

# Dutchess County Youth Council: Through the Years

By Stephanie Pagonas, Youth Council Member 2011

We've all heard it before: that same speech from our parents. The lecture about how they wish they could go back in time and relive their childhood years. When we become teenagers, we actually start growing up. We change, mature, and become the people we will be for the rest of our lives. By this point, most of us are ready to be treated like so, but acting like adults is much more difficult when people are not willing to help us get there. It seems as though people do not give us, the future of America, the chances and the opportunities to gain the knowledge and experience that we may need in order to lead the country in decades to come. We've got the world in our hands; we've got visions and aspirations of our own. Thanks to the Dutchess County Youth Council, we have the people who believe in us.

The Dutchess County Youth Council started as an idea proposed by local high school students in the early 1980s, who were already members of the Youth Board, an Advisory Committee to the Dutchess County Youth Bureau. Many people consider the Youth Board to be a "steering committee" and with the help of their "steering," the Youth Council was established in 1982. The early years were spent developing the Youth Council as a group of teens who were candid about what the "real issues" were facing teens back then. As the Youth Council began to become a highly regarded group for teens who wanted to make a difference, there was a change in leadership at the Youth Bureau, and in 1988 June Ellen Curtin-Notaro took the role of Advisor of the Youth Council with only a handful of teenagers. These teens, with the help of June Ellen, had a goal—to give themselves and all teenagers in Dutchess County the youth leadership opportunities that they lacked and the ability to have a say in what was going on in society. The Youth Council is an innovative and unique program because it allows young people to develop their own projects based on what they feel is important. According to current members, "The Youth Council is different to each individual, but it provides teenagers with the opportunity to voice their opinions in a safe environment where adults will listen and provide leadership training."

When thinking about the Dutchess County Youth Council, June Ellen says that a specific statement made by Eleanor Roosevelt comes to mind: "Think globally, act locally." What does this mean? She says, "While we might think about larger global issues, we can make a difference in our own communities by acting on issues locally." The Youth Council members, just like Eleanor Roosevelt herself, strive to better their community by participating in community service projects throughout the area. As a group, they are involved in activities such as collecting animal products for the county's SPCA, serving meals at The Lunch Box—the local soup kitchen, making homemade holiday cards for Operation Santa that are mailed to our war heroes, and even participating in Bright Nights - a project in which the youth council members make lunches and collect clothes to bring to homeless shelters around the area.

More than 650 teenagers have successfully been a part of the Dutchess County Youth Council to date. These teens have come from schools all across the county, including public and private high schools. At times, we have even had over 100 members in one year. With this number in mind, it seems as though the hardest question for June Ellen to answer was regarding whether or not there were any specific youth council members who stood out to her over the years. After taking a few moments to gather her thoughts, she took out a Dutchess County Youth Council photo album with a see-for-yourself attitude and explained something about almost every member shown in each photograph. At that moment, it was clear—the Dutchess County Youth Council is much more than a job to June Ellen. It is a part of her life, and so are these kids. In fact she refers to the teen members as “my kids.”

Thanks to the Dutchess County Youth Council, we are able to be treated like the adults that we strive to be. We have the opportunities to develop experience and learn what it will be like in the “grown-up” world. We may still be legally considered minors, but with the help of the Dutchess County Youth Council, we have the ability to do as much as we can with what we have. A fifteen, sixteen, or seventeen year-old has just as much of a voice in the community as any legal adult thanks to our collective experiences on Youth Council.