? Which of my friends can I involve? What do the local people have to say? How can we ensure a diverse group of participants and perspectives? Are the views of women taken into account, and do they differ from those of men in this situation?

"The biggest test and struggle for the group was unity within the group," writes one youth. "People, people, people. That is the only real challenge I think I have ever faced when it comes to service," writes another. Both volunteers knew that unity was important not just for the group itself, but for the quality of the service they offered to others.

Some of the youth interviewed are also aware of the downside of growing up in the comparatively privileged environment of the United States. One young woman worries whether there is a latent "cultural imperialism" in her service and reminds herself to listen, to learn, and not to assume she has the answers to complex local problems. "Just because we are from the West or even

"They'll start opening their minds more, and then they'll think about what they are doing the next time they are going to get in trouble."



Bahá'ís," she says, "does not make us an authority on every aspect of life."

Support Networks

Most young Bahá'ís have been part of local Bahá'í communities, which are composed of local administrative institutions called Local Spiritual Assemblies,² of adults, family and friends. How are they supported by these many "others" in their lives?

Although survey respondents say there are times when levels of support, respect and understanding could be higher, they say they generally feel supported. Indeed, more than two thirds of respondents say they are "very well prepared for the uncertainties or challenges to come" in their lives. Some 49 percent of respondents say they consider themselves leaders, and 63 percent say they want to be leaders some day.

Their parents may have been one source for this confidence: 53 percent of respondents say their parents have "had the greatest influence on me," compared with 21 percent who attribute greatest influence to friends and 20 percent to teachers. Among the general population, Barna found that 78 percent of teens he surveyed said their parents had "a lot" of influence on them, followed by friends (51 percent) and teachers (34 percent).

Bahá'í administrative institutions have a responsibility to foster a sense of optimism and confidence among young people, and they appear to be doing so with some success. When asked whether they feel "encouraged by the Bahá'í administration,"



58 percent responded "true" or "absolutely true." In the same vein, 60 percent say youth are supported by local Assemblies in their individual initiatives and 67 percent say they feel they have what they need to be

active in the Bahá'í community.

Nearly half (46 percent) say they are "very active" in the Bahá'í community and that the community "supports most anything youth want to do" (63 percent). More than half (56 percent) say their "participation in the Bahá'í community makes a difference."

At the same time, anecdotal reports reveal areas for improvement. One young organizer tells of going to a Local Spiritual Assembly for advice. "Their response was, like, 'hand over your membership list and your papers and step back. We'll take it from here.' But that wasn't my vision at all; I was trying to create something that could bring help to places nobody else can go." Fortunately for this project, its organizers used the Assembly's feedback to clarify their objectives and streamline their methods.

When asked to say whether the statement "At one time or another I have been asked my opinion by an institution of the Faith" is true or not, though 46 percent of respondents say it is true or absolutely true, another 28 percent say it is untrue, not at all true, or "doesn't apply to me."

This percentage would seem to corroborate the story told by the secretary of one local assembly, who said when a group of young Bahá'ís were asked to plan a community activity, the assembly dismissed the

More than a quarter of respondents say they have not been asked for an opinion by Bahá'í institutions.



resulting plan out of hand as “inappropriate” after seeing the details, and especially the youths’ choices in music. The secretary said she regretted very much the dampening effect this rejection had had on the youth.

What can adults do to support and encourage youth more effectively?

Taking a cue from this last observation, one solution might be to seek out and be respectful of youths’ opinions and act on their suggestions.

In her 1999 study *A Tribe Apart*, Patricia Hersch concludes, after working with a group of suburban Virginia teens for six years, that the most important thing adults in that community needed to do

was listen: “*Listen to the kids. Hear what their lives are like, what matters to them, how things are going in their world. Listen and bring adult wisdom to the discussion.*”

The world of youth is different from the adult world;

it needs to be taken on its own terms. This should come as no surprise, since each generational cohort experiences a “gap” separating them from adults. Commenting on teen music and culture, one writer noted, “Every generation needs a private language that people over 30 can’t translate.”³ And as one of the teens in Hersch’s study put it, “Kids don’t think the way adults think they think.”

