

## **From the Streets to the Boardroom: A Young Philanthropist Talks About Youth Organizing and Leadership**



*At 26, Alex T. Tom is one of the youngest members of the advisory board of the California Fund for Youth Organizing, which supports youth organizing around that state. Brought up in San Francisco and Fremont, California by parents who emigrated from China and Taiwan, he graduated in 1999 from the University of California at San Diego, where he helped to organize immigrant youth on social justice issues with Youth Organizing Communities. Currently he works in the Bay Area with Asian Immigrant Workers Advocates and other non-profits working in immigrant communities. He spoke to What Kids Can Do in October 2002.*

**W**hen I was in college in San Diego, I started organizing at a very conservative time in California—the end of affirmative action in the UC system. At first most of our organizing was with college students; by the end of the campaign, we realized we needed to go beyond the ivory towers—college students already had opportunities and ‘social capital’ to enter the university. But there were few resources, if any, in San Diego for organizing and empowering high school students to make changes in their community and go to college. So we held “outreach” conferences to bring youth of color to the university.

But it’s easy to romanticize youth outreach. In college I tended to think that poor youth of color automatically pumped their fist and wanted to make changes in their community. It’s easy to think that you can inspire youth to go to college just by having an event. Youth of color would come and have a great time going to workshops, learning about political issues, and meeting other youth. But then they would go back to their schools, and they still didn’t have the resources, weren’t taking the correct classes, and were being racially tracked away from higher education. What really does help is providing a long-term, sustained outlet and space for youth. And that’s the reason youth philanthropy exists.

This is not to say that youth organizing can't happen without funding—in San Diego we organized youth without real funding for three years, and I know there are still many youth groups across the state and nation that do the same. Rather it's that with financial support, our organizations can become more stable and long-term.

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**M**any of the youth that do make it to college are the ones who get involved with outreach programs, leadership training, and youth organizing projects, the ones who receive mentorship and guidance to take on these things. Although my family immigrated to the United States with little money, as I grew up our family was doing better, and I was privileged enough to go to high school in Fremont, a Bay Area suburb. Not only was I living in a middle-class neighborhood, I also participated in all these opportunities at school—student government, clubs, yearbook, sports. When I say resources, I don't just mean textbooks, supplies, and facilities at school. I'm also talking about general resources in the community, like jobs that provide living wages, libraries, affordable housing, youth centers, public parks, health care, a clean environment away from toxic waste.

For me, one of my main transitions was at 15, when I went to an eight-week summer camp for youth leadership—it's very similar to the work I do right now. The camp was mostly for poor youth of color from all over the nation. We learned about society's inequities—racism, classism, sexism, homophobia—and what we as young people could actually do to change our communities. When I came back from that camp I started a multicultural festival and a Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X Unity Assembly at my high school. I wouldn't have done it without the leadership training and political education, because I wouldn't have had the confidence or skills to do so. But the young people I work with now would never even fathom going to a camp to learn these skills—the camp I attended cost up to \$2,000! Fortunately the camp targeted predominately poor youth of color and gave out scholarships. But only a few youth leadership camps have this type of mission and provide this kind of access.

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**Y**outh organizing involves leadership training, but it also requires education about the system's inequities. And it means getting people to *use* their education and their leadership skills to promote change in their communities. More than just helping them from day-to-day, as social services do, it's creating an incubator—leading them to understand society's inequities and that there are other opportunities, like going to college if that's what they want to do.

Our goal is to connect them with the resources that more privileged people have and to help them understand why they don't have the same access. When you're young, if you want to become a filmmaker or make changes in your community or do something like that you often hear, "You're too young, that's not for you. Why don't you do this instead?" Youth in general are not given the power to make decisions for their own lives. And when you put a layer of race, class, and sexism on top of that, it makes it even more difficult for youth of color who want to go to college or whatever. So though youth of color *have* the potential for power, they don't have the resources and opportunities to find their way past the gatekeepers.

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Some funders might say, "I don't understand why these young people are getting in trouble, why don't they just stay out of trouble?" But look at their surroundings: what kinds of things are around to keep them away from bad situations? Are there good jobs and affordable housing? Is there a youth center? Do the police constantly harass youth? We're training young people to realize that they're in those situations not because they *deserve* it but because of the systemic problems of how resources are allocated—and to understand that we need to make changes in our own communities.

