Follow the Yellow Brick Road
To
Organizing a Youth Conference!

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So, you are interested in organizing a youth conference? Well, you have come to the right place. For the past 8 years the city of Lowell has been offering the Girls with Goals: Capture Your Confidence! Conference Day. This conference day has been organized by community members from Lowell and through the past 8 years the Girls with Goals Day Committee has managed to streamline the process of organizing this event. Before we go into the details of organizing the conference let me first provide you with some background information about this big day.

*Girls with Goals* is a day-long conference for 150 young girls, ages nine to eleven years old, from the diverse urban community of Lowell. The goal of the conference is to provide a forum that moves girls toward building their capacity for confident and responsible womanhood, acquiring personal fulfillment, and achieving their full potential. The planners of *Girls with Goals* are working in conjunction with the coordinators of Lowell’s Women’s Week to make this final event in a weeklong celebration of women’s strength and diversity. In order to obtain a better understanding of the event and the details of how to run a youth conference Kathy Horn, program director at Girls Incorporated of Greater Lowell was interviewed. Kathy has worked on the Girls with Goals Conference day for 7 of the 8 years it has been run and is currently the committee leader.

Why don’t you sit back and listen to a story, a story of the *Girls with Goals: Capture Your Confidence! Conference Day and follow the path on the yellow brick road and learn what is involved in organizing a youth conference.

**Kansas...or actually Lowell, Massachusetts**

Once upon a time there were a group of people that worked in the city of Lowell, Ma. These individuals worked with children of all ages and decided that they wanted to do something special for the youth of their city, especially girls. One day there was a discussion among the women of the Lowell Tobacco Control Coalition. They were disturbed by the increasing numbers of young women that were lured into smoking each year and wanted to throw their efforts into the fight against the tobacco industry. They felt very frustrated because of the theme "You’ve Come A Long Way, Baby" from Virginia Slims cigarettes and felt that it was a warped message of empowerment for young girls, linking the ideals of female strength and
confidence with the destructive lure of cigarettes. The Coalition felt intensely the need to address this issue in our young women and created the impetus for the Conference. This, my friends, was the start of the first Girls with Goals Conference Day.

Somewhere Over the Rainbow...

The planners thought that the first conference day was successful and wanted to continue to offer this conference to the girls of Lowell every year. They thought that it would be wonderful to keep this conference ongoing and building on the success of the first Girls with Goals Conference, the establishment of a second working group was underway. The intent was to continue to focus on the underlying causes of teen tobacco use, including looking into the underling causes of other risky teen behaviors. We know from various studies that behaviors such as teen tobacco, drug, and alcohol use, early sex and teen pregnancy and eating disorders are increasing at alarming rates in our young women. We also know that factors such as low self-esteem, lack of self-efficacy in the ability to refuse offers to use tobacco, drugs, and alcohol, and the susceptibility of young people to advertising all influence teen behavior. The committee for the conference day decided that rather than focusing solely on youth smoking they would address these other important issues as well.

What have we learned so far?

- It is important to examine the youth that you are working with and identify areas and topics that they might benefit from
- Be flexible, sometimes things change, what began as an anti-smoking conference evolved into a holistic health conference for girls
- Dream! Don’t just think Kansas or Lowell, open your minds and try to see what can be over the rainbow as well.
Kathy Horn says some best practices are...

1. Getting a number of people involved - each person brings new ideas and resources.
2. Keep written documents so you can reuse some parts in future conferences.
3. Be professional - use donor letters, follow up phone calls, thank you letters.
4. Start early - plan meetings early because you never know what obstacles you might encounter.
5. Make sure that all the members involved are benefiting from the conference as well, for ex.) free advertising on T-shirts, programs, flyers for all donors and organizations that the committee members belong to.

Along the yellow brick road to organizing a youth conference the committee did encountered some 'wicked witches' that presented obstacles to them. These 'wicked witches' took the form of changes in leadership, budget cuts, and things just not running as smoothly as they had been expected. Let’s take these ‘wicked witches’ one by one and find out what was done by our committee members to get away from these wicked witches.

