



The Waterfront Community

The donor newsletter of the Embarcadero YMCA

We build strong kids, strong families, strong communities.

Summer 2009

Trick and teach: awkward camper gets wise to the Y, becomes a leader



By Camp Unit Director, Priscilla Plasai

Thirteen years ago when I was sent to camp I was possibly the most awkward human being alive. Cowering behind my mother, with tears flowing down my six-year-old cheeks and my arms locked in a death grip around her legs, I did not want to go inside and

I certainly didn't want to learn anything new.

After much cajoling, I let myself be led away by a camp counselor named Jason. I refused to speak as we played about fifty rounds of Tic-Tac-Toe. But by the end of that first day spent doing nothing but playing, I came to a glorious realization: "You mean I don't have to... learn?"

The truth is, and please be warned, the YMCA tricks you into learning.

Campers learn games, they learn songs, and even the most awkward of campers learns how to let loose and make friends with other kids during endless activities guided by their favorite counselors. And the best part is they get to go home every summer with a huge stock of gifts: lanyards for all.

After four fabulous years I had finally made my way to the Glory Zone: The camp for middle school students called "Movin' On." Seriously, we were kind of a big deal. Not only were we beyond elementary school, we were too cool for singing, and we got to bring cell phones and money to camp.

The glory days had to end and then it was time to move on or become a Counselor in Training. I chose to don the bright green sweatshirt of

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—Priscilla Plasai

a CIT. Little did I know my role would change completely: camp was no longer a place to kick back and do whatever we wanted. Now we had to hold hands and carry ball bags and get snacks for other kids. Responsibility? What?

Throughout the next six years—slowly but surely, and sometimes unwillingly—I learned how to be who I wanted to be. I've gotten marriage proposals, I've been peed on, and I've been mistaken for Cherisse and Chynna and Liz and even Luis. But more importantly,

I've learned how to take initiative. I've learned how to lead, and I've learned how to follow. And with the help of a handful of indescribably amazing people I've met as a camper, a CIT, a counselor, and an Assistant Director, I can proudly say that I'm now only 83% awkward.

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This place is infectious and not in the way most parents would describe. I'm always going somewhere. I'm always growing. And for these reasons I can't bring myself to leave.

Come April this year, I got a call from Community Programs Director Troy O'Leary asking if I wanted to be a Unit Director this summer. "Sorry, Troy, I need to get an internship," I said, but even as I said it, it didn't fully make sense. And, as luck would have it, the Pioneers still needed a Unit Director for the last four weeks of camp. I absolutely cannot wait to work with a new group of incredible people. Maybe together, during Brain Quest and Connect Four, we can trick a few more unsuspecting kids into learning.

Youth & Government builds skills, networks and confidence

Lucas Bartholomew never expected to be a defense witness at the age of 14. Who would?

When he signed up for the YMCA of San Francisco Youth & Government program, he didn't really know what he was in for. "Before, I wasn't into trying new stuff and standing up in front of a group, especially if I wasn't the oldest person," said Bartholomew. But since his older sister was in the program for three years, he had no choice. He had to join the program to get a ride home. This past year, he said, he "learned how to speak in front of people and learned about the appellate court system." Just wait until next year!

Sponsored by the Embarcadero and Stonestown YMCAs, the Youth & Government program gives teens hands-on experience in the democratic process. Each year at the Mock Trial, two teams of six high schoolers comprised of four "lawyers" and two "witnesses" try their first case. This year, the focus was on a hot topic for teens and



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Looking for a new Saturday workout? Grab a chair for wheelchair rugby

"It's great to hear the new and old sounds of the sport I love fill the gym," Coach Nils Jorgensen said. "The smash of metal on metal, the smell of wheels locked on wheels, and the screams and cheers when there's a good play and a goal."

For two hours every Saturday at the Embarcadero YMCA, you won't hear the familiar "chirp" of high tops on the basketball court, but you may be invited to join a gut-busting cardio workout in the Wheelchair Rugby Group Exercise class.

"We're so busy having fun on the court. I forget I'm getting a great workout at the same time," said Jenny Kern. "It's good competitive fun on wheels; cardio workout included!"

