

# Recreation's Role

## in Promoting Positive Out-of-School Time

by Corliss Outley

As out-of-school time has gained attention, the importance of recreation has been overlooked. Recreation is more than “fun and games,” and it’s time for the recreation field to take itself more seriously in the positive out-of-school time debate.

In 1992, the Carnegie Commission Report revealed that approximately 40% of the waking hours of American youth is discretionary time and that most of this time is spent in unstructured, unsupervised, and unproductive activities. Research shows that positive out-of-school programs for youth can provide opportunities for more structured, more supervised, and more productive use of that time.

Despite its long, proven history, the role of recreation in promoting positive youth development during out-of-school time has received very little attention from youth development professionals, educators, and

politicians. There are several reasons for this oversight. First, many Park and Recreation Departments (PARDs) have been sidelined by the common misperception that recreation programs are just “fun and games” in a political climate that has focused on academic enrichment programs. Second, nonprofit volunteer organizations such as the YMCA, Boys and

Girls Club, and 4-H have successfully positioned themselves as positive youth development advocates and providers of out-of-school time, further isolating traditional PARDs. This is reflected in the funding disparity between youth development agencies and PARDs. Third, in the past twenty-five years PARDs



have undergone fundamental shifts politically, ideologically, and economically.

While once these public agencies were the major providers of neighborhood-based out-of-school time experiences, by the mid-1980s they were often challenged by shrinking budgets, employment cuts, and a lack of public attention.

### **Always More Than "Fun and Games"**

Leisure and recreation have long been considered important to human and societal health. Our pastimes play a role in civic engagement, release from societal problems, family cohesion, social communication, human development, and culture. As early as the 1850s, leisure and recreation were a primary focus for the physical growth of youth. This was illustrated in sporting activities (football and basketball), popular culture (variety musical shows and P.T. Barnum circus), and organizations (YMCA, Olympic Games).

By the middle of the industrial revolution, churches and social welfare groups began to align themselves with recreation activities as a tool to improve society. A prime example is the establishment of the Hull House in 1889 to improve living conditions in the urban Chicago area by offering educational classes and recreational services. Recreation became a way to balance inequitable conditions and to teach skills that would help individuals create more productive lives. This led to the first organized use of play as a developmental tool and was defined as the "play movement" (Kraus, 2000).

Parallel to the play movement was the establishment of the American playground movement in 1885. The first public park, the Boston Sand Gardens, also had the first playground designed specifically for children and youth. It inspired public playgrounds and recreation visionaries across the nation.



Photo: Don Breneman and Dave Hansen

These two movements set the foundation for the organized use of leisure for social good by the establishment of the Playground Association of American (known today as the National Recreation and Park Association).

Much changed with the outbreak of World War I and, later, the Depression. Many organized leisure services were cut as the nation's focus shifted to the war effort. As World War II ended, the recreation and leisure services field was confronted by another dramatic shift. The rise in automobile ownership, increased interest in the outdoors, and the relocation of families from cities to the suburbs led to an increased demand for recreation services but an abandonment of the inner cities. Urban youth were overlooked as programs catered to the affluent private sector and those who could afford to pay for "public services" (Bembry, 1998). During the 1960s, thanks to the Civil Rights Movement and later in response to the Vietnam War, organized recreation once again became a priority to address issues of urban poverty, and particularly to reach disenfranchised children and youth.

From the late 1970s to the early 1990s, events and conditions forced youth issues to the forefront of the political agenda: drive-by and school shootings, substantial increases in gang membership, increased teenage pregnancy rates, higher school dropout rates, growth in the number of low-income single parent households, and increased drug use (Witt & Crompton, 1999). Many public officials turned to park and recreation agencies to lead the movement for solutions due to the field's influence in the social reform movement and its historical access to youth within plagued communities.

As this trend continues, the need for special training for park and recreation leaders becomes apparent. Youth issues were the focus at national, regional, and state park and recreation conferences in the late 1990s. In 1995 the American Academy of Park and Recreation Administration held a major national conference on youth in high-risk environments. This momentum continued with the establishment of the annual National Recreation and Park Association's (NRPA) National Prevention through Recreation Services School, and the establishment of a National Consortium on Recreation and Youth Development. Both of these arenas provide current research and evaluation as well as out-of-school time program models from a broad range of PARs, and they participate in discussions with other recreation practitioners, researchers, and public policy leaders across the nation.