It is hard for today’s adults to understand the world their children inhabit. Life is much more complex than it once was. Whereas communism and the atomic bomb

were among the major threats concerning earlier generations, youth today have had to come to terms with much more personal and individual threats of danger and violence, following the rise in school violence and the proliferation of terrorism. The demystification of celebrities and leaders in all spheres has led to a heightened awareness of issues of personal freedom and privacy, as well as a keen sense of, and aversion to hypocrisy. The advances in communications and a proliferation of talk and “reality” shows, in which ordinary people can be “stars,” have helped to amplify age-old American habits of individualism, self-expression and self-promotion.

(*American Demographics*, 2001)

Young people may seem incomprehensible to adults because of adults’ own opinions of them. Barna found that 65-84 percent of teens think adults consider them lazy, rude, sloppy and dishonest, while fewer adults, in teens’ view, see their positive attributes: friendly (63 percent), intelligent (58 percent), trustworthy (36 percent), hardworking (29 percent) and spiritual (21 percent).

In contrast, Bahá’í youth feel adults view them positively: intelligent and friendly (96 percent), trustworthy (88 percent), spiritual and interested in making America a better place (87 percent), hardworking (86 percent). Most Bahá’í youth disagree that adults see them as dishonest (92 percent), rude (91 percent), sloppy (83 percent) or lazy (80 percent).

Although adults love their children, they seem to value their judgment less. Teens say their parents have the greatest influence on them and are the main sources

Bahá’í Youth

45%

Actively involved in charity and service projects

46%

Active in the Bahá’í community

64%

Tell friends about the faith

64%

Pray daily

82%

Beliefs shape my identity

74%

One person can make a difference

“Listen to the kids. Hear what their lives are like, what matters to them, how things are going in their world. Listen and bring adult wisdom to the discussion.”



Churches that attract teens "address teens' deep needs to belong, to believe, and to be competent"

in their lives of "peace, trust, power and safety," Barna writes. Teens also told Barna their parents "were not as supportive as they'd like regarding reactions to the quality of the teens' decision making." Hersch found that "whatever behavior is common to a group of kids feels normal to them, whether it be doing drugs or doing homework. Whether the adult world sees the lifestyle as positive or negative is not the standard the kids are using."

The experience of a Bahá'í mother who accompanied her son and other volunteers on an international project, points to a different approach: "My role was to center

them, to ground them sometimes, not tell them what to do. During our daily consultations, when we would review what had happened the day before and plan our activities, I would ask them questions about the implications of what they were deciding, about what was likely to happen as a result of a decision we were considering."

Through a process of consultation that brought in adult perspectives, this group, like others interviewed, developed a learning style that improved the quality of their decision making, thereby contributing to their effectiveness, safety and unity.

Hersch indicts the adults she studied for concentrating on trying to control their youth instead of channeling teens' energies into activities appropriate to their development. "...it is easier to cancel events than to figure out creative new ways of avoiding dangers....What (teens) yearn for is to grow and learn alongside each other with time to socialize and space to adjust to their



rapidly changing selves....What students don't get...are enough real-life coping skills....There are few popular age appropriate events....Boys and girls want to be together at this age, but society fails to create enough safe developmental social opportunities that catch on."

Carol E. Lytch, in *Choosing Church*, her study of Christian youth ministries, takes up a similar theme. She says churches that attract teens "get beyond the superficial solutions to youth ministry and address teens' deep needs to belong, to believe, and to be competent....Teens were attracted to high goals, standards of excellence, demands worthy of their attention and energy, and rites of passage marking steps toward adulthood."

Or, as one young Bahá'í puts it, "Don't give (young Bahá'ís) two millions things to do just because they have all this energy."

These observations ring true within the Bahá'í community as well. For many years, young Bahá'ís around the country participated in "Youth Workshops," an activity that focused on team building, performance art and consciousness raising. When asked, however, whether Youth Workshop has "had a significant impact on my life," 31 percent said the statement was true or absolutely true, while nearly one-third of respondents said it "doesn't apply to me" and 18 percent



said it was untrue or not at all true for them. This type of youth program might well be reaching the end of its life cycle.

