

SALT LAKE PEER COURT

A PROGRAM OF UTAH LAW RELATED EDUCATION

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NEWSLETTER
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From the Director

After completing a rigorous training schedule in August and September, Salt Lake Peer Court's 120 high school volunteers began conducting restorative justice hearings at the Matheson Courthouse in late September. Since then, our high school volunteers have adjudicated more than 260 restorative justice peer court hearings for referred youth and their families. This year, the majority of the referred youth have come to Peer Court as an alternative to Juvenile Court. If Salt Lake Peer Court did not exist, the majority of the youth we have served this year would have been sent directly to Juvenile Court for minor infractions.

Salt Lake Peer Court's youth volunteers have witnessed how their service as peer panelists and mentors has positively impacted the lives of their friends, classmates, and neighbors. Moved by their experiences with Peer Court, a handful of highly motivated high school volunteers approached me and asked what they could do to educate our community about the effectiveness of restorative justice in keeping their friends and classmates out of Juvenile Court. We formed a group of concerned Peer Court panelists and named it the "Salt Lake Peer Court Youth Advisory Board." After forming the Youth Advisory Board, we met weekly to discuss the risk factors that push kids toward the criminal justice system, and the protective factors that keep them out. After a month of meeting, the Youth Advisory Board decided that they wanted to host a public event dedicated to educating the community about the School to Prison Pipeline.

The Youth Advisory Board reached out to Kathy Abarca, the Racial Justice Project Associate at the ACLU of Utah, and began planning an event to raise awareness about the unintended effects of the School to Prison Pipeline in our community. In preparation for the event, Marcelina Kubica, a third year member of Peer Court, wrote the persuasive Op-Ed "We should educate, not incarcerate, our young people," that the Salt Lake Tribune published on October 4th, 2014. The following Saturday, October 11th, the Youth Advisory Board and the ACLU of Utah hosted "Education Not Incarceration: Challenge Utah's School to Prison Pipeline." This public awareness event was widely attended by community members, administrators from the Salt Lake City School District, and law students from the University of Utah's Public Policy Clinic who presented their recent study "From Fingerprint to Fingerprints: Utah's School-to-Prison Pipeline." The event was a great success, and members from the Youth Advisory Board learned key organizing skills that they were eager to employ in a follow-up event for high school students.

The Youth Advisory Board set its sights on organizing a conference by and for Utah's youth leaders. One focus of the conference was to educate youth about Utah's School to Prison Pipeline while another was to teach the youth leaders key organizing skills that would empower their civic engagement. After months of weekly meetings, donation requests, programmatic planning, and community outreach efforts aimed at recruiting active youth groups to attend, the ACLU of

Utah, the Boys and Girls Club of Greater Salt Lake, Teen Council, and Salt Lake Peer Court's Youth Advisory Board hosted Utah's first ever "Youth Leadership and Activism Conference" on Saturday, January 24th, 2015.

This free youth conference was attended by more than 40 high school students from northern Utah. These highly motivated youth activists dialogued with speakers about the importance of activism, knowing your rights, and standing up to the School to Prison Pipeline. Professor Emily Chiang from the University of Utah's S.J. Quinney College of Law gave the keynote address, encouraging students to pursue activism as a way to make something positive out of the negative that they see around them. Professor Chiang's law students taught the youth activists their rights and explained how schools' zero tolerance policies have had the unintended consequence of funneling students into the School to Prison Pipeline. After a morning of dynamic presentations, the youth leaders enjoyed conversing with Salt Lake City Council members Lisa Adams and Luke Garrott over lunch.

The casual encounters with Councilwoman Adams and Councilman Garrott prepared the students for their panel discussion with Utah state legislators from both sides of the aisle. Students conversed with the law-makers about issues ranging from immigration to religious freedom. The law-makers answered the students' questions, plugged the legislation they were sponsoring during the upcoming legislative session, and entertained the youth's requests for "selfies." The conference ended with an hour of inspiring youth-lead workshops which informed the youth leaders and activists about effective techniques for harnessing and interacting with the media. By searching "#ylac15" you can follow the crowd sourced live-tweets from the conference.

While the Youth Advisory Board has been busy educating youth leaders about the School to Prison Pipeline, I have worked closely with the Utah Youth Court Association, Cuong Nguyen, the state's Juvenile Justice Specialist, and a team of researchers from the University of Utah to develop a standard data set that all youth courts in the state of Utah will begin recording and reporting in 2015. We will use this data to determine best practices by observing which youth courts are most effective at serving referred youth and their families. Furthermore, by comparing youth courts' data to the data collected by Utah's Juvenile Courts, we will measure recidivism rates in Utah's youth courts. Salt Lake Peer Court and the Utah Youth Court Association are eager to observe recidivism rates so that we can improve the quality of youth courts through the development of data-driven best practices.