Better known as "murderball," the game is a cross between bumper



cars, hockey and football, played by athletes in wheelchairs with a volleyball. It can be rough but what brings these athletes onto the court is the chance to play a team sport in a welcoming environment. Watching the players, it's clear who has played before and who is using a

loaned wheelchair for the first time. Longtime wheelchair users have a distinct advantage over their "able-bodied" team members as they cross the court to pass, roll and score.

"Before my injury I was a drummer in high-energy, head-banging rock bands," said player Scott Pope. "Playing rugby in group exercise class is the only thing I've found that gives me the same high-energy, hard-driving adrenaline rush. I love it!"

Coach Jorgensen is a champion wheelchair athlete in the national Quad Rugby Hall of Fame. He calls it a group exercise class rather than a "special needs" program because he doesn't think there's anything "special" about chasing people down the basketball court and getting sweaty. He also directs the Embarcadero YMCA's Exercise Made for People with Disabilities (EMPWD) program. As a result of recent grant from True North and the Bothin Foundation as well

as a few personal donations, the Embarcadero YMCA has gotten a few new rugby chairs and five new pieces of inclusive strength training equipment for the fitness floor.

Like other members, EMPWD participants come to the gym for a positive environment to tackle their wellness goals. But for them, workouts pay off with the ability to do simple daily tasks that might have been out of reach before. "There are three things I take pretty seriously," said Jorgensen. "Blurring the lines between what is considered 'able-bodied' versus 'disabled' activities, creating scenarios or opportunities where 'blurring' happens and promoting healthy living. My rugby class is where all my passions come together and live, and I love it."

Players often invite their loved ones and friends to the class. At the end of a recent match, player Steve Dalton said his "able-bodied" girlfriend wouldn't get out of her chair.

"She was squeaking out figure eights on the wood, exclaiming, 'This is awesome!' he said. "Everyone—paralyzed and able-bodied—had spent the afternoon playing together as equals."



Bessie program kids filmed by CNN in 26.2-mile progressive marathon

This summer in partnership with CNN's "Fit Nation," the Orrick Year-Round Enrichment Program at Bessie Carmichael After School Program has launched a progressive marathon program. Over a six-week period, 25 kids from the Embarcadero YMCA after school program that happens year round at the only public South-of-Market elementary school trained for and ran 25 miles, with the final 1.2 miles run at the San Francisco Marathon on Sunday, July 26th.

Daily coached runs and strength training, plus sports workshops, race-day t-shirts,

running shoes and training guides helped spur the students' skills and enthusiasm. On race day, CNN provided lunch and interviewed the young athletes about their experience and its impact on their lives. The segment, narrated by Sanjay Gupta, will air on the series "Fit Nation," which chronicles health and wellness across America (www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/2009/fit.nation).

The objective was to offer the youth access to opportunities that their socio-economic class may not have; qualified coaches, a training facility and support. Expert-led workshops

included sports psychology, running techniques, strength training, body image issues, proper nutrition, injury prevention, proper alignment and race-day strategy.

Laura Grishaver, Program Director, is an avid triathlete and supervised all activities. CNN funded the marathon program. Generous donations from individual donors and Orrick, Herrington & Sutcliffe, SFUSD and the mayor's Department of Children, Youth & their Families fund many more opportunities for participants.

Canon Barcus kids team up with Precita Eyes for courtyard mural

These days, every day seems like a dance party in the courtyard at Canon Barcus Community House for formerly homeless families. This spring, the 25 kids in the YMCA After School program teamed up with local non-profit Precita Eyes Murals



to make the Canon Barcus courtyard a place that represents them and the things they care about most. Thanks to your generous donations, they chose to depict something that was offered at the Y's afterschool program: Dance Night. Precita's Youth Muralist, Eli, and the kids got together for a series of brainstorming and sketch sessions before anyone touched a brush to paint. Using enlarged copies of pictures of the kids doing their favorite dance moves, the students traced their own dancing images onto the wall. Then kids sketched individual sections to add to the mural: Julia drew the

bus, Eimond drew the dragon, and Chanelle drew the Bay Bridge. After the drawing was complete, the fun began. For five weekends, everyone from the smallest to the biggest helped apply with lots and lots of layers of colorful paint. With the help of artists from Precita Eyes, the kids did a great job. Not only did we learn a lot about painting, the weekends became fun painting marathons! that gathered the community: including parents, friends and neighbors. Overall, the kids at Canon Barcus reached their goal with the beautiful art piece they made. It is a cool thing for generations to come, and the students had tons of fun making it as a team.



