

# Minnesota Counties and America's Promise

Colleen Schacht

**W**hat makes some young people healthy and well-rounded? Can we identify in the blink of an eye those who have been given the resources to become productive adults in tomorrow's society? The rising rate of crime, violence, and illiteracy among today's youth calls us to identify the components of positive youth development.

## America's Promise

In 1997 decision makers at the Presidents' Summit for America shared information, thoughts, and ideas about working for our nation's youth and their pressing issues. Out of this summit came America's Promise to youth and its mission to "...achieve nationwide increase in positive youth development support

for all children who need help, so that they have the opportunity to grow up strong, with character and competence, fully prepared to take their place as successful adults." (America's Promise, Jan. 2000)

At the summit, General Colin Powell accepted the leadership role for America's Promise. His vision is to create more connections in our communities to fulfill five basic promises to our youth:

**MENTOR:** An ongoing relationship with a caring adult-parent, mentor, tutor, coach.

**PROTECT:** Safe places and structured activities during non-school hours.

**NURTURE:** A healthy start.

**PREPARE:** A marketable skill through effective education.

**SERVE:** An opportunity to give back through community service.

## Positive Results

The resources in the five basic promises are not the only things that matter in a child's life, but increasing access to these resources is a sound and practical place to start (Benson & Walker, 1998). Research shows that the Five Promises to Youth provide positive results in youths' lives. As the number of developmental assets (or resources) increases in a young person's life, two important trends are seen.

1. A dramatic *decrease* in multiple forms of health-compromising behavior including alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use; violence; anti-social behavior; attempted suicide; and driving and drinking.
2. An *increase* in multiple forms of thriving including school success, affirmation of diversity, and optimism for the future (Benson & Walker, 1998).



## Minnesota's Branch

Minnesota Alliance with Youth is a branch off the tree of America's Promise. It is "an intergenerational alliance of stakeholders committed to creating active citizen leaders who will help build integrated, safe, and healthy communities. The Alliance builds the capacity of communities to effectively connect people and resources." (MN Alliance with Youth: Questions and Answers)

The Alliance is not a program nor is it looking to start programs. It is a three-year movement to help communities find other resources available in the state.

## Days of Promise

For five days during the 1999 Minnesota State Fair, the MN Alliance with Youth paired with the Center for 4-H Youth Development, Habitat for Humanity, Avodah B'Yachad, the Minnesota Department of Children, Families & Learning, and other community organizations.

During what was called the Five Days of Promise, the groups worked together to build a home for a low-income family. The house was built to symbolize the five goals of America's Promise and illustrate the importance of youth and adults working together to build Minnesota's future. The purpose of the house-building project was to

1. Promote authentic youth/adult partnerships and the positive impact those partnerships can have on communities;
2. illustrate the importance of service-learning in volunteer experiences, especially for youth;
3. demonstrate the positive role youth can play in addressing pressing current community concerns and immediate social problems;
4. inspire people to action; and



5. remind the public of the importance of affordable housing for Minnesota families. (Jojannson, 1999).

A lot of planning took place before the house was constructed at the State Fair. The planning committee included the co-chairs of the MN Alliance with Youth Steering Committee: Lt. Governor Mae Schunk, Eagan high school student Maya Babu, and Red Wing high school student Mike Radmer. With other Alliance supporters, all three co-chairs worked behind the scenes to make the project work.

Mike later talked about the experience of working on a common goal: "It was a great experience being around a big group of volunteers, learning how to put the trust in them to do their part."

## Communities of Promise

A Community of Promise can be identified as a community—town, county, school, faith community, neighborhood or other defined community—that "creates a community team of committed youth and adults from all sectors of the community...building on the work your

community is already doing with youth.”  
(Community of Promise set-up packet)

The goal of a Community of Promise is to “Engage all sectors of the community around the needs of their youth. Encourage community members to build relationships with young people and to team with youth as partners. Lastly, to use the framework of Five Promises to measure community efforts regarding youth.”  
(Communities of Promise pamphlet)

Two groups promote and help Communities of Promise:

- Promise Fellows are individuals committed to a year of service with the Alliance and Partners. They encourage different communities promoting city, county, and faith groups to learn about and become Communities of Promise.
- Commitment Makers help Communities of Promise move forward with their community’s goals and mission. The commitment makers contribute to different projects, events, or programs. The commitment makers can include local businesses, organizations, or citizens of the community.

Millennium Youth Challenge Writing Contest

Tick Tock, Tick Tock, Tick

by Katie Foster

What is it like to be a youth at the millennium? Briefly I will tell you the things and events that have shaped my life so I am the youth I am today, prepared (and preparing) for the future.

I have...

Comfort—a home in the country, a warm cozy bed, my American Girl doll to love, a mom, a dad, and a sister. Lucky aren’t I?

I have...

Love—from family, friends, grandparents, my dog Sally, and my cat Abby. I love them back.

I have...

Faith—freedom to attend church, the will to attend Sunday school, and the money to buy a Bible.

I have...

Education choice—I love it!!! Advanced math class is challenging but fun... and I’m a girl!

I have...

Compassion—all of my life and 17 years of my grandpa’s life he has had Lou Gehrig’s disease and is in a wheelchair. I love him dearly. I’ve gained compassion from him and now I am able to transfer my concern and care to others.

I have...

Adventure—my tree house brings joy to my friends and me and is filled with memories, woods surround my house which brings bird and animal friends (Rocket the Snake is my favorite), I take airplane rides with my family to learn more and have fun.

I have...

Nourishment—pizza (the best food), well-planned family meals, food of different nationalities which I’m learning to like, also fast foods galore!

I have...

Entertainment—Books! Books! Books! and more at school and the public library. I own a radio, some CDs and a couple of tapes. Mom says no personal TV but I enjoy my home computer time.

