Political Power: Mikva Challenge Gets Youth Involved in Politics, Policymaking





by Joanna Klonsky | 2009

CHICAGO, IL — A few days after Barack Obama's election in November, a group of young people from his hometown gather on the campus of DePaul University, excitedly discussing their plans to improve the city's policies toward youth violence. They are not a college activist organization—rather, these high schoolers are part of the Mikva Challenge's Youth Safety Council, an initiative designed to give Chicago's teens a voice in a policy discussion that profoundly impacts their daily lives.

"Throughout my high school years, I would say I lost a majority of my friends to gun violence, to drug violence or just fighting for no apparent reason," says Jimmy Wilson, 17, a junior at Chicago Christian Academy. "That happening affected me to the point where I told myself that something must be done to stop this."

In the 2007-2008 school year, more than 30 Chicago Public Schools students were killed violently. Last summer, the Youth Safety Council worked to create a report, based on its own research and surveys, containing a series of policy recommendations for decreasing the violence that has been so rampant in Chicago in recent years.

A New Generation of Activists

The Youth Safety Council is just one of an array of programs for young political activists under the umbrella of the **Mikva Challenge**, a non-profit organization founded in 1997 by former White House Counsel, judge and Congressman Abner Mikva, with his wife, activist Zoe Mikva. In total, about 4,800 young people in about 75 schools participate in one of the organization's programs.

The mission of Mikva Challenge is to "develop the next generation of civil leaders, policy makers, candidates and activists," says Executive Director Brian Brady. "Their thinking was that basically middle class and upper class kids' parents bring them into campaigns, and they volunteer and that gets them interested, but that lower income kids really didn't get this chance, because they couldn't afford it or they really weren't connected. Out of this concept we quickly

realized that experiential learning and getting students out of the classroom had other educational ramifications that teachers and students were hungry for."

More than ten years later, the program has expanded beyond electoral participation programs to include youth policy making councils—the Youth Safety Council, the Teen Health Council and a council devoted to educational policy. In addition, Mikva Challenge sponsors Peace and Leadership Councils based in schools across the city to help advise principals on making their schools more peaceful, supportive environments. But in 2008, activity around elections and other political happenings remained at the center of the organization's focus.

Elections in Action

Students in the Mikva Challenge's Elections in Actions program had a busy 2008. Ashley Williams, a sophomore at Bowen High School's New Millennium School of Health, is a case in point. She interned at State Senator Kwame Raoul's office over the summer, and she attended the Democratic National Convention (DNC) in August with other Mikva Challenge youth. The program is "like a big family," Ashley says.





Through the program, 60 students traveled in January 2008 to witness the New Hampshire primary. Some 50 more headed to the Iowa Caucuses, and others attended the 2008 DNC, all to get a closer view of the nuts and bolts of the U.S. political process. And in January 2009, 26 Mikva youth went to Washington, D.C., to witness the inauguration of the first African-American president.

The training and political awareness learned in Mikva Challenge have clearly stuck with many of the program's graduates as well. Mikva alumni were working on campaigns in the 2008 elections around the country, in places like Ohio, Missouri, Iowa and Minnesota.

Through Mikva's Student Judge Project, some 2,500 high school juniors and seniors served as election judges throughout Chicago on Election Day. Mark Ford, 18, served as an election judge on November 4, and went along on the trip to the New Hampshire primary. He got involved in Mikva Challenge three years ago, when a teacher encouraged him to join. "I didn't know nothing about politics, so I went to an event at Mikva Challenge. I liked what they was doing," he says.

Ford began volunteering for Chicago Alderman Sandi Jackson, and took his first trip to Illinois' capital city of Springfield. Just a few months ago, after three years of activism through the organization, Ford joined the Youth Safety Council, and began to get involved in the Mikva Challenge's policy arm.

Youth as Policy Makers



Mikva Challenge students all seem to agree—participating in the program has made them think more seriously about the political process and how it relates specifically to their own lives. In a city where the murder rate is sky high, almost all of the Youth Safety Council members have been personally affected, or know someone who has been affected by violence. "I know a lot of people that died, so, that's why I wanted to try to get into this safety thing," says Ford.



Since the publication of its report last summer, the Youth Safety Council has met with top city officials to promote their policy ideas, including representatives from Mayor Richard Daley's office and from the Chicago Public Schools. The officials "were fired up about the students' recommendations," says Brian Brady.

The policy teams don't just walk into meetings with some of the city's most important policy makers without preparation. They undergo extensive leadership training, team building, and learn to facilitate meetings.

"People are scared to push ideas with the mayor really aggressively," says Brady. Through the youth policy councils, Brady says, the students are "the charge" that might allow city officials to be "more aggressive in their policy."

By giving the Youth Safety Council an audience, the city's representatives gave the youth "a chance to be heard, and to be understood—that '*we* know what we are going through. Now *you* need to know,'" says LaToya Reeves, 17, a senior at Orr Academy High School.

For Debbie Marian De Lara, a senior at Josephinum Academy, who came to the United States from the Philippines just over a year ago, Mikva Challenge has been life changing. She went to the New Hampshire primary election in January 2008, the Republican National Convention in August and in the summer worked for Chicago Alderman Tom Tunney, an experience which she says helped develop her communication skills. Mikva Challenge "made my American dream possible," says De Lara. "It catalyzed my dream to become a real political participant."