Wicked Witch #1 = Changes in Leadership

As the years went on things were going pretty good for our committee members but then something horrible happened. The Lowell Tobacco Control Coalition lost funding and the Coalition members were no longer unable to be
the overseers of the event. Luckily, the Lowell Community Health Center took the leading role and helped to organize the event for some time but then it happened again! The Lowell Community Health Center also lost their funding that could be used for this event and this time it was Girls Incorporated of Greater Lowell that took on the lead role as conference day organizer. This "funding loss" wicked witch is a hard one to conquer and she just keeps popping up but there are some things that can be done to help defeat this wicked witch.

Kathy Horn says ways of dealing with new leadership are...

1. Identify a new leader of the program the year before so that when you want to start the conference planning meetings you already have a leader in place.
2. It is better to have a committee involved rather than one lead person so that way if the one lead person can no longer take on this role there is a history of the event that is known by committee members.
3. If there is an organization that is taking the lead role then have it in the job description of one of the employees as being the leader of the committee so that the person knows that this is an expectation of them.

Wicked Witch #2 = Budget Cuts

Throughout the years the committee has encountered budget cuts and loss in funding which has not only forced a change in leadership but also the search for new, innovative ways to continue to offer workshops to the girls of Lowell. The way that the committee dealt with these budget cuts included getting individuals to conduct the workshops for free, getting food and supplies donated from local businesses, and finding students and committee members that would donate their time to planning and running the event. The committee also had to work harder to recruit committee members and possible donors to the conference day.
Wicked Witch #3 = Things Not Running as Smoothly as Expected

Originally the conference was held with seven workshops for the girls to attend and then groups of girls were attending different presentations. The committee members learned that not all girls were getting the same message and often times the workshop leaders did not have enough time to share their knowledge with the participants. The committee decided that they needed to be flexible and willing to change. As a group they decided to offer fewer workshops but increase the amount of time for each workshop so that the girls could go into depth on the topics they wanted to learn about. This way the workshop leaders and the participants both benefited. The committee members also decided to have the same presentation for all the girls so that all the girls were receiving the same message. Another problem that the committee encountered on the day of the event was that the volunteers sometimes showed up late and there wasn’t enough time to do an orientation for the volunteers. In order to remedy this problem the committee decided to have a volunteer orientation a WEEK before the event so that if the volunteer showed up late it wouldn’t be as big of a problem as it was before.

What have we learned so far?

- It is important to be flexible and work together to come up with ideas.
- Try to keep things documented so that you can reuse the material in future years and this also makes it easier for a new leader of the committee to take on their role.
- Working with a group of people allows the group to maintain a history of the event as well and all is not lost if there is a change in leadership.
- Find ways to get food, supplies, time, donated so that you can continue an event even if encountered with budget cuts and loss in funding.
Our committee members found a friend in *Glinda the Good Witch: Research and Practice*. Glinda provided a guide to our committee as they traveled down the yellow brick road to organizing a youth conference day. In order to find out more about what exactly the girls of Lowell wanted to learn more about, our committee asked the girls to complete an evaluation form at the end of the conference day. At first the form had yes/no questions such as, “Did you have fun at the conference today?” They soon learned that they would obtain more helpful information if they asked open-ended questions instead such as, “What was the best part of the conference?” This way the girls would provide clearer answers and this information also served as a guide for our committee when planning the conference the next year. Other questions that were particularly helpful to the committee included asking the girls, “What do you think can be improved?” and “What would you like to see offered next time?” The committee then used the answers the girls provided to these questions when they were thinking of workshop ideas and doing general planning for the conference for the coming year.

Kathy Horn says research and practice are great tools to use...

1. By conducting interest surveys the committee was better able to base the entire conference on what kids say and what they want
2. The committee would love to do more research and it is a great idea in theory, however, no realistically since conducting research is very time consuming.