Mock Trial builds skills, networks, confidence for San Francisco teens

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the rest of us: online privacy. Local attorneys from firms K & L Gates and Perkins Coie—two large law firms that often face off on opposing sides in real courtrooms across the state—assembled trial teams here in San Francisco to coach our Y&G students. The students tried their first jury trial in federal district court before the Honorable Thelton E. Henderson.

For six years, K & L Gates has supported our program by assembling a team of judges, partners, and lawyers for a trial prep team. Ray Loughery, a partner at K & L, has led the K&L team for the past four years. "It's really rewarding to get away from the day to day and watch the transformation from when the students first start to when they present in the courtroom."

Taneya Lunssford is a high-school senior who joined the program last year and has moved on to join the city of San Francisco's Youth Commission. She participated in Mock Trial for two years and says, even though she was nervous, she loved it.

"I have always been concerned with injustice in my school, my community, and at home. Y&G helped me understand that we have

to make decisions in everyday life and act on what we believe in. It has been a catalyst for me to make change and has helped me in my life," Lunssford said. Now she is doing something about it not only in Y&G, but as a member of San Francisco's Youth Commission.

Not only that, "Y&G helped me decide that I want to study medicine." With the support of her Y&G experience and mentors, Taneya has been accepted to study pre-med at Stanford, Berkeley or Columbia.

"I just like the mentoring part of it and I really get a kick out of working with kids," said attorney Farschad Farzan, a Senior Litigation Associate at Perkins Coie. For him, the program isn't just about who gets accepted to the best schools because of their Y&G experiences. It's about creating never-before-experienced learning opportunities. Farzan tells his team: "Don't look at the facts like a lawyer, look at them like a person walking down the street." He knows that most of the students come from economically challenged households and hopes that he can ultimately serve as a role model, or just a person who can provide a recommendation "for those going off to school or even those who aren't."

Gala lauds 30 years of Youth Chance



What a night! Colleagues, neighbors, friends, board members, donors, Youth Chance High School students and family members listened as students spilled their personal stories in poems, digital displays and autobiographical spoken-word essays. In each case, their young voices touched a chord in attendees hearts.

“This night changed my life, it showed me that people who don’t even know me are willing to support me and Youth Chance High School,” said student Andres Quitero. “I’m going to work harder at coming to school every day and take advantage of all that the school has to offer me. I am grateful!”

More than 200 people gathered on May 13 for the 30th Anniversary of Youth Chance High School. Thanks to all our generous donors and funders, this program will continue to change lives and our collective future, one student at a time!

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Thanks to you, good news from the Y

I have stopped watching the news in the morning. The clincher last fall was when we finally got some rain and the reporter lamented that it could not come at a worse time—rush hour. Maybe I should send this newsletter to local news stations so people can start their days on a bright note. At least those of you who have contributed to our programs’ positive outcomes can read about them here.

After a solid year of bad news about economic downturn and recession, the stories in this newsletter remind me of why I do what I do and what a great year this has been. In these difficult times, our impact on the youth and families we serve is only magnified. Yes, our bottom line has suffered. This year in particular, the gifts that we received from you have made a real difference for so many kids.

Because of your gift we could hire Priscilla—who is “tricking” our kids into learning at Y camp. Because of your gift we can keep Nils on staff to bring vibrancy back to those who live in a wheelchair. Because of your support, children at Canon Barcus Community House enjoy brighter days and a new courtyard mural. Because of your gift, high school students are finding a voice that they didn’t believe they had. All because of you. Thank you so much for supporting the Embarcadero YMCA!

Executive Director