Currently, many local Bahá'í groups seek to involve their younger members in the three "core activities" of devotional gatherings, children's classes and study groups for adults and youth. Forty-one percent of survey respondents say they are "involved as much as possible" in these core activities, compared with 46 percent who say they are very active in the community overall; 8 percent say the statement does not apply to them, and 14 percent say the statement is untrue for them.

In the context of organized service programs, the skill sets developed through the core activities are used by young volunteers to meet a wide range of needs. Orient Aid expects volunteers to have finished



the "Ruhi" sequence of courses, which cover topics ranging from Bahá'í history and teachings to children's education and group problem solving. Youth

involved in the Ark Project were called upon, during their visits to the Yasothon orphanage, to arrange a series of recreation and instruction activities; their work at home with Bahá'í children's classes helped prepare them to meet these needs. Insights encourages participants to offer workshops on topics that interest them, and to arrange creative devotional periods throughout their conferences.

"Don't give them two million things to do just because they have all this energy."

The study group activity includes a service component designed to encourage participants to engage in activities that reflect what they have learned through study. Service, as shown above, is a powerful tool for engaging youth; the core activities, as well as programs that apply the same skills in varied settings, may well be effective ways to promote that sense of belief, belonging and burgeoning competence young people seek.

"Now Is the Time for Service"

One young woman, reflecting on her service, writes: "My inspiration to serve is the principle of the oneness of humanity

promoted by the Bahá'í writings. I believe that everything I strive to do should be toward the physical manifestation of this spiritual principle."

It is in the writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá that we find these words: *"Now is the time for service, and for servitude unto the Lord....Therefore must the friends of God engender that tenderness which cometh from Heaven, and bestow love in the spirit upon all humankind. With every soul must they deal according to the Divine counselings and admonitions; to all must they show forth kindness and good faith; to all must they wish well. They must sacrifice themselves for their friends, and wish good fortune to their foes. They must comfort the ill-natured, and treat their oppressors with loving-kindness. They must be as refreshing water to the thirsty, and to the sick, a swift remedy, a healing balm to those in pain and a solace to every burdened heart."*

What Can Adults Do to Help Their Youth?

- Listen and consult: the world of youth is different from the adult world, full of complexities and tensions, and it needs to be understood on its own terms
- Concentrate on the positive qualities in young people
- Find creative activities that are appropriate for each age and stage of youths' development, and that are worthy of youths' attention and energy
- Surrender the instinct to control things; instead, bring mature wisdom to the situation to reduce risks and allow young people to develop competencies
- Encourage and support service programs of all kinds; they help youth cultivate their talents and capacities
- Pray for young people by name, every day.



PROFILE: Orien Aid

"The people are so wonderful, you want to do your best"

"Orien Aid is really just about youth serving others," says Samir Toloui, 21, one of the organization's founders. "Everything else is really only details of how youth can be connected to an opportunity to share what they can do. We have an organization now, and a board of directors, and we do fundraisers and plan trips, but mostly we want to help young people like ourselves find ways of serving."

Sam, as he prefers to be called, says the idea for Orien Aid came about after he had been to the Maxwell International Bahá'í School in western Canada. "Everyone there was from different countries, so you got an idea how interesting people are, about some of the challenges they face back home," he says. "You got to appreciate the differences in people, in their backgrounds, and you got to make friends with them."

One of those friends was Lua Anderson, a young woman whose Canadian parents had been living for several years in Rwanda, where they had started a non-profit foundation. During a school vacation, Sam, then 19, went to Rwanda to visit and fell in love with the people and the place. Some time later, Lua's father, Chris, sent an email to a number of people, including Sam, asking if they could come to Rwanda and help build community centers, teach classes in nutrition and hygiene and help construct a clinic in a rural area outside Kigali, Rwanda's capital.

Sam discussed the opportunity with a few friends; they decided to form a small group and make a trip. "We started planning in January 2004," recalls Steve Failows, one of those Sam recruited early on, "and things just fell into place. By June, ten people went." Orien Aid was under way.

Part of the planning involved training. Orien worked with a firm that specializes in development curricula to create easy-to-deliver classes with a village perspective. The volunteers' preparation also included physical conditioning and familiarization with local culture. Bahá'í participants were expected to have completed a sequence of courses about the Bahá'í Faith, consultation, community service and children's education; these courses, in Orien's view, get volunteers ready, both practically and spiritually, for the tasks they will do in the field.

