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During a sabbatical semester in Fall 2018, *CLJ* co-editor Paul Feigenbaum volunteered as a "Scholar-in-Residence" at Youth Enrichment Services, a nonprofit established in 1994 that is based in the East Liberty neighborhood of Pittsburgh. Guided by its mission "to create hope out of hopelessness, paint a bright future out of uncertainty and give young people from inner-city and urban communities a portrait of themselves as successful, empowered, and confident leaders," YES empowers local students through its mentorship-based educational, cultural, and professional literacy programs. After the sabbatical ended, Paul interviewed YES Founder and Executive Director Dr. Floyd Jones and YES Program Director Denise Jones about the successes and challenges of supporting youth transformation into mentors, leaders, and community advocates.

Paul: Can you briefly describe the mission and programs of Youth Enrichment Services?

Floyd: Yes. The main mission of Youth Enrichment Services is to provide children who are located in postindustrial urban communities an opportunity to achieve success through a variety of educationally empowering programs. Many of our students are growing up in one-parent families where the mother or the parent is engaged pretty heavily in just managing to keep the students and the kids in the house with a roof over their head. A lot of them work in service industries that do not pay living wages, so the students by and large either have to help supplement the family income, or in many cases, they have to stay home and watch their younger siblings, while their parent is working two to three jobs.

These are the kinds of students that we get in our program. Much to our concern, there doesn't seem to be this reservoir, if you will, of interest from some of the institutional leaders to provide the kind of structure that would eliminate the need for these families to live in extreme poverty. Invariably, we wind up not only trying to work with the students in academic and enrichment programs, but also providing them with food, travel, transportation, helping them to access fees for getting to and from their work, applying for various schools and colleges. Helping to monitor a lot of their absences in school. Many of these youth face two choices: Stay home and watch young siblings, or watch the only provider in the house lose their job? Those are not two choices that you would like to see.

When you look at the kids who come to our program, in many cases, they have skills that are pretty much hidden. They do not even know their

own potential. We put them in various positions where we have high expectations, we require very high accountability. The key to it is to make them accountable to each other. As the students become certified through our mentorship certification program, there is a one-year requirement that students give back. They give back in a significant way by helping the younger kids, being a role model, volunteering, being active in all of our programs. If you think about this from the perspective of having an older sibling, the concept is that they want to be that older person. They want to have the benefits or that socialized engagement where they are well respected and well liked.

Another primary program is what we call "Summer Learn and Earn," [which is associated with the Pittsburgh-based workforce development organization Partner4Work], where these students are employed by YES but are "outsourced" to various local partners. We have churches and YMCAs who host academic and sports camps, and our students work in a capacity either as a counselor helping to serve the meals, helping with the cleanup, or in any capacity that can support those organizations in the summer. Now, we pay them, but the entities and agencies supervise them.

This becomes a win-win. It allows a student to build a resume, because we have the employers evaluate the kids and provide feedback and constructive comments on how the students can improve their work and be more effective. But also, the agencies get free labor. And that labor creates a positive relationship with our organization because we become known as an agency that can take these middle school and high school students and have them prepared to go in and work with little babies in a daycare setting, or work with other middle and high school kids in a sports camp, or work in an academic enrichment center.

Another summer program is called Summer Scholars. This is where the students work with a local mentor, such as [Eric Darsow, a Community College of Allegheny County Computer Engineering Professor,] who helps the kids learn GIS mapping in order to observe the built environment of the community and see there are gaps in resources, or where there is an over-supply of unhealthy types of commerce, such as selling tobacco products to young kids, or accessing areas where there's heavy gang activity. To engage these real-world problems, students produce a research project where they come to the office a couple of days a week, and they work with a local scholar. Projects can focus on a range of issues, anything from toxic chemicals in black hair care products, to the image of do rags and how they've changed over time, or issues related to careers in the health industry. The projects are very diverse and wide ranging.

Then our board of directors and volunteers come in and they serve as observers, jurists, if you will, attending the students' research fair, where their posters are put on display and these adult experts or volunteers question students about their projects and get into the nature of the research question and how they conducted their research, how they wrote up their

paper, what the results are, and what it means going forward. Are there any messages that they see that the students need to pursue?

