Tell us about YouthSERVE.

YouthSERVE works with young people ages 11-20. We refer them to local nonprofits that work with youth volunteers and we’re also a part of the Youth Coalition of Santa Cruz. The Youth Coalition is a group of young people that combat negative stereotypes about themselves through doing service work and social activism in the community. We also organize volunteer events like National and Global Youth Service Day.

In this project, you invited youth with disabilities to participate in National and Global Youth Service Day. Were you hoping that participation in this one-day event would lead to more participation in the rest of your activities?

Yes, that was definitely one of the goals. We hoped this project would help recruit youth with disabilities for the Youth Coalition of Santa Cruz. We also wanted to work with agencies that serve people with disabilities, agencies that we hadn’t worked with in the past. We wanted to build bridges for future activities.

The Homeless Garden Project was your National and Global Youth Service Day site. Tell us about it.

The Homeless Garden Project provides homeless men and women job training and transitional employment. They can work in the garden, the kitchen or with carpentry.

The Homeless Garden Project was the site for last year’s National and Global Youth Service Day. Their volunteer coordinator was really excited about utilizing the youth volunteers. National and Global Youth Service day is in the spring, so it was great to have a project that was outside. Things were blooming in the garden. It was great to get moving and be in the middle of nature.

You did a lot of intensive outreach to recruit youth with disabilities. What methods were most successful?

We approached agencies that worked with people with disabilities. We tried to get in touch with the right person. We called and dropped off fliers and we stayed in contact with these agencies on a consistent basis. Doing this targeted recruitment was the most effective.

One of the teachers from a school that serves young people with disabilities went to look at the garden as a vocational opportunity for her students, even after National and Global Youth Service Day. So, that can be a long term relationship.

We promoted the day on our website. We put a public service announcement in the newspaper and that’s how a lot of people found out about us. We did radio spots. All of our public service announcements mentioned that this event was for young people of all abilities.

You were very conscious about making sure your project was inclusive, from the way you designed your flyers to the way you set up the activity area in the Homeless Garden Project. Can you talk about what you did to make this project inclusive?
We had a variety of activities for people with different physical abilities, concentration levels and interests. We had buckets available for people who didn’t want to kneel. We had gloves available. In the morning, we had opportunities for people to feed the ducks. People could sit down in chairs to paint signs for the garden, pot smaller plants or arrange lamb’s ears bouquets. The project was well set up to accommodate wheelchairs. We made sure we had tables that were the right height. We cleared pathways around the area and put a ramp to get up to the garden paths. We also rented accessible port-o-potties.

Did your efforts to make this day inclusive and accessible change the way you think about your other projects?

It changed the way we thought about setting up the event. It helped us do more thinking about what makes volunteers comfortable and what meets their needs. It’s important to prepare the event to suit the needs of those volunteers you are targeting. A lot of our accessibility changes came from our initial talks with our disability agency partner. Talking to partner agencies will really help you to understand what potential volunteers with disabilities will need.

You originally had a partnership with an agency that serves youth with disabilities. That partnership didn’t turn out as fruitful as you hoped. What lessons did you learn from this experience?

The main lesson was don’t worry about over-outreaching. Do as much outreach as you can to as many different agencies as you can and assume that not everyone you outreach to will show up. Another lesson was to try not to schedule around competing events. Make sure that you select the right date and consider what else is going on.

In fact, even though our initial partnership didn’t work out, other agencies that work with youth disabilities contacted us. They may have heard about us through our public service announcements. These relationships will continue after the event. Especially when we have other similar group service events.

What advice would you have for other youth leadership organizations if they wanted to do a similar project?

Appreciating the volunteers and celebrating them after the event is important. Also make sure you put these new volunteers and agency contacts in your database afterward so they know that it wasn’t just that one time event and so they’ll be exposed to other events in the future.

To learn more about YouthServe’s inclusive service project, contact Emily Redding at (831-427-5066) or ys@scvolunteercenter.org.

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