"A lot of our friends thought we were crazy to go there," Sam says. "There were signs everywhere of the genocide but none of us really appreciated how big it was until we got there. And we found these wonderful people, so sweet and open and loving, and we fell in love with them. That's why we go back. Orien made a five-year commitment to Rwanda because we saw and heard of so many other organizations that go there once,



"We wanted to build relationships, and we have. That's what keeps us going back."

Orien Aid was founded in 2003, and was incorporated in the US as a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization in 2005. Orien Aid was "created to provide humanitarian aid and socio-economic development around the world. We specialize in finding, empowering, and training youth to get out there and change the world."

Program operations include a five-year commitment, in association with the Joan Anderson Memorial Foundation, a Canadian NGO, in Rwanda, and community development projects in Costa Rica.

More information is available at www.orienaid.org

***"There's
a whole spiritual
aspect that's more
difficult to recognize...
that's where our energy
and commitment
come from."***

give out a bunch of stuff to people and then leave. We didn't want to do that. We wanted to build relationships, and we have. It's those relationships, I'd say, and what we learn from them, that keeps us all going back."

Makini Boothe, a volunteer for Orien's second summer (2005) of operations in Rwanda, echoes Sam's sentiments: "We made a commitment to the people there, and every day we were there was a fulfillment of our responsibility. If it was hard for me to get to a place, driving in an old van for a couple of hours, I'd be inspired by the fact that it was equally, if not more difficult for some who walked half a day to get there. Everyone is so wonderful and their spirit encourages you to want to put forth your best. Even if you're tired or sick, you still know you have to go and do what you've promised to do."

For Makini, the work in Rwanda is about empowerment, which she sees as an inherently spiritual process. "Many of my friends jokingly ask me where I'm going next, insisting that they want to go next time. They want to do what I do," she says, "and wonder how it is that I find opportunities—or even have the courage—to go to a place where I literally don't know a single person. When I tell them it's because of my religion, their response is always 'Oh...religion.' They want to get involved in the material part of it—getting clean water into a village or building a community center—but there's this whole spiritual aspect that's often more difficult to recognize. But this is the most important part, because that's where our energy and commitment come from, and that's what will keep the projects going after we leave."

Orien's volunteers have the freedom to pursue other opportunities that interest them. Last year, for example, a group of youths who didn't want to go to Rwanda, partly because none of them spoke French, decided to accept an invitation to go to Costa Rica. The Spanish-speaking group included Sam's sister, Anisa. "She started asking me if Orien could do something there," Sam recalls, "and I'm like 'Sure, why not? Just figure it out and do it.'"

So she did. In June 2005, nine volunteers trekked eight hours by bus and another three on foot to the native Guaymí village of Progreso. "We stayed in raised houses and ate beans and rice every day for every meal," Anisa relates. "The family we were staying with had started a school at their home, so some of the members of the group helped teach those classes... Besides the classes there was a lot of work to be done: chopping wood, building suspension bridges, helping restore and rebuild the community center, building chairs and desks for another nearby school... The people of Progreso were all loving, soft-spoken and have a wonderful culture of their own."

Youths from Canada, the U.S., India, Iran, Japan, Singapore and Jamaica participated in Orien's 2005 projects in Rwanda and Costa Rica. By relying on the Bahá'í practice of



consultation they learned to use their diversity as an advantage and make decisions as a team.

Sometimes the volunteers incurred risks. Sam's mother, Roya Toloui, had supported Orien Aid from the beginning and in 2005 went to Rwanda. "I didn't go as a chaperone," she says. "I went because the program and the service opportunity interested me. I found that the young people were very special, they worked really well together even when they disagreed about some things, but sometimes they didn't know their limits; they didn't see the next steps, or the implications of what they wanted to do."

Roya tells a story that illustrates how youth and adults can support each other.

The group had committed to visit a remote village. The day of the trip, however, their van broke down and some of the volunteers were not feeling well, but there was no way to get word to the villagers and to those who were walking a great distance to greet the visitors.

The group consulted about what to do.

