In Sacramento, California, Crossroads Employment Services, and E.L. Hickey Junior/High School partnered to create the YAMEAN Project (Youth Actively Mastering Each Achievement Now!). Students at E.L. Hickey deal with tough urban challenges. YAMEAN helped 14 of those students, with and without disabilities, become leaders. YAMEAN students learned art fundamentals and acquired leadership skills. Want to know what made their project a success? Read our interview with project director, Madeline Thompson.

The YAMEAN students learn in a community court school, which means they either had difficulty in a previous school or had been in the juvenile court system. So, I’m assuming that these youth hadn’t had many positive experiences giving back to the community. Why did you approach them with the YAMEAN project?

Initially, we did a couple of workshops at the school and I really enjoyed working with the students. When the grant came up, I asked the school what they wanted, and they said “art and leadership,” so we developed something similar to other on-going leadership activities in the community. We didn’t know what would become of it. From the start, I wanted leadership to be a big piece of it, even before the art.

Some of the students in the project had “hidden disabilities.” This is a new term for some. It refers to disabilities like dyslexia, which are invisible to the naked eye. How did you accommodate those students with hidden disabilities?

At the beginning, I found out who had a disability. A couple kids volunteered that they had Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, one had a heart condition, but of course they were hidden disabilities. In general, we wanted all the students to feel comfortable talking to us. Confidentiality was a big issue. We said that whatever we talk

This inclusive service project was supported by California Volunteers, California’s State Commission on Service. The Local Inclusion Network Collaboratives for Service (LINCS) at the UCLA Tarjan Center Service Inclusion Project is part of a national initiative in California, Hawaii and Florida, funded by the Corporation for National and Community Service. LINCS uses community collaborations to increase the number of people with disabilities taking their places as volunteers in community service. For more information on the California LINCS project or to share your own success story, call Karen Leventhal at 310-825-0067 or send an email to kleventhal@mednet.ucla.edu.
about in YAMEAN stays in YAMEAN. We made sure the activities and sites were accessible. We made sure we had plenty of time to complete projects to accommodate students with learning disabilities. We didn’t want to pressure these kids; they had been pressured by the system and their families. Of course we didn’t want to give them too much time or else they slacked off.

I saw a big change in the group over time. We had a meeting a month after the project ended and many of the students said their grades went up. They also said they learned how to be committed to something.

You mentioned that it was a challenge to keep the youth engaged, at the beginning, that some came for the free food and left—how did you tackle that challenge?

We had open dialogue. We asked the kids what they wanted. We let the program belong to them. We asked them to set ground rules. I didn’t want to play the parent—so I gave them power over the program. Also we built a commitment with the kids. You have to listen to them and take into consideration what they have to say. Most of the kids come from tough backgrounds. They are not your typical middle class kids. Listening means a lot to them. They had a lot of support from the school and by the end they had started to hold each other accountable for showing up and doing the work. Alissa Taaca-Warren, from Sacramento State, helped us develop a youth-centered program. Her experience was crucial. Barbara Modlin arranged for sweatshirts to be made, which solidified group unity.

The teachers of the school were very supportive of the project. What do you attribute that to?

We had good communication with teachers. Inez Reyes, our school liaison was wonderful. They knew what the program was about. We were conscious of other people’s schedules. It’s a small school, so if you bring in an exciting project, there are lots of people that want to help.

You focused on topics that were meaningful to the youth. You termed it an “urbanized perspective.” Can you say more?
We tried to create a leadership curriculum for kids who lived in urbanized areas. We talked about types of music relevant to these youth and their lyrics. A quote from Tupac Shakur, the hip hop artist, is on our mural. We had students who were Hmong, Latino, African American, and Caucasian. We brought in food from each culture. We talked about issues that affected them—like employment. We had them write poems. Some of the poems talked about living in the ghetto to survive. We tried to pick art that was relevant to their culture—like spray painting, political art, or different things that they could relate to. That is why the program was so successful.

Your pitch to students was that they could learn art fundamentals while engaging in community service. How did they learn and apply art fundamentals?

We hired a muralist named Gabriel Romo from a local gallery. He had worked with urban youth before and had a good experience. He did very well with the kids. He left three weeks before the mural was finished because he moved to L.A. I didn’t realize how much of an impact he had made with the kids, until he said he was leaving. He was one of those people who gets a great smile and a great attitude from the kids. The students look up to him. He came in saying, “I know you don’t think you are artists, but you are. Let me show you how.” He brought in a lot of different techniques for them to play with.

The artistic techniques used were more urban, like stencils. First thing you do is find images that you want to work with. You can use Photoshop to take an image apart and grab the pieces that you need. Then you project the image onto a wall and onto butcher paper and trace it. One of the faculty members donated a roll of transparency paper. They got the butcher paper and put the clear transparency paper on top and used a hot metal tip to trace the image. They did it in layers. They used some spray can techniques. The panels that we used, along with other art supplies, were donated by our muralist, Gabriel Romo.

How did the youth develop the mural? What were they trying to communicate through the mural?

We looked at art book ideas. I liked the idea of a bridge. The kids and the mural artist would go online. He asked them to pick images they related to. They played with those images on Photoshop. One student created a bunch of different...
drawings, and we scanned them into the computer. Then we traced those images onto the panels. They sanded the panels down and painted them. I had originally hoped they would have images of leaders, but when we turned it over to them they changed it for themselves and that was good.

The group did four presentations with the mural—for school students and staff, at a parent Open House, for an Open House with other community court schools, and for the Superintendent and other high ranking officials from the Sacramento County Office of Education. Wow!

How did the students prepare?

Each student was given a word, like “inequality” or “racism.” During the presentation, we had them line up in a row, we gave them their word and they had to say the antonym. We had them make t-shirts. Each of their t-shirts was individually decorated and had their particular word on it. We had an opening poem. We had a song we picked out to play at the beginning. We had the mural covered, and then we turned the lights on and unveiled the mural. We did a Power Point presentation. That really had an impact on the other students, who could now see what the YAMEAN group had been up to all year. Doing the presentations made the kids feel like it was their project and something that they created. We taught them communication skills. They got better with each presentation. It made them feel worthy, like they were able to accomplish something.

What affect do you think this had on the school and the school district?

I think the school wants more of those programs to be available. They want us to come back next year, although we don't know if we'll have the funds to do it, so that is heartbreaking, especially since students are already inquiring whether the YAMEAN project is going to happen again. Other schools have inquired about replicating the project. I have a co-worker who wants to do the project with a different group. Local churches are asking about doing mural programs. It wasn’t just the mural that was important, it was the leadership experience. These students didn’t have to be there, some of them have jobs, and some of them were willing to miss out on job bonuses to give their time to the project. That is how committed they were.

To learn more about YAMEAN, contact Madeline Thompson, at Crossroad Employment Services at (916) 676-2504 or madeline@crossroadsdiversified.com.