### **The Recreation Field Today**

Many professionals in the field recognize the potential for park and recreation departments to be a strategic community resource for the positive development of its youth. Witt and Crompton (1996) believe that PARs are posi-



tioned today to be the leaders in the youth development field for at least three reasons:

1. Recreation centers and park areas (where many gangs and deviant youth congregate) are widely distributed across communities, and thus can be used as service centers for dealing with youth-related problems.
2. PAR personnel are experienced in establishing supportive and caring relationships with their clients.
3. Recreation activities are intrinsically appealing to large segments of youth (including at-risk youth), and thus offer a conduit for attracting diverse young people, assessing and positively influencing pro-social behavior.

Challenged by the real needs in communities, and encouraged by a renewed understanding of their own potential, PARDs have begun redefining their purpose. They are emphatically expanding their traditional (or perceived) boundaries as providers of “fun and games” to a more holistic youth-serving approach. To build on the strengths of its past and reinvent its public image, the recreation field has become more intentional about positioning itself in the youth development movement and the positive out-of-school time debate.

PARDs are repositioning themselves through a breadth of programs, built on solid developmental theory and aimed at engaging youth in their own communities over an extended period of time. These programs include outdoor adventure, local sports lessons and leagues, arts and culture, gender and culturally specific opportunities, youth clubs, and direct contact through mentoring or peer

outreach. The following are examples of programs that illustrate the innovative ways in which PARD's are providing positive out-of-school time opportunities for youth within their diverse communities.

### **Direct Contact Program**

In Austin, Texas, the *Get REAL (Recreation, Education, Activities Leaders)* program has recreation youth workers working directly in the community where youth live instead of waiting for youth to come through the doors of fixed program sites (Witt & Baker, 1999). The program was created to provide outreach to kids not currently served by the parks and recreation department. Described by the organizers as a “recreation center on wheels,” the leaders roam their communities, carrying equipment and supplies for impromptu games, crafts, and athletic activities. The activities, however, serve primarily as a “hook” by which



Photo: Don Breneman and Dave Hansen

the leaders connect with the children and provide guidance in their positive development. REAL leaders spend their time at housing projects, apartment complexes, parking lots, street corners, and sports centers seeking out youth and teens in need of positive, fun ways to spend their time. Evaluations of this program have linked its success to its focus on an individualized approach, targeting youth who feel alienated by traditional approaches (Bocarro, 2001; Baker & Witt, 2000).

summer. A 2000 evaluation by Kleiber and Cory found that the Grand Slam Program serves a large number of lower income youth in an atmosphere that is consistently attractive to them as a safe context for social interaction and physical expressiveness. In addition, the report indicated that the program diverts youth from contexts and situations that may be criminal and/or socially deviant.

### Culture and Gender Specific Program

The *Academic Cultural Enrichment (ACE)*

*Mentorship Program* is sponsored, in part, by the Campaign Park District. The program provides African-American youth (ages 6 to 14) with the competencies and skills needed to be involved, resilient, and successful. The program develops strong math, reading, oratorical, and analytical thinking skills. The program also fosters the development of a strong, positive Black identity in participants by providing the children with effective African-American mentors and by emphasizing an African cultural component in the program structure (Shinew et al., 2000).

### Coming to the Table

Across the nation, PARDS are filling the out-of-school hours with a variety of programs and services. Yet despite their historical continuity and renewed vigor, many PARDS are still relegated to the sidelines “for fun and games” by youth development professionals. Too often PARDS are not invited to the table of community youth development discussions due to their lack of political influence among decision makers and taxpayers (Crompton, 1999). To become more engaged in the youth development arena, park and recreation departments have to fully understand the principles of positive youth development and make meaningful changes in their programs;



### Summer Program

The *Grand Slam Program* began in 1990 as a collaboration between the Athens (Georgia) Recreation and Parks Department, the Athens Police, and other area agencies to provide recreation opportunities for low income (mostly public housing) youth. A program of recreational and educational activities was designed for Bishop Park for a time period where there is a relatively high crime rate: the hours of 7:00 to 11:30 p.m. on Friday and Saturday evenings, on eight consecutive weekends throughout the

begin to collaborate with other youth-serving agencies, faith-based institutions, schools, and public service agencies; and formulate a systematic approach to youth development that identifies youth needs and provides programs to the overall community (Witt, 2002). As more recreation professionals choose to do this, it is

critical that other fields and civic leaders recognize this effort and meet us halfway. When it is tapped, the potential for vital positive out-of-school program collaborations between PARDeS and other community organizations will be phenomenal. ☘

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## A B O U T

### the Author

**Corliss Outley**, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor in the School of Kinesiology and Leisure Studies at the University of Minnesota. Her current research is focused on understanding the relationship between race/ethnicity and recreational behavior in environmental settings, and the meaning of leisure for inner city and rural at-risk youth.