Getting to the village would involve a long, tiring trip, but some wanted to go anyway. "I was concerned that we were stretching our resources too thin and I voiced my concern," Roya says. The group asked the opinion of an adult Rwandan. "He is a wonderful man," Roya says, "but he was very zealous. He said, 'If Bahá'u'lláh or 'Abdu'l-Bahá were here, they would go!', and so of course the youth all felt moved to go, whatever the risks. I obeyed the majority vote."

The group set out, but one participant developed full-blown malaria—high fever, vomiting—by the time they reached a remote village along their route. There was no ready transportation back to Kigali and no clinic.

The travelers decided to split up. Making what provision they could for their sick friend, some went on to their destination, and others waited with the sufferer, eventually returning to the capital where they found a doctor and got treatment. "They learned that actions and decisions have real consequences, and that plans don't always work," Roya says. "They had to learn it themselves. Still, I saw they took some comfort having someone present who had a little more experience."

Orien Aid plans to continue to build for sustainability in Rwanda and possibly in Costa Rica. The organization is committed to building trust with the local people by returning to fulfill the commitments made. Orien also sponsors a young Rwandan's English studies in neighboring Uganda, where the schools are better and cheaper; Orien hopes to sponsor additional students in time.

Orien is constantly searching for youth who want to serve. "We don't have programs yet for all the things youth can do," says Sam Toloui. "If all the Bahá'í youth learn from each other, spend more time creating positive energy, teaching, serving, and being a positive influence on their friends—especially younger pre-teens—the world can change."

"They learned that actions and decisions have real consequences. They had to learn it themselves."



Six of the Things Orien Aid Does Well

- Erase boundaries using technology and personal communication
- Use consultation to learn from even difficult situations
- Recognize organization limits and reach out to others for resources—training materials, funding, advice
- Combine unique strengths of both youth and adults
- Emphasize sustainability and trustworthiness
- Keep alert for new opportunities; meet them with initiative

SNAPSHOT: KWSP/Ark Project

"She wanted to make an impact, and eradicate the stigma."

Dale and Evan Ryan, sister and brother, have traveled to Asia with their family many times; they used to live there as children. Starting in 2001, their visits began to take on another purpose: service.

As their mother Maryanne tells the story, "We let the Bahá'í community know of our trips so we could be of service while we were there." The more the family was in contact with local Bahá'í communities—especially in Thailand—the more the scope of their service grew.

Then, as Dale and Evan spoke with their friends back in the U.S., interest in service in Thailand increased. "That's how the dance workshop came up," Maryanne recalls. In 2001, three youth traveled to Thailand. In 2002, the Ark Project was born, and has since become a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization.

The volunteers were asked by a local Bahá'í if they would perform at an AIDS orphanage in the town of Yasothon. The visit was not planned, but the group agreed to go. "When we got there, one little boy ran right up to Dale," Maryanne relates. "He had a fever, and was HIV-positive. She held him for two hours that day."

"Dale was really motivated to start the project. There's a big stigma there about AIDS. She wanted to make more of an impact, and eradicate the stigma. Now a lot of Thai youth are going to the orphanage. She prayed for this boy every night after coming back to the States." As of this writing, Dale is volunteering for a year in Thailand.

In 2004, a group of eight—Dale and Evan Ryan, and six of their friends—got together and worked on a set of basic dances to perform in Thailand. When they arrived in

"One little boy had a fever and was HIV-positive...she held him for two hours that day."

one town, they learned that drugs were a big problem there. The dance workshop showcased their "drug dance," about the damaging effects of substance abuse; local children and youth watched and learned the dance.

The project continues and grows. Ten volunteers went to Thailand and Japan during the summer of 2005, under the auspices of what is now known as the Karen Wallace Service Project (KWSP), named in honor of a Massachusetts Bahá'í and friend of the Ryans who passed away in 2002.

Beyond their service overseas, some of the volunteers are active at home. One started a diversity club in her high school; another is promoting mandatory drug testing for athletes in his school.

This sort of organic growth creates its own structure as it evolves. "We coordinated a meeting at an annual youth conference in 2005. We met seven times altogether...and there was a lot of dialogue, mostly over the Internet, email and instant messaging. This year's ten youth were from our area (in New Jersey), as well as Boston, Philadelphia, Delaware, and Hoboken."

