



Youth on Main Street



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Remember the old saying, “If you want something done, ask a busy person.” Well, I say if you want something done, and done with energy, enthusiasm, and excitement, ask a **young** busy person!

Over the past 25 years, I’ve had the opportunity to work on downtown revitalization in five communities in three states. In each community, I found a great way to get volunteers and other people involved in the Main Street program by recruiting young citizens. I call this group “Youth on Main Street” or YOMS.

Planning for the Future

Why do this? Why spend the time and energy organizing a youth committee for your Main Street organization? I do it because it makes sense and it works. Think about this. As Main Street directors, we go about the business of planning for the future as well as planning events and activities for our downtowns. But, we often forget to involve the very citizens who will be implementing those plans and running those activities someday. Ask the young citizens in your community what they want for their downtown and they will tell you. In most cases, however, we neglect to ask. Youth on Main Street gives us the opportunity to ask them, hear them, and involve them in what we do.

There are benefits for your Main Street organization as well. YOMS:

- Introduces the youth of the community to Main Street;
- Provides young people with leadership training;
- Shows young people how to become community volunteers;
- Involves youth in downtown and shows them what downtown revitalization is all about;
- Promotes downtown and downtown businesses;
- Promotes the benefits of historic preservation and smart growth;

- Attracts young people who might not visit downtown otherwise and it brings their relatives as well;
- Encourages youth to support local businesses and shop downtown;
- Captures the enthusiasm and vitality of young people, thereby giving the Main Street organization new energy;
- Helps to build pride in the community, especially among the youth; and
- Helps to form partnerships with schools, students, parents, youth organizations, businesses, and other community groups.

So, what is YOMS? Youth on Main Street is a group of young people who represent all community high schools. The group acts as a liaison between the Main Street organization and the youth of the community. Some of their activities include:

- Advising the board on the direction of the program, from their point of view;
- Acting as ambassadors by promoting historic preservation and downtown revitalization in area schools and the community’s youth organizations;
- Serving as advocates of economic development through historic preservation in the community; and
- Promoting the historic downtown and all downtown activities.

YOMS also gives young people the opportunity to:

- Become involved in public issues and thus acquire a greater knowledge and appreciation of their community;
- Voice their opinions in identifying community needs and planning community activities; and
- Participate in evaluating downtown projects and activities and the impact they have on the community.



These opportunities nurture youth ownership of the community, and especially the downtown, which in turn empowers young people to develop leadership skills and take their places as valuable, decision-making members of the community.

Building Partnerships

YOMS also furthers the Main Street mission by building partnerships among young people, the Main Street program, and the community as a whole. These partnerships can involve not only Main Street and young citizens, but also businesses, schools, social service agencies, and other groups in the community and the area. By bringing people together in a collaborative effort, these partnerships can bridge inter-generational, ethnic, and cultural gaps; provide young people with strong role models; and strengthen community infrastructures.

What does YOMS offer the young citizens of the community? First and foremost,

it helps young people acquire a greater knowledge and appreciation of the historic downtown area of the city. It shows the town's youth that they can participate in community development, historic preservation, and downtown revitalization activities and make a positive change in the community. It also serves young people by

YOMS gives young people a feeling of positive worth and self esteem by teaching them to work with each other and with public officials, school administrators, chambers of commerce, civic clubs, nonprofit groups, service organizations, and other public/private groups. It teaches teamwork and respect for the rights and property of others, while

“We often forget to involve the very citizens who will be implementing those plans and running those activities someday.”

informing community leaders and elected officials of the needs and wishes of young citizens. And it involves youth through the planning and implementation of social, educational, cultural, community service, and recreational activities for young people, especially in the historic downtown.

promoting community pride and eliminating potentially negative influences among the future leaders of the community. By creating and promoting positive youth activities in downtown, YOMS helps to fight negative activities and the influence of gangs on our young citizens. (continued on page 8)

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Case Study

Opelousas Pride – Opelousas, Louisiana

Developing a project that promoted downtown revitalization, historic preservation, community pride, and community service was the first step in creating a Youth on Main Street program in Opelousas, located in South Louisiana Cajun Country. The Opelousas Pride Program, sponsored by the City of Opelousas, the Opelousas Tourism and Activities Committee, and Main Street Opelousas and supported by donations from local businesses, was developed to teach students about their city's culture and heritage.

The program also encouraged young people to volunteer for community service and work with civic groups, like the Main Street organization. This educational program involved all elementary, junior high, and senior high schools – public, private, and parochial – in St. Landry Parish.