"We Welcome You to Munchkinland"
The committee members found little munchkins to help them on their big day. These munchkins helped in planning the event, volunteering the day of the event, evaluating the event, and researching ways of improving the event. These little munchkins, also known as students (graduate students, undergraduate students, and even high school students) were very helpful and essential to organizing this youth conference and devoted time, energy, and effort when the committee members were unable to provide it. As part of the conference these student-munchkins served as a contact person that linked the university to the committee and often were able to do research that helped when trying to learn more about issues that affected girls and what has been done in the past. The student-munchkins were also able to document this information and help gather and maintain this information for future conferences.

Kathy Horn says roles for graduate students include...
1. Serving as a link between the university and committee that can bring different disciplines and departments together.
2. Conducting research, sitting on the planning committee, and becoming a volunteer on the day of the event, either by running workshop, functioning as group leaders and/or helping to keep the events of the day run smoothly.
The *Girls with Goals: Capture Your Confidence! Conference Day* for many years has been run by a group of members from the Lowell community. These members represent different groups and different organizations throughout Lowell. Not only do these individuals provide their time and resources but each person has their own connections and links and can assist in generating new, innovative, diverse ideas for workshops and creative ways of finding funding sources and potential donors. One of the things to be wary about when creating partnerships is to ensure that all members agree to the mission and purpose of the conference day. The committee members worked hard to be confident that the amount of giving to the event by each member was equitable and that the expectations of the amount of effort the partner is willing to contribute is the same as what the committee members have in mind. Our committee learned that it was very important for everyone to be on the same page and for everyone to work together and put in an equal amount of work to run the conference. The committee also learned that by providing incentives such as free advertising on t-shirts, flyers, and programs more individuals and groups were interested in partnering with the committee to run the conference day.

**Kathy Horn says partnerships are very helpful...**

1. Partners not only bring in physical bodies to help do the work but also bring community connections, help to spread the work around, provide more variety and diversity in workshops.
2. Problems occur when the expectations of effort put in by partners and the amount of real effort put in don't match.
3. Make sure partners share the same philosophy and agree to the mission of the conference.
4. Create motivation, such as free advertising, for individuals to participate and assist in the conference.
5. Try to be equitable in the amount of effort that is expected from all partners.
“You’ve Come a Long Way, Baby” and have enjoyed the trip down the yellow brick road to organizing a youth conference. You’ve encountered bad witches and good witches and made some partnerships with munchkins and friends along the way. The conference has been held for 7 years now and is currently planning the 8th annual Girls with Goals: Capture Your Confidence Conference Day and each year the conference has run a little bit more smoothly than the year before. One of the best ways to ensure this success and provide success stories for other groups looking to organize a youth conference as well is to create community repositories of knowledge. By doing this the knowledge that is gained from one group can be shared by others.

Kathy Horn says community repositories of knowledge provide...

1. Academic journals obtain a great deal of valuable information but often this information is generic and not specific to your community.
2. It is important to document information such as best practices so that you have something in place when there is a change in leadership.
3. When you have this great information it is important to share it with other either via a website, copies, or holding the information in a public place but it is important to keep this information in a place where people will know where to look for it.

There’s No Place Like Home...
Or is there?
The planners of *Girls with Goals* are firmly of the belief that women need to create a stronger relationship with young girls and act as role models in our everyday lives. This conference is their very preliminary step toward that goal. The committee members have been successful in organizing a youth conference in their home of Lowell but this type of conference can be done by others as well and is not limited to just the city of Lowell. If you are motivated by the work the conference committee has done you can look to the following resources in planning your own youth conference. Good luck on your path down the yellow brick road and use the lessons that you have learned from this story to guide you!

**Resources...**

http://www.girls-inc.org

http://www.health.org

http://www.newmoon.org

http://www.channing-bete.com

http://www.edap.org