So you can see how this becomes a larger part of how the students then get recognized. And also it provides a tremendous amount of goodwill for the folks who support these community kids, because they see that we have kids who are doing creative inquiry that has some real connection to their community. Those folks then become part of our network and our resource base.

Paul: Floyd, you have been involved in this kind of work for decades, even before YES was founded in 1994. I wonder if you can talk about your early experiences growing up in rural West Virginia and how they led you to this work in a much more urban environment?

Floyd: Well, as a child growing up in a rural area, you were very limited. But I was exposed to the boy scouts, to 4-H, and those programs focused on having an organic connection to your community. Kids from the community were a part of it, they were led by their parents and there were activities designed around keeping the kids active and busy and teaching them responsibility and things like that. My whole family were young minorities in a white community in a very rural area. We had outdoor plumbing. We didn't have any of the things you would consider modern, nothing. We had to carry water, we cut grass with a push mower, but we were still very entrepreneurial.

We sold newspapers every week. We cut grass for people in the city. We picked strawberries and cherries. We worked in a garden. We were very industrious, even though we didn't know that. So we were able to get into the 4-H Program, and that was probably the best educational tool that I've ever been a part of, because you learned how to use very science-based material and you applied that to your own area of interest. Photography, raising rabbits, cooking projects—what we called junior leadership at the time. I went through this program for a number of years, and that was in the back of my mind as I moved forward with my career.

And once I was able to get my Ph.D. and an academic position, the opportunity emerged to build something in the community that could help rural kids who were not getting academic enrichment over the summer. I was familiar with the research on summer learning loss.

After obtaining some grant funds, when we got a program started with a public housing project [in West Virginia], we were doing programs that were agriculturally based. Looking at ways to understand animal husbandry and things like that. Then we faced a question, "What are we going to do to keep the kids together?" Because we had 165, and we thought, "Oh, let's hire some teenagers and use them as mentors." And when we took about 14 or 15 kids, we trained them, and they were an eclectic group of mixed-race high school kids.

In the middle of the program, the local newspaper came by and interviewed one of the public housing kids. The reporter said, "This is strange. All of the things you could be doing this summer. Why are you out here in this program in this hot weather on a summer?" You know what the kid said? "My house is right across the street on the second floor. And when I look out of my window in the morning, if I see my mentor there, I know I'm going to have a good day. I run and get dressed because I want to be with him."

That really opened up the flood gates to me about the powerful role that mentors play in the lives of these young kids. For a lot of these kids in these communities, those mentors become the heroes.

It was pretty powerful to see how those roles mesh with the mentor and the mentee and how they build each other. The mentee grows from the leadership and the relationship and the new knowledge and the access. The mentor grows from their role of giving, directing, engaging, and being emotionally committed to something that is outside of themselves that they value. This is a value-based relationship, and I think we don't sometimes realize what is the real essence of mentor-mentee relationships; it's value-based. It goes beyond what people perceive to be as quid pro quo. "I'm going to work and get a job, you're going to get to be a mentor. You're going to learn and you're going to do well in school." There's the value that the kid finds, "Somebody cares about me," and the mentor finds a value in caring about someone else who's less fortunate or younger or smaller, and less mature.

Paul: So this started in rural communities in West Virginia.

Floyd: Mm-hmm (affirmative)-

Paul: How did you make the switch into an urban environment in Pittsburgh?

Floyd: Well, what I kept thinking about is if this works so well in a rural community, why not an urban community? Why not see its transferability? Our first summer that we designed it for the urban community, we did it as a part of the Public Housing Projects and Drug Elimination Program. We decided to do mentoring programs for the kids.

The other part is that we started to look at what we found to be the real Holy Grail, and that was locus of control. These kids were almost invariably in environments where they didn't feel like they control anything. The poverty, the living conditions, the places that they lived, all those things were external to their ability to control. So a lot of these kids just felt like they should give up. We believed the key was to help these kids become committed to their own learning so that they would be in control of their own destiny.