The program focused on developing community pride among the city's youth. Educational materials celebrating the diverse cultures of Opelousas residents, referring to the city as a “Cultural Gumbo,” were created. Targeted at third, fourth, and eighth grade students, this heritage education program told the story of Opelousas from 10,500 B.C. to the present.

Educational materials included a short video presentation, a coloring book for elementary school students, and a supplementary textbook for eighth-grade Louisiana History classes, which came with a companion teacher's guide. Lessons focused on Opelousas Indians, Cajun settlers, Zydeco music, Cajun and Creole food, downtown business development, and famous citizens. Also included in the program were city museum tours, downtown walking tours, and classroom visits by local business people.



As a reward for participating in the program – and as a way to encourage a sense of “Opelousas Pride” – students received buttons with the slogan, “Opelousas, the Place You'll Want to Be.” Those who excelled received certificates that were specially designed to match other program materials, and the top students in each class got T-shirts, donated by a local business.

The Opelousas Pride Community Service Award and Scholarship was given each year to a graduating senior who showed pride in the community by working with local community organizations, such as Main Street Opelousas, and volunteering for community events and service projects. This award was presented in conjunction with a \$250 scholarship provided by a local downtown business.

Following the success of the Opelousas Pride Program, Main Street Opelousas organized a Youth on Main Street group. YOMS members attended Main Street meetings and assisted the organization with projects and activities ranging from the International Cajun Joke Telling Contest, Main Street Revived downtown concerts, Musique et Manger Brown Bag Lunch Concerts, and Downtown Business Appreciation Day to downtown restoration projects and tours of the historic downtown.

Something to Crow About! – Nicholasville, Kentucky



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Nicholasville Now! – the Main Street Organization in Nicholasville, Kentucky – organized a YOMS group to act as ambassadors and assist the organization with its many downtown projects and activities. A local bank donated the funds to produce T-shirts for each member.

YOMS members worked on downtown projects and activities including Spooktacular, the annual downtown Halloween Trick or Treat event. This event involved all the stores and professional offices in the historic downtown. Parents were invited to bring their children downtown to trick or treat at the businesses. Downtown merchants and professionals, many dressed in Halloween costumes, kept their doors open late, handing out candy and other treats to the kids. YOMS members gave out candy, guided the children through downtown, and helped keep the “trick or treaters” safe when they crossed the streets. They also helped judge the Halloween Costume Contest held as part of the event.

YOMS members also worked with the Nicholasville Recreation Department to create an annual Easter Egg Hunt. Held in a downtown park, the event attracted hundreds of kids, along with their parents, grandparents, and other relatives. Members of YOMS prepared for the hunt by filling plastic eggs with candy and prizes, then hiding the eggs on the day of the hunt. Local businesses donated additional candy and prizes, and members of Nicholasville Now! and the Nicholasville Recreation Department took turns playing the Easter Bunny each year.

Other YOMS activities included Kite Flying Days and the Fishing Derby, held in partnership with the Nicholasville Recreation Department; the Nicholasville Pride Community Service Award and Scholarship; Mutts on Main Street Dog Show; the annual Christmas Decorating Contest; and the Jessamine Jamboree fall festival held in downtown.

One special project of Nicholasville Now’s YOMS during its first year was the **Something to Crow About** rally, an image-building campaign designed to bring the community together and build local pride. Held on the grounds of the historic Jessamine County Courthouse in downtown Nicholasville, the rally invited all local students and residents to come and “crow” for their community.



© Nancy Stone, Jessamine Chamber of Commerce

Designed to be fast-moving and energetic, the rally featured a well-known local businessman who motivated the crowd by saying positive things about Nicholasville and throwing give-a-ways, supplied by local merchants, into the crowd. Brief talks from local and county officials and the town’s young leaders, performances by local dancers, music from the two high school bands, and cheers led by cheerleaders from the two high schools completed the evening.

Nicholasville’s two high schools compete against each other in scholastic and sports activities, often times dividing the town. The **Something to Crow About** rally not only brought positive attention to Nicholasville and the historic downtown; it accomplished much more by bringing the two schools together for a joint activity. Cheerleaders from East Jessamine High and West Jessamine High got together to lead a cheer for their community. It was a great project that instilled a sense of pride in all citizens, especially the town’s youth.

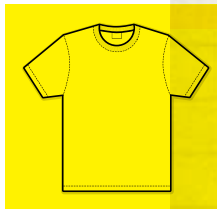


Starting a Youth Program

Who are potential YOMS members? YOMS members come from all social, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. They are students from local and area high schools who:

- Show an interest in community development and historic preservation;
- Want to acquire community service hours;
- Are at risk and need to feel wanted and respected in the community; and/or
- Want something to do!

