

Presidents' Summit for America's Future

The Presidents' Summit: Telling Our Stories

Nora Silver

As we look back, we recognize that none of us made it alone. What follows are the stories of individuals whose lives were touched by others and who are reaching out to help others in turn.

FAVIANNA

Favianna Rodriguez sits between Arabella and me at the opening ceremony. She holds a bouquet of balloons and a flower arrangement. She wears a wide smile, dark curly hair and a long, festive black dress. Favianna is 19 years old. Thanks, in part, to receiving one of eight national scholarships awarded by Girls, Inc., she is a freshman at the University of California at Berkeley. She is the first in her family to attend college.

Favianna is a delegate from Oakland, California, her hometown, to the Presidents' Summit for America's Future. She describes herself as "a woman and a Latina woman. I don't want to be invisible. I am involved in lesbian/gay movements, Girls, Inc., and other groups." Later she adds, "I want to continue with the delegation—kind of keep a reality check on it. Like, this may not work for the youth, or we may need to focus on youth really at risk. Youth have the energy, and they do have the channels."

To Favianna's left sits Arabella Martinez, former assistant secretary of human services in the Carter Administra-

tion and current chief executive officer of the Spanish Speaking Unity Council, a community development corporation in the Fruitvale District in which Favianna's family lives and works.

As most of us relax and wait for the festivities to begin, Favianna dives into her knapsack. She pulls out books by women authors, assignments for her women's literature class. She roots lovingly through her treasure chest of books, sharing with me her favorite authors and stories. Favianna wants to be a writer. She settles on her next assignment and begins to read from Janice Mirikitani's *Shedding Silence*.

Tomorrow I will get to introduce Favianna to Janice, the poet whose words Favianna responds to with her whole body as we sit waiting. Janice is a delegate to the summit from San Francisco. I know Janice will embrace Favianna with the special warmth and regard she extends to young people. She will sign her book, wish Favianna well, and encourage her to follow her path. By standing before her from a background different from Favianna's, yet not dissimilar in many ways, Janice will signal to Favianna that she, too, can become a writer.

JULIA

I first heard Julia Globus-Sabori speak at her graduation from BAYAC, an AmeriCorps program in which members

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work with children. I attended the graduation as a mentor to Kim Smith, the executive director. Julia was on stage speaking as a co-leader of one of the BAYAC teams.

During that year, Julia became chair of the Mayor's Youth Commission in San Francisco. She works at RAP (Real Alternatives Program), a violence prevention program in the Mission District, and is an outreach coordinator for the Peace Walkathon. She describes herself as "currently 18 years old, a strong woman, and a proud Apache." Julia channels what she calls "the frustration of growing up being so misinformed or one step behind the process" into educating and organizing young people to take an active role in the political process. After the summit she observes, "I think we [the youth] were very proud to be there and made our voices heard loud and clear."

Julia will return from the summit to convene the Youth Empowerment Conference in San Francisco, a youth-run event that will call forth 1,200 young people ages 12 to 23 from all neighborhoods of the city. She will open and close the day. The Mayor will speak, and he will leave with written input from 1,000 youth on the city's five-year plan. Julia will introduce me to her mom who is witnessing her daughter's emergence as a civic leader. I thank her for sharing Julia with us.

Upon her return from the summit, Julia spoke to The United Way board of directors about her experience in Philadelphia. She told them that the year before she had been homeless. A year ago she registered to vote when she attended "Stand for Children" in Washington, DC. This year she participated in the summit in Philadelphia. She pointed out that there are other young people in our cities, capable and eager, just waiting for someone to take notice and extend an opportunity. She asked The United Way board volunteers to make a commitment to all youth.

I believe that Julia and Favianna are asking us all to sign books for them, open doors and offer them encouragement, applaud their accomplishments, and listen to their stories.

NORA

I returned to Philadelphia, the city of my birth, as a delegate from San Francisco to the summit. My name tag reads, Nora Silver, Ph.D., Director, The Volunteerism Project. What the stranger's eye cannot see is the young person I was when I left Philadelphia at 17 who I would return having earned a slot to attend the Presidents' Summit on America's Future 30 years later. A snapshot of me in my teens in Philadelphia would have shown a very angry, acting-out young woman. Many adults found me difficult. Some found me incorrigible. A lot of my behavior was aggressive: fighting, drinking, smoking, sex, vandalizing buildings, hanging out at race tracks, sneaking into Baltimore and Washington basement nightclubs. Only those who know me best can see this heritage in me now. I was one of the lucky. I did not end up pregnant, alcoholic, or a casualty of rape, disease, or street violence.

Just as a stranger's eye cannot detect my rocky beginnings, it may also overlook a current teenager's potential future. For in the bumbling, confused, chaotic antics of young behavior are the rumblings of the mature, confident, focused adult. We simply need to look harder, to understand what we're seeing.

What can we do to help the struggling 17-year-old become the accomplished 47-year-old? For me, the difference has been 30 years of people offering me opportunities. Paolo Freire, the world-famous international educator, who gave me my first job at 19. David Joroff, who fought for me to be able to teach in the school of my choice, an inner-city, Washington, DC, junior high. The University of California Medical Center Pediatric Clinic that trusted a 21-year-old to intake and translate for Spanish-speaking families with seriously-ill children. Laura Cummings, who took me on as a student intern and taught me the best the psychotherapeutic world had to offer. Bob Wood, head of a community college human services program, who let me run

with new program after new program—child abuse prevention, foster parent recruitment, counseling, and interviewing skills training. Tri-Valley Haven, a domestic violence shelter and sexual assault program, that gave me my first executive director job despite no previous administrative experience. Bill Bergquist who, when I told him I was not graduate school material and was dropping out, asked me to co-teach a class with him. Bob Fisher, who gave me the chance to turn a needs assessment of volunteerism in the San Francisco Bay Area into a vision of a comprehensive program to strengthen and

diversify volunteerism, and a model for collaboration between foundations and community organizations.

All of us have had these people in our lives. The names and faces change, but the principle remains the same: a caring other person. Someone to open doors, offer a shoulder or a hand, listen to our hopes and dreams, speak words of encouragement and belief, and walk with us for a time. Each of us must be that person for others, especially to those who are younger. They need it. Just as we once did.