

America's Youth: Expanding Our Horizons

By Selena Farnesi, 2008 National Youth of the Year

America is home to some 160 million youth and teenagers. A large portion of these seemingly healthy teens are actually at risk of what professionals are calling teenage influenza, a deadly disease which, if left untreated, can cause life-long damage. I am no exception. This is my story.

I live in the suburbs of California. I have two parents who love and support me. Food, shelter and education were handed to me like a birthright rather than a privilege. Doesn't that sound like the perfect life? It was the perfect life, but I couldn't recognize that because the disease was taking effect. My symptoms included complaining about sharing a room with my sister, not caring that in Sudan a family of five could live in a desert hut no larger than a queen-sized bed. I was rampant with rage when my sister borrowed my clothes, not stopping to consider

that I had enough for months when the children that helped make them had little to none.

As the symptoms became worse, I began to throw fits over having to walk three blocks to school, not caring in the least that the children of Uganda travel over 30 miles a day, walking from where they beg to the safe houses

those children so desperately scour for food and nourishment to hold on to their already starved lives is littered with bombs and mines left there from the Vietnam War. I cared not that civil war was raging and unreasonable religious conflicts and governmental extremists were abducting, brainwashing, raping, and killing children.

I was beyond help; the illness had eaten away my ability to feel empathy and to care about the plights of others. Apathy had reduced me to nothing more than a selfish, self-serving, and self-indulgent individual. Just when my parents feared all hope was lost, a cure was found. International studies and civic education are the vaccination.

When I started debating for my school, I could see the pain left on the faces of children in Time Magazine from harsh lives. When I took a civic education class (environmental science) I could feel a change brought on by learning through community service projects, like river restoration and bird banding. I could see students caring, taking an active interest in something larger than themselves. Both experiences promoted my decision to be a volunteer. I can remember my first community service project; I could feel the impact I was making in the handshake of my co-volunteers. Hands-on education broke down the walls that surrounded my small materialistic world. Because of my positive educational experiences, a passion for community and service surpass my passion for television and telephones, and the need to make an impact thwarts my need to shop. The problem is, experiences like my own are few and far between. Youth everywhere suffer from the apathetic disease just as I did, but less and less are exposed to a classroom that can do anything more but sustain their condition.

The youth of America need the help of our educators, not our text books. The burden of molding students into productive community participants and good citizens lies with our public school systems. This burden is not something new, rather it is something forgotten. In fact, Albert Einstein acknowledged it when he said, "We believe in teaching citizenship because it makes the man."

Through civic education students would be empowered; they would know they could make a difference—students would know that what they thought, what they said, and what they did mattered! Students would learn in our communities and use their education to solve problems and make change instead of spending their days flipping through text books. For example,



Youth of the Year winner Selena Farnesi and Atlas World Travel Vice President Darlene Heller, sponsor of the Youth of the Year award.


where they sleep. I wouldn't voluntarily help my mother bring in groceries, never registering that one bag of donated rice could feed a starving family for a month. And in the most deadly stage of the disease, my reaction to the illness was enough to make me complain about only owning last year's Ipod model, having to use a phone that wouldn't store all my text messages, and having to deal with a slow internet connection. I didn't care that in the time it took me to log on to Myspace.com, seven children would die of malnutrition. It didn't bother me that the land

students taking calculus and high-level math courses or engineer prep classes could get hands-on experience by designing and building homes for Habitat for Humanity, instead of completing 20 math problems every night. Government and economic students or history majors could learn about our judicial system by advocating for changes that matter to them in our legislature, instead of reading about others who did.

Furthermore, when civic education is paired with international studies, it's easy for students to be more open to what's going on in other parts of the world and feel passionate about people outside their own country, their own community, and their own shopping malls. International studies exposes students to the pros and cons of other cultures. It can demonstrate the

riches of a tradition or political system different than our own, while also providing students with real life statistics regarding the challenges people in other countries face every day. In some cases it may make a student grateful for what they have. In others, it may evoke passion and a need to create change. But in all cases, international education is empowering because it presents the truth.

Everyone says my generation is the future. How often do we hear the phrase, "The youth of today hold the key to tomorrow's success"? My question is this—how can any of us be effective leaders when we are all sick—ill with teenage influenza, disabled by apathy, and rendered mindless by pop culture? An effort must be made to save our youth and the future of our country.

International studies will let students see people—real people, innocent people, people in need. It will let students see cultures beyond their own as fascinating before threatening. Just as civic education will let students see the good they can do and the difference they can make. International studies and civic education will enable students to open their eyes and their hearts to something better, to something beautiful. Education can be eye-opening. Education can be life-saving. It was for me. 

About the National Youth of the Year Award and Selena Farnesi

The National Youth of the Year Award honors outstanding students who have exhibited excellence in academics and leadership. It is the culmination of an effort by hundreds of Exchange Clubs across the country to identify and recognize the young leaders of our nation.

The recipient serves as a role model to his or her peers, by exhibiting exceptional scholastic achievement, respect for self and others, and ambitious career goals. Our National Youth of the Year recipients have illustrated that the diligent pursuit of higher ideals truly brings rewards.

