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YOUTHVOICE

Celebrating 10 Years
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Celebrating 10 Years of YouthVoice

By Sara Mogilski | NCACC Chief Operations Officer



NCACC's 93rd President, Mary Accor, former Cleveland County Commissioner was honored with the NCACC Hall of Fame Award for undertaking a youth leadership development initiative during her year as president. Her initiative evolved into YouthVoice, which is now a key component of NCACC's Annual Conference.

In August 2009, Cleveland County Commissioner Mary Accor stood before her fellow county leaders, family and friends at the NCACC's Annual Conference in Catawba County, and made a bold statement. "We cannot rely solely on our public schools to educate our children about county government," she said, "We can change these attitudes."

At the 2009 conference, Commissioner Accor was sworn in as the NCACC's 93rd President, and spoke about her vision of seeing the next generation of leaders in attendance at the following year's NCACC Annual Conference. She recognized the need to overcome the mindset that many youth are disengaged and lack trust in government and that a statewide effort would need to be undertaken to make progress toward the goal.

Under the leadership of President

Accor and the NCACC Board of Directors, Association staff got to work developing a year-long initiative to increase youth involvement in county government. Former NCACC Deputy Director Patrice Roesler initially led the effort and knew it was quite an undertaking, "It will take more than one year to do what President Accor has in mind, but it's to instill in young people a desire to serve." The initiative was reported in the NCACC's monthly newspaper, *CountyLines*, and Dr. Marshall Stewart, then Associate Director of the NC Cooperative Extension and State Program Leader for the Department of 4-H Youth Development and Family & Consumer Services, took note.

4-H Youth and Adult Citizenship & Engagement Specialist Sarah Kotzian recalls him reading the *CountyLines* article more than 10 years ago, "Dr. Stewart read the article, wrote Ms. Accor a note saying, 'We think this is great. Thank you for taking on this initiative. If you need help in planning it, we are the youth development part of the Cooperative Extension service and we would be happy to help you in any way we can.'" That outreach led to a partnership between NCACC and 4-H that continues today. Kotzian was involved from the beginning and worked closely with Association staff to develop a program today known as YouthVoice, which brings together youth from across the state to participate in a two-day program held in conjunction with the NCACC's Annual Conference each August.

The inaugural YouthVoice was held August 2010 in Pitt County and more than 80 youth and adult chaperones representing 74 counties attended the event. Since then, nearly 700 youth from across the state have participated in YouthVoice. It represents a rare opportunity for youth to attend sessions that help them gain a better understanding of what county governments do and the role of commissioners as the governing body for counties. Perhaps one of the most beneficial elements of the program is the chance for youth and county commissioners to connect, whether during sessions, the youth breakfast held Saturday morning of each annual conference, or at the business session, where several YouthVoice participants provide a testimonial on their experience.

NCACC Director of Education and Conferences Jason King plays a critical role in designing and planning YouthVoice, and sees this networking component as central to the program, "I want to make sure they get good face time with their commissioners. It's important that not only our commissioners have time to engage with our youth, but our youth have the chance to engage with our commissioners. To let them know about some of the issues they face in their community. This helps to provide that commissioner with a good sense of what the young people in our counties see and deal with on a daily basis."

In order to qualify to participate in YouthVoice, county youth delegates

must speak at a Board of County Commissioners meeting prior to the program. King described the importance of this requirement, "We want them to get in front of their board – everything from scheduling that appearance with the clerk to the board to going before the board, presenting themselves, making sure they are putting a face to the name for their youth delegate."

Once at the NCACC Annual Conference, delegates are given a YouthVoice t-shirt and jump right into engaging in a personality type assessment called Real Colors, which is facilitated by Dan Clark, Director of Montana State University's Local Government Center. Youth get a glimpse into better understanding their own behavior and what drives those behaviors, and how to better communicate with others.

On the second day of the program, participants undertake a budget simulation designed by the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill's School of Government. Called Bottom Line!, the simulation requires players to make budget cuts, additions and set core values for their fictitious communities. King reflects on the value of the exercise, "That really gets them into the sense of working with different personalities that sit on the board and in making tough group decisions – all while doing it in the public eye."

In 2012, the Boys & Girls Club of North Carolina joined as a partner of YouthVoice. Wayne County Boys & Girls Club Teen Youth Director Raytrell Caldwell recognizes the value



From left: Julie Totten, NCACC Operations Assistant, Sarah Kotzian, 4-H Youth and Adult Citizenship & Engagement Specialist, and Jason King, NCACC Director of Education and Conferences.



of the opportunity in the eyes of youth participants, “They really don’t know what it’s going to be like until they actually get there. When they get there, they see other teenagers and other members just like them in their neck of the woods and the cities they live in. Some share the same views and some agree to disagree. They get to dress up on that second day and they get to act as county commissioners. They get to make some real life decisions.”

Caldwell works closely with the Keystone Club, a leadership development program offered through Boys & Girls Club, which elects youth officers each year. His Keystone officers are designated YouthVoice participants as another

component of their development and are encouraged to take an active role in their community. Caldwell recognizes that many youth need continuous support as they define a path beyond high school, “Especially for the young black males who I deal with – they are sports minded. We always try to teach the youth about having that plan B. They dream of going to the NBA or NFL or something like that in sports. You hear a lot of the sports figures talk about having that platform to stand on and to use their voice to stand up for what they believe in. You can start that right now without going to the NBA or NFL. You can start having a voice now. You can say I heard about him when he was in high school, serving on our student government board.”

Participating in YouthVoice is a great opportunity for youth, and it is also a tremendous commitment. “They are

giving up a weekend usually right before school starts to come to YouthVoice,” said Kotzian, “I think it shows that they are committed to going back home and making their community a better place. They know the expectations when they register for this conference. They exceed those expectations with every single experience.”

This year’s conference marked the 10th anniversary of YouthVoice, commemorated at the NCACC Annual Conference with awards going to Past President Accor, Kotzian and Dr. