



THROUGH THE YMCA'S
YOUTH IN GOVERNMENT PROGRAM,
A GENERATION OF AMERICAN
TEENAGERS IS LEARNING HOW
TO VOICE ITS POLITICAL
CONCERNS—**AND IGNITE CHANGE
IN THEIR COMMUNITIES.**

BY CLARE CURLEY • PHOTOS BY PETER HOWARD

PRACTICING POLITICS

Growing up in Washington, D.C., Alicia Wade stood out at a young age. By seventh grade, she was already the editor-in-chief of her student magazine, and through the stories she edited, she became acutely aware of the problems in her community. Tales about kids who did drugs or didn't want to take the school bus home because fights had broken out in their area made Wade conscious of the growing disillusionment with education. "Some kids were discouraged. They didn't feel the need to go to school," she says. "They didn't have anyone telling them it was important."

That was when she decided to join the *Youth in Government* program at the **YMCA of Metropolitan Washington**, in Washington, D.C. The program hosts mock state governments where youth debate issues and write legislation. They may not be creating actual laws, but the program gives them a chance to research and discuss community problems and solutions, shape and air their views, evaluate proposed policies and see how the levers of government really function.

Now 18, Wade recently passed down her title as the D.C. program's Student Mayor.

"The program allows you to know you really have a voice," she says. After Wade joined, her first proposal was for a new afterschool recreation

center that would give more kids an alternative to street life. Though it didn't pass, she says, "That's not the point of the program. It's that I was allowed to speak about it."

Currently, some 47,000 middle and high school students participate in *Youth in Government* programs nationwide. Each state runs the program differently. California Ys operate their programs entirely through YMCAs, while others operate out of schools. All programs, however, offer students, or "delegates," a chance to travel to their state capital, debate issues and vote on each other's proposals.

A handful of students might go on to become real-life congressmen, but ultimately, the program teaches young people how to become civic leaders in their communities. "If an

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entire generation stopped caring about [civic life], we'd have a massive leadership void," says Jason Reimer, chairman of the YMCA D.C. *Youth in Government* board of advisors who started the D.C. program eight years ago.

The program doesn't just welcome students with a budding interest in politics. "It's for students who fly under the radar," says Mary Capers Blesdoe, the Executive Director of *Youth in Government* in South Carolina. Blesdoe runs the program through an office at the **YMCA of Greenville** in Greenville, S.C. "I've had so many teachers tell me about this spark that comes on [in students who participate], who go from not caring to spearheading a recycling effort at their school or participating in a fundraiser," she says.

Participants are from city schools, rural counties, public and private schools. "Even if you think you hate government and politics, if you participate, it's going to change your life," Blesdoe says.

Learning to Change Their World

Youth in Government was first created in New York in 1936 and has since taken root in nearly 40 states. Joe Bringardner, YMCA of the USA *Youth in Government* Specialist, would like to see the program in all 50 states.

"We're in the midst of a large increase in our teen population, and I feel that the YMCA is poised to meet that need," says Bringardner, who also helps lead the statewide program in Kentucky. "Camp, sports and wellness are all

very important, but civic engagement, leadership and responsibility are also crucial to the development of teens."

Despite the program's title, its mission extends far beyond teaching kids about the role of government. Students may be required to volunteer in their communities or to mentor children at other schools. Some states have student press corps that travel to statewide conferences and publish newspapers. Others have student lobbyists that encourage youth legislators to support particular policy proposals.

Many *Youth in Government* programs also incorporate a judicial component with mock trials, an endeavor that recently received a big boost thanks to a partnership with the American Bar Association (ABA) initiated in 2008. In Alabama, for example, teams of students present briefs they've drafted before the actual Supreme Court of Alabama, which then rules on the cases.

"Research shows that students who have gone through *Youth in Government* programs stay civically involved in their communities and

vote at a much higher rate," says Brent Veysey, Executive Director of Michigan *Youth in Government*. The programs also help strengthen their interpersonal skills. "We do a lot of work with students on how to present themselves. We correct verbal and body language [and teach them] the best way to get their point across," Veysey says.

Typically, annual fees cost approximately \$300 per student and vary depending on the state, but every state offers some form of assistance. "We turn no one away," Bringardner says.



IF AN ENTIRE GENERATION STOPPED CARING ABOUT [CIVIC LIFE], WE'D HAVE A MASSIVE LEADERSHIP VOID.

—JASON REIMER, CHAIRMAN OF THE YMCA D.C. YOUTH IN GOVERNMENT BOARD OF ADVISORS



Alicia Wade (second row center) with fellow student leaders after D.C. Council Hearing on Officers Training Day, March 18.

Photo courtesy of Jason Reimer

Making Real Waves

The bills that students produce give them a chance to share their perspectives, and weigh in on issues important to their lives—such as the “In-School Suspension Act,” a stand against out-of-school suspensions that passed in the mock legislation in D.C. last year. The authors of the bill reasoned that keeping kids in school during their suspensions could encourage students to complete school work while making counseling available to those with behavior problems. But topics extend well beyond the school walls. Elsewhere, students have ratified bills to restrict the use of plastic bags in retail stores and mandate paid maternity leave.

The program also connects students with actual lawmakers who could be influenced by their ideas.

In 2008, for instance, a team of students attended a breakfast with the Michigan Education Committee and voiced concerns over the state’s proposal to tighten high school graduation requirements. Ben Brelje, the Michigan Youth Speaker of the House at the time, says, “Students have different goals, different passions, and we felt that a one-size-fits-all generic college prep approach doesn’t work for all students’ needs.”