Currently I work with Asian immigrant youth, predominantly the children of garment and other low-wage workers, and with them the issues are similar but different at the same time. Some youth might identify more with the economics of a tired mother at the end of a 12-hour workday than with the "prison industrial complex." But these issues are definitely linked.

Really, in the end, the goal of the education that we do in youth organizing is to help all young people understand the systemic problems by realizing that our oppression is

connected and that we are pitted against each other by having to fight over few resources. We don't want youth just to blame each other and say, "My neighbor was really messed up because he did this."

But even with all the education and leadership training for youth, the bottom line is that young people learn by doing. Once you give youth the space and power to participate, it's a challenge for them to use that power since in most cases they've never had it. Young people need to realize—with the help of organizers, but primarily on their own—how to use their power. For example, at first, you may ask them to facilitate a meeting and they might be laughing and fooling around. Then, at the end when the group evaluates what got done, they say, "We didn't get anything done, you all were just messing around! Why didn't you guys [the adults] say anything?!" We might say, "This is your organization; the teacher's not going to put you in check here. We're not like parents or teachers. If you want to do nothing, that's your take." As organizers we want them to realize the stakes are theirs.

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**B**eyond just philanthropy, youth philanthropy is essential. One of the values of having the board of the California Fund for Youth Organizing (CFYO) being a younger group of organizers from immigrant communities is that we bring a different perspective to the table. We're not just saying who needs the money; we also understand the work that is happening in the community.

Personally, I've learned a lot about the funding world. Being on the CFYO advisory board puts organizers on the other side, as gatekeepers to the funding. Usually we are the ones trying to frame our organizing work into the narrow definitions and goals of funders. This is the contradiction of needing financial support from foundations but also wanting systemic social change. Regardless of the contradictions though, these boards, who are mostly rich white males, need to be more diversified in race, class, gender, and age. Only then will youth organizing be truly supported. Poor youth of color and immigrant youth need to be on the streets and in the community *and* also in the

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boardroom making funding decisions. What makes more sense? A board that is already doing the work to make the decisions or a board that only vaguely understands the work?

We had one roundtable for all these major foundations and program directors who were interested in participating in the funding collaborative. We talked about youth organizing—and it was very different because we *were* the board. We talked about the grand expectations some program officers had—for example, decreasing the dropout rate or the pregnancy rate by 30 percent, or raising graduation rates. They have all these desires for concrete empirical results. Our response was to give the potential funders a “reality check,” a realistic understanding of what their \$15,000 really does. New youth organizing groups might not necessarily decrease dropout rates. But by the end of the year they might get a seed organization started with six to ten new youth leaders, to possibly empower other people to go to college and change their communities.

Jesus Ruiz, one of the graduates from our program, for example, was in and out of a lot of trouble before. He had a hard life; his mom is single with four kids, and he didn’t have a clear direction in what he wanted to do. He’s going to college right now and still active in the community—and I’m proud and happy about that. There was a statewide conference recently, and he brought his little sister and brother who are in elementary school and junior high. They may not completely know yet, but he really believes in this kind of work.

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**I**f you look at the trajectory of young people’s involvement, you can see: They stay in this work. Many of my friends that I grew up with in college are organizing in various types of youth groups too. Once you do this work, once you understand the root of the problems in the community, you realize it’s not your neighbor that creates an unjust environment; it’s the way resources are allocated. You stay in it because it’s about the future of your family and your community.

If young people do leave a youth group, they go on to create their own, and as they become older they train new young people.

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Young people are becoming organizers, coordinators, and directors. Eventually there will be more young people as board members of foundations.

Overall this work is on the cusp, it's exploding. It's been growing and changing so fast that funders are barely catching up. What I predict is that in the next five years it's going to diversify; new things are going to be coming out. Young people are always on the cutting edge of more innovative, expressive ways of being—now it might seem that everything is only about hip hop culture, but you have various youth immigrant cultures that are equally dynamic. I'm barely keeping up myself! And I'm definitely still learning a lot.

As long as philanthropy exists, youth organizing will be cultivated like a garden. It's about bringing the power and muscle of money through youth *to* youth. And it's about youth of color becoming leaders and organizers to better their own communities.

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