This spring, Salt Lake Peer Court will begin recruiting youth volunteers for the upcoming academic year. We will visit local high schools in April to educate youth volunteers about our program, answer any questions they may have, distribute applications, and schedule interviews. In May, we will be interviewing applicants and narrowing the field down to 120 students. Accepted students will receive their letter of acceptance via email in late May and training will begin in August. If you, your student, or your friend is interested in applying to become a volunteer for Salt Lake Peer Court, please download an application from our website saltlakepeercourt.org and submit it to the office by Friday, May 8th. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me via email at slpcourt@xmission.com.

Tyler Bugden



Left: Student leaders at the Youth Leadership and Activism Conference show off their pocket constitutions! (Donated by the ACLU of Utah) **Right:** Youth leaders speak about the School to Prison Pipeline during the "Education not Incarceration" event.

Panelist Voices: Varesh Gorabi, Highland High Class of 2017

Inspired Youth Activists Ready to Make Their Mark on the World

Vagueness surrounds the early years of life in elementary school, but some events don't fade. Kids as young as four years old are beginning to carry bricks of labels. Trouble-maker. Bad kid. Failure. From things like throwing a snowball to "disrupting" class and getting suspended, harsher consequences can follow. These events don't fade; studies have shown that one suspension leads to more, and that 49% of students who have been suspended three times before high school will most likely drop out. One in three inmates in Utah are high school dropouts.

Many students would read this and go no further. However, youth activism is on the rise.

Activism is "moving negative energy into positive directions," as said by Professor Emily Chiang. It's the sense of belonging to a larger community, and recognizing that bond. Empowerment roots from changing the negativity found in society into something positive, something worth fighting for.

Professor Emily Chiang from the University of Utah's S.J. Quinney College of Law spoke at the first Youth Activism and Leadership Conference (YLAC) on Saturday, January 24th. This day-long event at the U's Business College was hosted by the ACLU of Utah and Salt Lake Peer Court along with Teen Council (of Planned Parenthood). It drew many young and zealous activists from throughout the state, ready to learn and then act about the issues they care about.

"It was awesome being able to see how many people are passionate about this issue and are willing to take the time to learn how to make change," Marelina Kubica, a senior at West High and a planner of the event, said.

The focus of the conference was the school-to-prison-pipeline (STPP) and providing the tools necessary for student activism. The STPP is the one-way direction from being a student in school to a criminal in prison. Even one suspension increases youths' dropout rates, and those who do drop out, are eight times more likely to go to prison. In 2013, one out of every five students in Utah dropped out of high school.

During the conference, questions were raised like: Does the punishment fit the crime for some disciplinary actions? Students were given a card with their offense and their punishment (as an exercise during Nubia Pena's presentation), and they were all based on real cases. Many students were shocked, and even more so when they heard the stories about little kids being arrested. For Kate Harris, a sophomore at Highland High, it was the story of a five-year-old boy, Michael Davis, with ADHD being zip tied (hands and feet) by a police officer after reacting to his touch, that affected her the most.

Students also shared their own personal stories of being suspended for trivial or misunderstood actions.

After learning about the injustices happening in schools across the nation, as well as to minorities in Utah, youth engaged in writing letters to Legislators and participated in the "white board project". Students wrote why they thought education was important and why the STPP should be stopped on white boards to express their voices on the issue.

With help from Anna Brower, a Public Policy Advocate for the ACLU of Utah, students learned about the legislative process and when they can actively voice their opinions on future bills.

Along with advice on how to interact with the media professionally and a talk on knowing your rights, students met a panel of adult leaders and were able to question them on topics of interest, including the school-to-prison-pipeline. Rep. Rebecca Chavez-Houck, Rep. Angela Romero, Senator Aaron Osmond and former Rep. David Litvack, director of Salt Lake County Criminal Justice Advisory Council, all talked about their on-going projects and gave advice to the young activists.

All in all, the conference inspired students to take action in their communities.

"The conference lit the spark I've always had for activism," said Harris.

At the end of the day, students were invited to come up to the microphone and talk about the changes they were going to make. Responses included STPP awareness, ending girl-boy choice dances in support of LGBTQ students, writing to legislators and attending legislative sessions.

The day was filled with youth bursting to make a change in their schools and communities, and now they have the tools to do so.

"The community of youth involved in activism and leadership is so strong and they all truly care about making a difference. To me, it's very inspiring. I hope to make a difference someday," said Harris.

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!!!Donate to Peer Court on March 26th for Love Utah Give Utah!!!

On Thursday, March 26th Salt Lake Peer Court and Utah Law Related Education are teaming up for the Love Utah Give Utah day of giving. Please donate to "Law Related Education" on March 26th!

Salt Lake Peer Court works to combat the disproportionate involvement of low-income and minority students in America's school to prison pipeline by providing youth who commit minor offenses with an alternative to the Juvenile Justice System. Our Strategy aims to break the cycle of poverty by giving low-income and at-risk youth a chance to escape a lifetime in the revolving door of America's justice system.

As youth and adults working together, caring and showing respect for one another, we will improve our neighborhoods, cities, and Juvenile Justice System. Through youth-led education and coordination with local community agencies, we will assist our peers and their families to strengthen their ties to school and community while building positive new skills.

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