In order to see long-lasting success, the project has required support. Bahá'ís in the youths' home regions have helped with strategy and preparation meetings, while parents also support their own children directly. Bahá'í institutions in the United States and Thailand have helped with direction, advice and logistical support. With this combination—individual ideas and energy, and the impetus lent by collective resources—this project has connected with many individuals around the world.



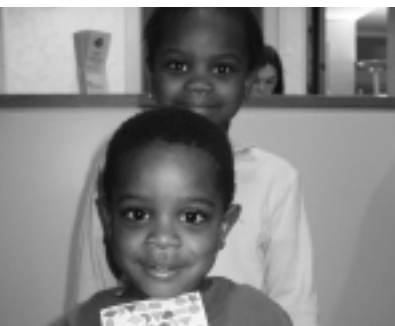
Five of the Things KWSP and the Ark Projects Do Well

- Be flexible enough to follow new opportunities as they arise
- Observe and listen in order to identify those new service needs
- Build a region-wide community using technology
- Harmonize the contributions of youth and adults
- Join passion, compassion and commitment to both international and domestic goals



SNAPSHOT: Insights

"There's a hunger among young people to experience community."



Four of the Things Insights Does Well

- Identify a need and meet it, letting participants' experience shape the program
- Help people network and share perspectives using a mix of technology and personal interaction
- Use devotional time creatively
- Extend the community virtually after the conference ends

Insights, a virtual community for young adults, is a different kind of service program: rather than one group of people serving others in some fashion, Insights participants all serve each other.

Insights sponsors several conferences a year. It is building a networked community of interest via email, cell phone, the Web and word of mouth. A growing group of friends and the coordinators of the three national Bahá'í schools worked together to bring more than 100 participants to three conferences in 2005.

Topics are chosen by young people to meet their own needs, providing a way to talk about hard challenges they face: choosing a career, starting a marriage, having children, arranging finances. Conferences are loosely scheduled. Participants get to know each other, relax and start new friendships.

In this way, they get advice from peers who may have gone through similar experiences. The conferences provide a structured way for young adults to consult on how to apply Bahá'í principles to life decisions.

Nevin Jenkins, one of the organizers, explains Insights' approach to prayerful meditation during conferences. "We use DVDs and PowerPoint presentations, incorporating different styles—hip-hop, or multiple languages. We encourage one person to take on hosting devotions." More than this, however, the organizers recognize a need to connect with God, even in the middle of discussion. Nevin continues, "We don't just have devotions at the beginning of a talk. We try to instill a devotional theme into the whole conference. Sometimes we stop and pray in the middle of a talk. Why

shouldn't we draw on the power of the word of God?"

Chiazor Igboechi, who attended the first Insights conference, in 2004 at Louhelen Bahá'í School in Michigan, recalls, "I'm reminded how wonderful it is to be a Bahá'í when I'm surrounded by 100 other Bahá'ís

who are warm, loving, and sincere. Discovering that such a religion existed, that it produced such marvelous people, was a very big part of why I became a Bahá'í at the first

conference I attended."

Dr. Rick Johnson, co-director of Louhelen, believes that Insights has a lot of potential. "It provides an opportunity for young people," he explains, "from teenagers to individuals who are beginning to engage career and family, to consider challenges they face as they transition away from family, or away from their college environment."

One of the challenges faced by this continuing project is finding a way to keep participants connected after they leave a conference. A virtual community is the organizers' answer, but how that will work is still evolving. Virginia Patterson-Nicely, originally a participant, saw a need for consistent administrative support to continue the effort, so she volunteered. "I created a database of young adults who filled out a questionnaire at conferences. It contains personal info, what they do for a living, and what they can offer to Insights."

"As word gets out," Dr. Johnson says, "we will see the numbers of participants grow substantially. There's a hunger among young people, many of whom feel uprooted from their homes and peer groups, to experience community."

"We try to instill a devotional theme into the whole conference."

SNAPSHOT: Media Training Pilot

"I liked it when I got to use the camera."

If a group of youth make a film about their community, might they think differently about that place? What if those young people are Navajo, already studying spiritual development and Navajo culture?

The Native American Bahá'í Institute (NABI) in Houck, Arizona, is asking questions like these, exploring new possibilities for its own role in the local community.