## Community Examples

Through the Community of Promise commitment, diverse members of the community join forces and connect resources to the rest of the community. The MN Alliance with Youth's journal of Community of Promise stories are examples of the Community of Promise's impact in different communities.

The Crookston Community of Promise has developed a "Summer of Promise," a one-month program helping youth who are underserved because of economic or racial barriers. The program has enrichment activities (arts/crafts, America Reads, music, theater,

dance), community service activities (humane society, nursing home, weeding, food shelf), and field trips (Wildlife Management Department, University of Minnesota career counseling, greenhouse, petting zoo, swimming, and health/fitness activities.) The migrant school serves lunches to these youth, community elderly transportation vehicles provide transportation for field trips, and 4-H helps with the funding. The Crookston Community of Promise believes that educating business owners, community leaders, and other important people of the community creates greater support for the Community of Promise.



I have...

Guidance—for my needs, parents, grandparents, 4-H leaders, teachers, good school bus drivers, caring neighbors, and fun baby-sitters.

I have...

Disappointments—a grandma with cancer, a grandpa in a wheelchair, a family pet that died, and too young to take a 4-H state fair trip that I earned. I'll try again.

I have...

Opportunities—to be a 4-H member, to play in the school band, to be chosen for school patrol, and to learn new things each day.

I have...

Responsibilities—to take care of a young border collie that has lots of pep, to practice playing the flute everyday, to clear the table after meals and take out the garbage. Oh, how I love my allowance!

I have...

Hobbies—reading, playing soccer, writing, playing the flute, going to 4-H meetings and having fun!

I have...

Clothing—mostly in style and easy-care garments, my wardrobe is full of tennis shoes, sandals, flares and widelegged jeans of every color and a couple dresses for special occasions, I have accessories like earrings, necklaces, bracelets, and my first new watch.

I have...

Hopefulness—for my youth to continue to develop positively as a child, teenager, and adult in the new millennium.

What is it like to be a youth in the new millennium? It's exciting!



Katie Foster  
Age 11

Another example is the Community of Promise in Faribault. In May of 1998, Faribault's Future Leadership class, Youth in Action, and the Faribault Community of Promise conducted a door-to-door community survey. They asked residents their views on the community's youth development needs and whether community involvement should be increased in response to those needs. Youth and adult pairs surveyed the city, neighborhood by neighborhood. They used the data to apply for grants and the Youth in Action group produced a community-wide resource directory. Faribault now has a school calendar dedicated to the five basic promises and started a fee-based Kinder-Links program for all-day, everyday kindergarten.

### Counties of Promise

The University of Minnesota Extension Service Center for 4-H Youth Development has taken the challenge to contribute to America's Promise by developing Counties of Promise across the eighty-seven county area of Minnesota.

A County of Promise is based on the same idea as the Community of Promise, but covers a different, often larger, geographical area.

The mission for the Counties of Promise is to support the five promises to our youth in the county areas. The goal is not necessarily to start a shift in programs or to get a great amount of new numbers, but to:

- enhance or strengthen the availability of resources to youth;
- aim toward youth development with an ongoing relationship with a caring adult—parent, mentor, or coach;
- increase safe places and structured activities during non-school hours;
- work toward giving youth a healthy start;
- develop marketable skills through effective education; and
- give youth an opportunity to give back through community service.

### Becoming a County of Promise

As we develop County of Promise pledges, the Center for 4-H and I (as a Promise Fellow) will try to educate the Extension educators and committee members on the benefits of becoming a County of Promise.

In the months ahead, we plan to increase awareness about Counties of Promise and the five promises through dialogues and literature. We want to illustrate the challenges and opportunities of this commitment.



The vision of Counties of Promise is to fulfill America's Promise even after the MN Alliance with Youth has completed their term. We want to make county fairs a place for the work around the five promises to become visible and public.

As the ball gets rolling, we want to keep everyone informed about the work of Counties of Promise across Minnesota. 4-H Extension Service will update this information in publications such as 4-H Extension Weekly and Clovernet.

### A Helping Hand

General Colin Powell and communities across the country are working toward America's Promise, "this same promise [that] ...brought thousands of concerned Americans to Philadelphia to attend the Presidents' Summit for America's Future. We were [there and] are here [in the US] to fulfill America's Promise for millions of our children who have come to disbelieve the promise or to fear it is out of reach. We are here to prove that the promise is real, and that they can attain it if the rest of us just give them a helping hand." (Powell, 1997)

4-H is working to instill positive youth development; here is the chance to compliment the counties' efforts with the MN Alliance with Youth's Counties of Promise.



If you have any questions or would like to learn more about Counties of Promise and the MN Alliance with Youth...Fulfilling America's Promise, please call me at 612-625-8394 or email at [schac012@tc.umn.edu](mailto:schac012@tc.umn.edu). You can also call MN Alliance with Youth 1-888-234-5119 or 651-296-4738 or online at [www.mnyouth.org](http://www.mnyouth.org).

### Bibliography

America's promise: Five basic promises & Community of Promise set-up packet. <http://www.americaspromise.org>, Jan. 5, 2000.

Benson, P. and Walker, G. (1998). Why the five fundamental resources matter: A reassessment of the evidence. In *AmeriCorps Promise fellows orientation manual*. Washington, D.C..

Jojansson, J. (Aug. 1999). The house that the promises built. St Paul, MN: Minnesota Alliance with Youth.

MN Alliance with Youth...Fulfilling America's Promise: Questions and Answers and Fact Sheet, 1999.

MN Alliance with Youth: What's It All About? <http://www.mnyouth.org/whatsitabout.cfm>, Jan 20, 2000.

Powell, C. L. (1997). Give children what we had. *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. April 28,1997.