So we would give the kids sports, we'd give them math, computer science, all of these various academic enrichment programs, but it was all couched around helping these kids frame it in a way that you control your own destiny. If you're smart enough, if you're athletically competent, if you

have friends, if you have social adaptability, if you have people and mentors around you who can support you, all of these things help you to begin to realize that you're the one who can determine how much of your own life success happens to you.

Paul: I want to ask more about that because it's a really important piece, but I think a lot of our readers who are focused on systemic factors like the opportunity gap and the school-to-prison pipeline, if they hear something like "locus of control," their concern might be that that gets played into neoliberal narratives of personal responsibility and that it's not the social structure. So how do you promote the message of, "I have power and agency to determine my life," but still not exonerate the system?

Floyd: I'm glad Denise is here because she's been really flirting with this notion of agency and that term has been used quite a bit for the kids that we're working with now.

Denise: Part of the work we do is help get students in the race; then we continue the conversation around agency and systemic, oppressive structures. Helping them understand that they still have a level of agency so they can navigate the system. I think when they see, "Oh, there's this gap, this opportunity gap, this achievement gap," a part of our philosophy is that there's no gap because our students aren't even a part of the race to even identify the gap. Now we're getting them in the race and then they're competing, then you eliminate the gap because they have the resources. They're able to compete. I think it's about shifting the narrative there. That's the work that we do on the backend. To help students navigate the systems and the resources that are available to them and to compete against their peers.

Paul: Can you say more about competing against their peers?

Denise: We have really been intentional about this through our college preparation work. We are really trying to help students understand that they are a part of a larger system. In their school, they might be a big fish, but in reality there are other students that are potential competition. So, how do they position themselves in a place where they are able to market themselves against other people who have had access to resources and experiences in other spaces? Part of this work also came through our school exchange program at South Fayette [a wealthier, mostly white community], where the students were able to see different educational facilities and the types of experiences other students were afforded. And that really helped them contextualize the problem and also see the role they want to play.

          So, our students say, "I really want to take advantage of these research opportunities that YES is offering me or I want to make sure that I'm, you know, engaging in this particular experience because I know that in order

to compete against the top students and the students with the most diverse experiences, then I have to engage in the things YES is offering."

Paul: That's really interesting for me because in the work I have done in Detroit and Miami to promote college access, one of the most problematic things I've seen in terms of how the system screws people over, is that in many cases, the students don't get taught about the educational opportunity gap. They don't realize that they are academically behind because they haven't been able to compare themselves to students in more privileged environments.

In several cases I have had students tell me about the shock they felt when they got to college. They feel unprepared when they see that they weren't given the same opportunities or held to the same expectations. This contributes to imposter syndrome and belongingness uncertainty, which can lead them to drop out even though they have the ability to succeed if there is a support structure in place.

Many of these students have gotten good grades throughout their K-12 years, so they've gotten the message within their local environment that everything is fine, because they're playing by the rules and doing what is being asked. But they don't realize how low the expectations are being put on them. And again, how the system is setting them up to fail. And part of that narrative is, "I'm actually successful within this system."

Floyd: That, Paul, is a critical issue that we have to really hit on. You know, because I have a background in student recruitment and admissions and I know the science says that if you're on the upper two fifths of any class you can succeed in college. Upper two fifths. So these kids, even if they come from poor-achieving schools, if they're in the upper two fifths of that class, they can achieve in college. What we have to do and what the majority black colleges do is take that student who comes from that lower performing school and immerse them in their culture. So the student then learns, "I'm good, I'm okay." And once a student learns that they're okay and they go through that system, they then might still have graduated from high school with not so much of a rigorous academic formula, but they got it here in the real world and they perform high or just as high as some of their more privileged counterparts.

That's the key to what I see, YES' ability to take these youth and to affirm them in the fact that you need to be aware that your performance is not consistent on a level that would be for those kids in the suburban schools, Mt. Lebanons and Upper St.Clairs [two suburban communities in the greater Pittsburgh area] or whatever. However, if you're able to do these things and learn field research, you know what I mean? When you have these kids doing GIS mapping, doing computer science right in their own community.