Activities for youth and elders such as rug-weaving, the Moccasin Game, study of Navajo language and spiritual development, are already underway there. NABI staff also visit reservation residents frequently, carrying news and ideas to extended families in their home compounds.

Starting in April, 2005, plans were developed for an exciting pilot project: train youth to film interviews with two renowned Navajo artists—Chester Kahn, a sculptor, painter and jewelry designer; and Knifewing Segura, a police officer and kick-boxer turned musician. For two weeks, the young people researched and filmed the interviews, then edited them into a feature that was shown at a community gathering.

It was a learning experience. One young man said, "You can spectate all you want, but unless you check it out yourself, you don't know the whole story, you see?" A young woman said, "Before this I might have gone to the library. We had to go out there and find answers. You all forced me to do something I didn't want to do, but I liked doing it." A staff member suggested, "It took courage to do that." "Yes, it did," the young woman agreed.

"You can spectate all you want, but unless you check it out yourself, you don't know the whole story"

Craig Rothman, a project planner and member of the National Spiritual Assembly's Media Services Department, sees the program as experiential education. "If you can teach youth something through their own experience, they retain the knowledge more deeply than they are likely to do in a study group," he says. "Video was one tool. It could have been anything, as long as it involved the youths' experience. They had to learn to research, consult together, work as a team. They saw their community as a resource and a place that had a lot to offer them. In the end, they produced a film with heart, humanity and humor, and they became stronger people."

"I liked the parts best where we would talk," a participant says. "We talked a lot! We had to decide what parts to put in, and how to edit them." Other participants nodded in agreement when one said, "I liked it when I got to use the camera. We spoke with these people who I thought would be different because they're famous. But first you learn about them and then you get to interview them."

The response to the film's screening was enthusiastic: The Chapter President, a post similar to that of mayor, said he planned to show the film to the Chapter Council so they could see the positive things young people are doing. Parents and grandparents expressed —some tearfully—their pride in the youths' accomplishment.

Planning for more projects like this one is underway.



Four of the Things Media Training Pilot Did Well

- Set a standard of excellence
- Emphasized hands-on learning
- Showed the community as an asset for research and learning
- Showed the youth as asset to the community



SNAPSHOT: Umoja Souljahs

"We had this big discussion on different topics, strong topics that were crucial for my life."



Four of the Things Umoja Souljahs Do Well

- Emphasize participatory learning
- Use consultation and discussion to draw lessons from hard topics
- Focus on creating a constructive future
- Create a sense of community and identity

Umoja, in Swahili, means unity. Souljah is a play on the words soul and Jah—Swahili for God. Put together, the Umoja Souljahs are finding ways of consecrating their souls for God, in unity. For nearly ten years, the Bahá'í Unity Center in Decatur, Georgia, has been home to this group, oriented to meeting the needs of young black men of any faith background, who live in the neighborhood.

The basic needs of the young men who live here reflect the realities of life in a hard environment: how to deal with the police, for instance. One of the group's founders tells of being confronted by a police officer, who told him to leave the restaurant where he was having dinner. The young man respectfully insisted on his right to be there. Seeing that the officer was not budging, however, he left peaceably, and later wrote a letter about the incident to the mayor and the chief of police. Within days, a letter came back from the mayor with apologies for the officer's actions. The young man says he tells this story to show there are alternatives, and that sometimes taking the peaceful route can produce a greater effect.

Sharing stories like this, and others drawn from African American history, lies at the heart of the program, together with the seven Kwanzaa principles and recreation in the gym at the Bahá'í Unity Center. The aim, according to Anthony Outler, the group's coordinator, is to help the young

men and boys answer two questions:

What does it mean to be a black man in this society? Who are you, given the experience of black people in America?

Chris Inman, currently studying accounting in college, recalls, "It was one of the greatest things that ever happened to me. As a kid in the inner city, there aren't too many influential black males around. The Unity Center was the main place we could go, especially Friday nights, to

play basketball. After that, we had this big discussion on different topics—strong topics that were crucial for my life."

"Most of the guys, we still keep in contact. They were some of my best friends and we are still strong. We are still the same type of people."