How does a Main Street program start a Youth on Main Street group? Before your organization actually creates a formal YOMS group, you may want to gradually involve young people in your projects and activities. Creating a downtown activity for youth is a good idea. For instance, Main Street Newton in New Jersey launched its YOMS program with a youth concert on the downtown square, and the Opelousas, Louisiana, Youth on Main Street group grew out of the Opelousas Pride Program (see "Case Study #1: Opelousas Pride," on page 6).



Use the following steps to start your group:

- Appoint a chairperson from your organization to work with the YOMS group. (I make this project a subcommittee of Organization). Be sure this person is available to attend most of the YOMS meetings. You may also want to invite a group of young adults in their 20s and 30s to serve on the YOMS committee. They could meet with and help guide the group.
- Contact the high schools in your area and set up a meeting with the principals to explain Youth on Main Street. Ask if there is a teacher from that school who would be interested in helping you.
- Get names of interested youth from all the high schools in your community and area. In the beginning, you may want to involve a lot of freshmen. Continue inviting freshmen each year.
- Send out letters inviting these young people to participate. Be sure to invite students from every high school in your community.
- Volunteer to make presentations about Main Street projects and activities at all the schools. Explain what Main Street is and what it can do for the downtown and for the community. Talk about YOMS



- and ask students to participate.
- Schedule an organizational meeting at a time most young people can attend. At the first meeting, after the group gets acquainted, elect officers and decide on a scheduled meeting time and place.
 - Once the group starts holding regular meetings, have them decide on projects and activities for the year. Invite the group, and encourage them to get involved in Main Street projects and activities. Let them know they are welcome at all Main Street meetings and activities.

DO'S AND DON'T'S OF A SUCCESSFUL YOUTH PROGRAM

To ensure the success of a Youth on Main Street group, here are some things to remember:

+ DO'S

- Do get your Main Street board to make this YOMS committee an official part of your organization.
- Do make sure your YOMS committee, or team, has young people representing all the high schools and junior high schools in your community. One of the goals for YOMS is to bring students together to build pride in the community.
- Do provide the group with T-shirts. Get a local business to sponsor these shirts.
- Do hold training for your youth team. Be sure they know and understand the importance of a healthy, viable downtown and what that means for your community. Make sure they understand the four points and eight principles of the Main Street approach. *Be sure to hold some initial meetings to educate the group about Main Street, community development, downtown revitalization, and historic preservation.*
- Do provide adult supervision at all YOMS meetings. If the group meets on its own, make sure a parent or another adult attends.
- Do make sure you "check out" any adult who volunteers to work with the young people of your community. **(Very Important!)**
- Do keep it fun and exciting. You can work and have fun at the same time.
- Do keep track of the YOMS group's volunteer hours. Make sure the school, as well as the community, knows what these young people contribute to your downtown. Give the group recognition through news articles, letters to the editor, interviews, etc.

Ø DON'T'S

And, here are some things not to do:

- Don't be too rigid. Give your YOMS team some flexibility. *Allow time for both work and fun activities that celebrate achievements.*
- Don't make all the decisions. Let the youth team decide on the projects and activities it can do, with your guidance and support (of course).
- Don't give the group responsibilities it will find stressful and difficult to handle.
- Don't get carried away and give YOMS too much to do. Remember high school students already have a lot of commitments with schoolwork, school activities, homework, home chores, etc.
- Don't include too many age groups in your YOMS. High school students seem best suited for these groups. Let older students plan activities that will bring other people, including elementary and junior high students, into downtown.
- Don't let the youth group do things on its own without getting the okay from your Main Street organization. Make this clear from the beginning!

The Benefits of a Youth on Main Street Program

What does YOMS contribute to your Main Street organization? YOMS is a great way to increase your program's volunteer base. When you get young folks involved, they will encourage their parents, grandparents, and other family members to join in as well. Young citizens are willing to give some of their time to help in the community. And often they are required by their school to earn community service hours. Why not encourage them to earn those hours

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Case Study

A Day in Newton, PRICELESS! – Newton, New Jersey

Launched in 2007, Main Street Newton made Youth on Main Street a priority of its organizational team from the beginning. The first step was to include high school students in the Main Street Designation Program, held in January 2008. Another important step was to work with a young musician to bring a Youth Concert downtown. To date, three concerts held on the Newton Green in the heart of downtown have attracted hundreds of teenagers and their parents.

