

Abstract: *This Case Example Highlights ways that youth and adults can work together to promote community assets. Young people and adults have different perspectives and talents. When they work together, great things happen. This example from Oconto, Wisconsin, demonstrates Y-AP's potential to improve community infrastructure and relationships.*

Case Example #1: Promoting Community Assets through Y-AP

Location: Oconto, Wisconsin

Project Title: Oconto's Promise – Multiple Projects

Background:

Oconto Wisconsin – Preserving Community Assets through Youth-Adult Partnership

Oconto's Promise is a community-based organization dedicated to preserving and promoting the natural and historic assets of Oconto, Wisconsin. The organization relies on youth and adults working together to accomplish its many community projects. Two of the Promise's recent projects exemplify elements of high quality Youth-Adult Partnership as a community improvement strategy.

Oconto's Marsh Project

In 2012 youth and community adults partnered to protect marshlands surrounding the community. The Marshlands are home to birds and other wildlife and is known for the recreational activities it offers. Oconto is designated as a "Bird City Wisconsin" for meeting strict criteria in areas of habitat improvement, protection, and public education. For many years, community adults had discussed the value that boardwalks and observation decks would add to the property but the project never came to life.

"With the marsh, for twenty years had been talking about projects but nobody could get anything done. So, I had one school board member who said if you want anything done you need to talk to Oconto's Promise because those kids can get things done." – Oconto Resident

Promise recruited youth from local schools and 4H youth development programs to identify a site for the observation platform, create educational materials, and plan the design of the platform. Youth led the effort with assistance from local, state, and federal government agency representatives, local bird enthusiasts, and other community adults. The platform was built and opened in 2013.

Project participants expressed pride in the project and mentioned that their participation resulted in heightened connection to the community, improved knowledge about the local area, and changed perspective on what youth and adults can accomplish. Youth and Adults continue to work together on several local environmental projects.

Oconto on the Bay Mobile App

Visitors entering Oconto will be welcomed by a sign inscribed with the city motto "history on the bay". Adding to the natural history found at the marsh and bay, the city also boasts several museums and unique historical attractions. History has become a tourist attraction and a central to community pride and identity. Recently, youth and adults have partnered to preserve and promote this history. The school-based project works with Oconto's Promise, and 4H youth development programs to document the history (places and faces) with film, web-based educational materials, and applications for mobile technology. Funded primarily by a state education grant, the project brings generations together.

Youth and adult partners steer the project planning and make programmatic decisions together. Youth are responsible for major creative decisions and lead on most technology decisions. The project requires youth to engage in discussion with multiple community adults, and partner with historical experts to produce a high quality educational product. Youth film interviews with local historians and develop applications to bring the history to community visitors.

“Youth are typically impressed with these individuals. Part of it has to do with enthusiasm and expertise on the part of the adults (about their work and about sharing). Adults who don’t treat youth differently than adults are more respected. He doesn’t talk down to them.” – Adult Participant

The History on the Bay project is ongoing. Program participants have been inspired by the dialogue and discussion between generations. Several adult participants noted having learned a great deal about youth culture and respect for the high quality work that young people can accomplish. Youth mentioned that they had a stronger understanding and respect for the town’s history. Participants also expressed a high degree of dedication to project success.

Keys to Success

“Long term commitment to the community (by youth) and participation in community life comes from/is related to youth seeing support from the greater community...when youth get positive feelings from the community. With the Marsh, kids have really felt connected to the community.” Adult Participant

Oconto’s projects are unique in that they employ youth-adult partnership as a strategy for building community pride. One important element of high-quality youth adult partnership is a focus on social change. While participants mention that the efforts are not perfect, they continue to search for ways to improve the ways that community youth and adults work together.

Focus on community change: Community members and participants expressed commitment to the project because the work was relevant and meaningful to them and their pride in the city they live.

Teach people how to work together: The programs teach youth and adults how to work together through discussion and ongoing reflection. Generational differences and exposure to multiple community adults brings perspective to all involved.

Promote the project – Celebrate: All project participants and community members mentioned that the projects included celebrations, and events that helped promote the project to the greater community. This kept them interested and involved. The success of these projects has community members seeking new work from the Promise.