Lawrence Ivory, 13, says, "I've learned about the past, about slavery, and about the Negro. I've learned some of the quotes that Malcolm X was saying about slave history. I've learned how to think critically, and many more things."

What's next? "Our dream is to turn this into a school for young black men," says Anthony Outler. "When we look at the number of black men incarcerated, disenfranchised, or involved with drugs, the numbers are staggering. Many people have marches or empowerment programs, but they can only take the black community so far. They don't have the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh. Bahá'u'lláh says we should be 'a defender of the victim of oppression.' "

The Seven Kwanzaa Principles

1. *Umoja (Unity)*
2. *Kujichagulia (Self Determination)*
3. *Ujima (Collective Work & Responsibility)*
4. *Ujamaa (Cooperative Economics)*
5. *Nia (Purpose)*
6. *Kuumba (Creativity)*
7. *Imani (Faith)*

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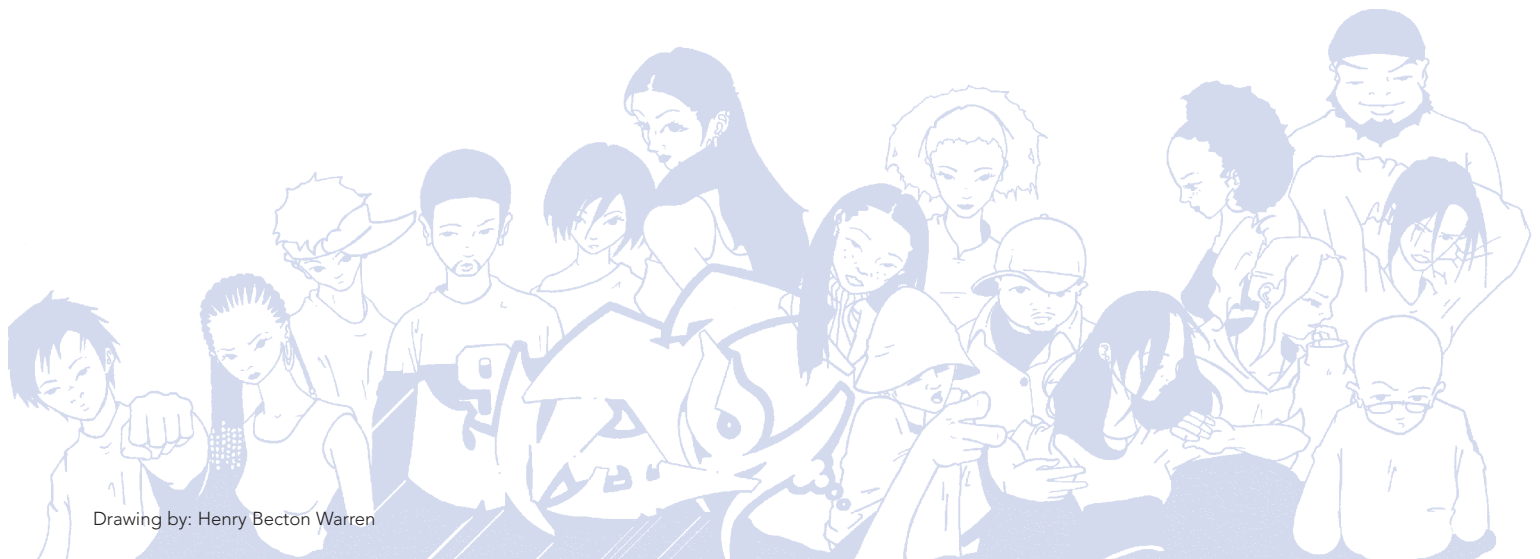
End Notes

¹Statistics are drawn from the 2005 survey of Bahá'í youth, which 1,029 young people completed online or over the phone. All statistics cited refer to this set of respondents. Several of the questions were formatted on a 1-to-10 scale; particular attention was paid to what are termed the "upper" and "lower" boxes, comprising the three highest and lowest choices.

²Local Spiritual Assemblies are elected each year from among all Bahá'ís 21 years of age or older living in the locality. These volunteers—there is no clergy in the Bahá'í Faith—administer the affairs of the local Bahá'í community.

³John Weir, "Hot Sound", from *Rolling Stone*, 8/97; quoted in Barna, 27.

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