Another successful project was the Architectural Scavenger Hunt held in March 2008. Calling it an **Arkitecture Hunt**, participating students from an area school spent the day discovering architectural treasures in historic downtown Newton. The students were:

- Invited to participate;
- Transported from their school by bus and dropped off at the Gazebo on the Green in historic downtown Newton;
- Given a brief history of Newton, the seat of Sussex County;
- Given a description the Main Street program and the downtown;
- Given a brief description of the architectural features of the buildings in Newton's downtown historic district;
- Divided into six teams – four to five students per team, plus a school chaperone;
- Given a disposable digital camera and a list with the following instructions: identify the items on the list and take digital pictures of the architectural elements and styles on the list; and
- Given pictures of some of the architectural elements on downtown buildings and asked to find those elements.

Following the hunt, students gathered at the local ice cream parlor in downtown where each team presented its findings. The pictures they took were downloaded onto a computer and shown to everyone during the presentations. The students also enjoyed a



pizza and ice cream feast, donated by downtown businesses. At the end of the day, each student received a specially designed backpack filled with items donated by the downtown merchants and professionals, as well as information about Newton, downtown businesses, and the Main Street organization. A local downtown business donated the backpacks.

Not only was this an enjoyable learning experience for the students; it promoted Main Street Newton and downtown businesses as well. As the students were boarding the bus to return to school, one of them remarked "A Day in Newton ...PRICELESS!"

Educating Youth about Main Street – Bridgeton, New Jersey

Bridgeton, located in southern New Jersey, has the largest historic district in the state and one of the largest in the United States. With more than 2,200 contributing properties, the district includes a large portion of the city and all of the downtown and the Main Street district. Although this historic district is one of the city's greatest assets, it presents many challenges as well.

Educating local citizens about the benefits of historic preservation and using it as a tool for economic development is one of Main Street's goals. With that in mind, Bridgeton Main Street is in the process of organizing its first Youth on Main Street group. Teaching young people about Main Street and the importance of a viable downtown will help them realize the need for, and benefits of, historic preservation.

Over the past year, Bridgeton Main Street has made a special effort to include young citizens in its projects and activities. In 2008-2009, Bridgeton students volunteered to help with projects such as:

- **Lincolns for Lincoln.** February 12, 2009, was the 200th Birthday of Abraham Lincoln, the 16th President of the United States. Bridgeton Main Street celebrated the Lincoln Bicentennial by launching a fund-raising campaign called Lincolns for Lincoln. The campaign, a project of the Organization and Promotion committees included a Lincoln Penny Drive, which encouraged

young people in the area to celebrate by participating in a penny drive to benefit Bridgeton Main Street. Area students were asked to save or collect pennies. From February 8 to 14, they were encouraged to bring the pennies they had collected to selected downtown businesses and drop them in labeled jars.

- **Bridgeton Farmers' Market.** Held every Friday at the River Front in the historic downtown, the Bridgeton Farmers' Market runs from June through August. The market features Jersey fresh produce along with great South Jersey food. Vendors also sell flowers, plants, herbs, books, and other items. The market is a great gathering place for the community. Local folks and visitors gather for lunch at the market, enjoying each other's company as well as entertainment offered on some Fridays. This year's market included a Children's Day and Dawg Days at the Market. Young people were asked to volunteer their time during the summer to help with the market. They helped set up the market and assisted vendors in selling produce and other items.
- **Bridgeton Cinco de Mayo.** Students from Bridgeton area high schools volunteered to help with this event. Held in the historic downtown in May 2009, the Cultural Festival included:
 - Musical and other types of entertainment throughout the day;
 - Arts and crafts;
 - Food and drink;
 - Family activities and activities for children;
 - Special downtown business promotions; and
 - Opportunities to showcase and promote historic downtown Bridgeton to residents, visitors, and potential new business owners.

As the 2009-2010 school year begins, Bridgeton Main Street is in the process of organizing a Youth on Main Street group. The goal is to have the group organized and working on projects by early 2010.

Farmer's Market in downtown Bridgeton, N.J.



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Drawing on the Downtown – Wilburton, Oklahoma

The Design Committee of Wilburton Main Street worked with the community elementary school's music and art teacher and her fifth grade students on a **Historic Building T-Shirt Contest**. The objectives of the project were to:

- Introduce a group of fifth-grade students to the historic architecture and specific historic buildings in downtown Wilburton;
- Reinforce their knowledge by drawing the image of the buildings and ironing that drawing onto the front of a t-shirt.
- Increase traffic in downtown retail establishments by hanging the t-shirts in stores during Main Street Week; and
- Raise funds for the Design Committee's façade grant program by asking customers to vote on the t-shirts displayed in downtown stores and by auctioning the t-shirts to the highest bidders at the end of Main Street Week.