The process for selecting the National Youth of the Year begins at the club

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2008 National Youth of the Year Nominees

Nominee	Sponsoring Club	District
Alexander Mitchell Taylor	Wetumpka, AL	Alabama
Devin Wayne Newson	Oklahoma City, OK	Arklahoma
Colton A. Dillion	Newport Harbor, CA	CA/HI/NV
Selena Farnesi	Fresno, CA	CA/HI/NV
Jeffrey J. Russell	Naugatuck, CT	Connecticut
Alex James Windjue	West Fargo, ND	Dakota Territory
Kyle Bertram Schenthal	Emerald Coast, FL	Florida
Whitney Schmieder	Emerald Coast, FL	Florida
Aaron Groover	Statesboro, GA	Georgia
Corrin Hatala	Waverly, IA	Heartland
Rachel Giuseppetti	The Tonawandas, NY	Lake Erie
Stephanie Bloch	Quincy, IL	Lincolnland
Stephanie Butman	Farmington-Farmington Hills, MI	Michigan
Camden Bowman	Battle Creek, MI	Michigan
Laura Yu	Newtown, PA	Mid-Atlantic
Benjamin Joshua Keough Daniel	Picayune, MS	Mississippi
Elizabeth Scott	Hillsborough, NC	North Carolina
Nicholas Ryan Simmons-Stern	Needham, MA	New England
Natalie D. Johnson	Portage, IN	Northern Indiana
Kayla Lockhart	Downtown XC of Spokane, WA	Northwest
Luke Brenneman	Lima, OH	Ohio/West Virginia
Johnniel Ortiz Mendez	Sabana Grande, PR	Puerto Rico
Emily Dunn	Bonneville-Salt Lake City, UT	Rocky Mountain
Courtney H. Marsh	Isle of Palms, SC	South Carolina
Hailey Taylor	Marysville, CA	Sierra Pacific
Rachel Marie Thurston	Flagstaff, AZ	Southwest
Marco Orozco	Paragould, AR	Tennessee
Sarah McKamie	Gatesville, TX	Texas-Louisiana
Anthony Charles Montes de Oca	Baton Rouge, LA	TX-LA Gulf Coast
Kourtney Ginn	Winchester, VA	VA/MD/DE
Ellen Elizabeth Goldschmidt	West Suburban Milwaukee, WI	WI/Upper Peninsula
Luke Mitzel	Missoula, MT	Yellowstone

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Selena Farnesi speaks to Exchangites about her award.

level. Exchange Clubs provide a monthly recognition of outstanding youth in their communities. Each club selects a Youth of the Year and forwards an application for

district judging. District honorees are judged at the national level for the final selection of the prestigious National Youth of the Year.

The National Youth of the Year receives a \$10,000 scholarship and the opportunity to address hundreds of Exchangites at the National Youth Recognition Luncheon. In addition, the recipient's winning essay is featured in Exchange Today magazine.

Selena Farnesi was sponsored by the Exchange Club of Fresno, Calif., and the California-Hawaii-Nevada District. She attended Bullard High School, where she was very active in many school activities, including student government, school publications, and debate. She was also active in school clubs and was on her school's varsity water polo team for four years.

Community service is a big part of Selena's life. She is active in such groups as the Youth Service Council, Project CATALYST, and the Grant Advisory Board for Youth. Her service experience includes helping repair a church in Mexico, bird banding at Scout Island, and making Christmas baskets for low-income families. Because of all her work in the community, Selena was honored as one of the "2008 Volunteers of the Year: You Inspire By Example!" at the Volunteer Center of Fresno County's 40th Annual Volunteer of the Year event. She has received the President's Volunteer Service Award (Gold) for five years.

After her return home from convention, Selena sent the following note to National Headquarters:

July 16, 2008

Dear Exchangites,

I just wanted to extend my gratitude to all of you! I had an amazing time getting to know you and your organization over the four days I spent with you at the National Convention. My parents and I had so much fun attending the patriotic breakfast, listening to Roy Firestone, and learning about the regions (and their respective treats) in hospitality rooms. In addition I must correct myself, in my address to all of you at the Youth of the Year and A.C.E. Award Winner's Luncheon; I said that the Exchange Club's downfall was their lack of pin distribution as I only had four at the time – I stand corrected. I now have a vest full of pins including every region and some that go back as far as 2005! Between that vest and the beautiful trophy you gave me I nearly exceeded my luggage weight limit at the airport. Thanks again, I will always remember the Exchange Club and their generosity as well as their dedication to making the best country in the world even better!

Thanks again,

Selena Farnesi

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About the National A.C.E. of the Year Award

A.C.E. is an acronym for Accepting the Challenge of Excellence. The award recognizes high school students who have overcome difficult times and obstacles, yet still managed to graduate from high school and excel in some area. These students have overcome great physical, emotional or social obstacles, but few receive recognition.

This positive program encourages students to overcome their hardships and work toward a high school diploma. It recognizes those students who are often overlooked for their accomplishments. A.C.E. of the Year recipients are shining examples of the rewards of hard work and perseverance.

The process for selecting the National A.C.E. of the Year begins at the club level. Exchange Clubs provide a monthly recognition of determined youth in their communities. Each club selects an A.C.E. of the Year and forwards an application for district judging. District honorees are judged at the national level for the final selection of National A.C.E. of the Year.

The National A.C.E. of the Year receives a \$10,000 scholarship and the opportunity to address hundreds of Exchangites at the National Youth Recognition Luncheon.