And we have people who teach, and this is what I think is another good thing about YES is we've been able to bring in the resources from these experts who have a heart for our kids. When these kids are striving, they just

need access. When these [networks] are strategically aligning themselves with these underperforming kids who have so much potential, and when the kids themselves begin to identify that they want to be a part of this ... They're getting paid for it or they're with their peers and their buddies and they're having fun, all of those things are part of a process. If they get into it in a way that it becomes part of their narrative, then they adapt to it and they look back at us and say, "Did I really do that?"

Paul: Okay, so let's talk a little more are about literacy and how YES promotes community literacy. And literacy can be defined in all kinds of ways. Academic literacy, civic literacy, professional literacy, financial literacy, science literacy, and you are involved in all of those things in different capacities. But I'm interested in hearing you talk about how these literacy practices help the students negotiate their world and ideally empower them to be community advocates and bring social change.

Denise: I think really investing students in the process and in relevant issues has been key for us. And we've kind of learned how to do that. Through this process, students develop a level of literacy and understand the importance of the process. And I think it's not that we sit down and say, "Here's the process." But they learn that process as they engage. It's not passive instruction, like I'm teaching you this information, but students really are out in the field and learning by doing and getting their feet wet. And through that process they develop competencies that we could never, you know, sit down and teach them.

Floyd: And the other thing, let me say this too, from a literacy perspective. When we do our field research. Okay, you have to do surveys, you have to collect the data, you have to analyze the data. Do you understand, Paul, that these kids went out there delivering surveys on their phones? And I was absolutely blown away because even in college you have kids that say, "Okay, I'm going to print out this survey, I'm going to take it and set up a table." And that kind of stuff. These kids were able to, with Denise's leadership, create their surveys on their phone and go out and collect 25 surveys just from people on the street.

Denise: That type of literacy is something we have as a standard practice. We're not going to be bound by the clunky, obsolete, and sometimes expensive arcane structures that limit a lot of kids' ability to be effective in communicating. We're going to use every tool that technology allows so our students have access to the kind of resources they need to perform in a way that gives them the best chance for success.

Paul: I want to add about the importance of that component. Bob Moses, a civil rights organizer from the 1960s who later started the Algebra project in the 1980s, and who has been deeply influential on how I conceptualize

community literacy, makes this argument that students of color in urban environments, they get taught the literacies that are already obsolete while the white kids in the suburbs are taught the latest technologies. So by the time the underserved students get access to that, it's already outdated. And so I think it is really important that YES builds into its structure more innovative forms of technology and literacy. And finding creative ways to use these technologies.

That also raises another question, the money component of this, because if you're going to get access to the latest technologies you have to have access to funds. So I'm curious to hear about how YES, as a 501(c)(3), has navigated the ecosystem of philanthropy and funding and grants.

Floyd: Oh we've been able to do, and this is probably one of the real hidden resources; we have board members who we recruit primarily from the minority community and some of these board members have corporate connections and because of that corporate connection, they're able then to go to their buddies who run the foundations, who they've networked with. Like the largest grant we've ever gotten, $250,000 from the Richard King Mellon Foundation, came directly from the foundation through one of our board members.

Denise: Well the other thing is that a lot of the resources we have gained in recent years have not been financial. And I think that's been really key to our ability to do a lot with a little. So whether it's people who donate their time and expertise and say, "I'll teach this course." For example, Eric Darsow, if we really paid him what his contribution has been to YES, I mean, we wouldn't really be able to do so. But he has donated his time, his resources, he has gotten us connected to the Community College of Allegheny County, his local institution. And he has allowed us to leverage some of his resources. So he has been a great resource for YES because he is always really invested in the work that we're doing and he cares deeply about the kids and he's not in it for the money. And he believes in the heart of the work that we do. So he's just one example of someone providing resources that aren't necessarily financial.

Paul: Well, just wrapping things up. I want to thank both of you for your time and for providing historical and conceptual contexts for the amazing work YES does.

Floyd: Thank you, Paul. Thank you.

Denise: Thank you.