A member of the design committee took enlarged photos and drawings of five historic Main Street buildings to the class and described the history of each building. The students chose one of the buildings to draw and color. They used special crayons that could transfer onto

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by working for the Main Street organization? There are many ways to involve the younger population in your projects and activities. Here are a few examples:

- Young citizens in Opelousas, Louisiana, got the opportunity to work on many Main Street projects, including The International Cajun Joke Telling Contest held each year, and Main Street Revived Concerts held in the historic downtown every Friday evening during the spring.
- Every year, during their summer break, young people in Bridgeton, New Jersey, volunteer to help Bridgeton Main Street with the Bridgeton Farmers' Market in the historic downtown.
- Young folks in Nicholasville, Kentucky, volunteered their time to help Nicholasville Now! (the Main Street organization) "spruce up" the downtown by painting posts and signs, creating artistic banners, and planting flowers. One of Nicholasville's YOMS projects involved East Jessamine High and West Jessamine High cheerleaders who got together on the grounds of the historic downtown courthouse to give a cheer for **their** community (see "Case Study #2: Something to Crow About" on page 7). In another project, YOMS members helped Nicholasville Now! host a tour group from Florennes, Belgium.
- Antigo Main Street's Student Advisory Committee (SAC), established in 1991 in

Antigo, Wisconsin, was involved in many downtown activities, including Art on the Avenue, Market Street Day, Customer Appreciation Day, the Lakepark Festival Duck Race, Historic Preservation Week, and Downtown Cleanup Day. The organization also held an annual Back-to-School Fashion Show run primarily by the students.

- High school students in Greensburg, Kentucky, are trained to help give tours of the historic downtown. Calling their organization BRIDGES (Building Renewed Interest in Downtown Greensburg through Excellence in Service), they act as Youth Ambassadors for Greensburg Main Street, assisting in many projects and activities, including the annual Cow Days festival and the Christmas on the Square Holiday festivities. When Hurricane Katrina struck Louisiana and Mississippi along the Gulf Coast, the Greensburg Youth Ambassadors, through Main Street, collected items to help people displaced by the storm.
- In a YOMS project called the "Arkidteecture Hunt," students spent the day discovering architectural treasures in historic downtown Newton, New Jersey. They also assisted with the Main Street Newton designation program, helped with



© Courtesy Mayor George "Lisle" Cheatham, II, Greensburg, Ky.

LunchFest brown bag concerts in the fall, and held youth concerts on the downtown square for the last three years.

- Newkirk, Oklahoma, Junior Main Street was organized in March 1997, by a group of eighth grade students. The group included students from the fifth through eighth grades. They wrote their own mission statement, a slogan "Living in the Future to Repair the Past" (written by a fifth grade student), and designed their own logo. The group is still going strong. They meet every Tuesday after school, prepare work plans, and do a terrific job. They have received many, many awards throughout the years.

During my long career with Main Street, I have been fortunate to work on projects in most of the towns discussed in this article. In each community, through Youth on Main Street, I discovered young people to be bursting with energy and enthusiasm. They brought fresh ideas to the table, and added their vision and dreams for the downtown they want to inherit. Main Street programs across the nation need to realize the great benefits of involving young people in the work we do. I encourage all of you to form a Youth on Main Street committee for your organization.

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a t-shirt. (The t-shirts and special crayons were provided by Wilburton Main Street, Inc.) A local artist, who serves on the design committee, gave the students a lesson on mixing colors. The kids spent weeks on the project. During that time, members of the Design Committee took turns visiting the class to see and hear about the progress being made. When the shirts were completed, they were hung in downtown stores, and then in the downtown pocket park.

This project drew a favorable response from the community and had a positive impact on young people. During Main Street Week, Wilburton Main Street holds a walking tour with fifth graders. The students who took part in the T-Shirt Contest proudly showed off their knowledge of the buildings that were discussed during the tour, and drew attention to the t-shirts hanging in the store windows. Main Street realized the impact the project was having early on when members of the program visited the class and heard students say, "I saw this building yesterday!" They realized that they were drawing buildings in the historic downtown.

As a result of this project, Wilburton Main Street has formed an ongoing partnership with the elementary school that will lead to more student projects downtown. The program also won an award for Best Main Street Youth Involvement Project from the Oklahoma Main Street Center.

Join Carola in Oklahoma City where she will be co-presenting "The Power of Youth on Main Street" at the 2010 National Main Streets Conference.