The committee challenged the students to return with a list of suggestions regarding the proposed policy as well as possible ideas. The students researched graduation

GETTING STARTED

There’s no formula for starting *Youth in Government* in your state, but four key ingredients will help:

1. **CONTACT** Y-USA *Youth in Government* Specialist Joe Bringardner via e-mail at jb@kymca.org. He will help you navigate next steps.
2. **SPEAK** to teenagers in your community at schools and other local youth organizations to get a group of around 50 participants.
3. **MEET** with area teachers, and see if they are interested in running the program through their schools.
4. **IDENTIFY** funding to cover initial costs, such as hotel fees for students to attend an annual legislative conference.

requirements in other states and concluded that the proposed bill, with its stricter math mandates, could increase dropout rates. The state bill is pending, but certain requirements have been dropped from it, a sign the students’ proposal may have had an impact.

In the D.C. program students regularly bring their proposals before the Council of the District of Columbia. In 2008, the students proposed the creation of a city council internship program. “Because of our student legislation, 20 high school students a year now have paid internships with the city council,” says Reimer.

Launching on a Shoestring Budget

“To start a program, the thing you need the most is the passion to help young people understand the value of their voice,” Reimer says. And he should know. While Reimer was attending high school in New Jersey, his divorced parents were struggling to make ends meet. “I was an incredibly unlikely candidate to be where I am now,” he says. “I had a very rocky family, and I was really looking for a support system.”

The **YMCA New Jersey** *Youth in Government* program provided Reimer an emotional foundation that had been lacking in his life. What’s more, he was able to interact with a much broader variety of peers. “[The program] helped me push myself further. I would never have pushed myself to go to law school,” he says.

While attending college in D.C., Reimer was surprised by the lack of

PROMINENT YOUTH AND GOVERNMENT ALUMNI

- **SENATOR MIKE BISHOP**—Michigan Senate Majority Leader (Michigan delegate)
- **H. THOMAS WELLS JR.**—2008-2009 president of the American Bar Association (Alabama Speaker of the House)
- **THADDEUS GARRETT JR.**—White House advisor to Presidents Ford, Reagan and H.W. Bush (Ohio Youth Governor)
- **FRED DUVAL**—Deputy Director of the Office of Intergovernmental Affairs during the Clinton administration (Arizona Youth Governor)
- **DIANNE SAWYER**—ABC World News anchor (Kentucky delegate)
- **VICTOR MARSH**—Foreign Service Officer, U.S. State Department in Hong Kong (Michigan delegate)

THE PROGRAM ALLOWS YOU TO KNOW YOU REALLY HAVE A VOICE.

—ALICIA WADE

similar programs, so he decided to launch one. Between classes and a part-time job—and aided by a \$5,000 grant that was matched by the YMCA of Metropolitan Washington—he volunteered to establish a *Youth in Government* program. The first step was to drum up participants.

“I started by finding different groups of high school students and meeting with them at YMCAs,” he says. “I went to Boys and Girls Clubs

and some high schools, bringing pizza and talking to students about what the program did for me and why I thought they should get involved.”

The grant money covered hotel costs for about 75 teenagers to attend the area’s first annual legislative conference.

Reimer, now 27, is the only person in his family who attended college. He now works as a lawyer in Pennsylvania, but despite his personal accomplishments, he says, “I’ve never felt the type of reward in my life as I have watching this program grow.”

In states without an existing program, it does take some effort to get started. Yet, staffed with only two people, the South Carolina program reaches more than 1,700 students, evi-



Council member Michael Brown talks to Alicia Wade after the D.C. Council Hearing.

dence that it doesn't take a lot of money or staff to succeed if you have passion and perseverance.

Whether a program has several dedicated staff members or is run by teen leaders with a host of other duties, the key is finding enthusiastic people to run it. "They don't have to love government, just to be

excited about a new program that involves young people," says Blesdoe. As the director, she splits her time between visiting teachers in schools that sponsor the program and leading "bill brainstorming sessions" with students.

The program also brings benefits to local YMCAs, such as opening

up new opportunities to recruit more teenagers. "Y's struggle everywhere with how to engage teens," she says. "This gives you a means to get high school students to come to your YMCA."

Bonds that Last

The influence of the *Youth in Government* program may be far-reaching, but Bringardner believes its impact really starts at home. Growing up in Florida, he recalls watching his older brother practice speeches for the program in the living room. The effect was contagious, and participating has become a tradition in his family. Now he urges YMCAs in states without a program to contact him directly so that teenagers anywhere in the country can have the same advantages that he had.

One experience that students value is the chance to meet kids from different regions, backgrounds and walks of life. "The sense of community built statewide is pretty unique to the program," says Brelje, a former Michigan Youth Speaker of the House. "When you come from the west side of Michigan, like I do, you don't really come into contact with people from, say, Detroit schools or the Upper Peninsula."

As Alicia Wade prepares for college, the friendships she has created through the program are what stand out, along with her new-found passion for helping students to speak their minds. "If I can get just one person to want to change and to publicly voice what they care about, then I'm satisfied," she says. ■

RECENT LEGISLATION PASSED IN YOUTH LEGISLATURES

Mandatory Student Drivers Education Classes Act (D.C.)—Mandating that all D.C. high schools require drivers education and, if necessary, improve and modernize their classes.

Senate Bill #104 (Arizona)—Implementing random drug testing for recipients of federal and state assistance and unemployment benefits to ensure that taxpayer money isn't spent on drug use by government assistance recipients.

House Bill #2009-02 (Idaho)—Awarding 11th and 12th grade students college elective credits for completing community service.

House Bill #0015 (Michigan)—Mandating that people with bulimia and anorexia receive the same health coverage as those suffering from mental illnesses.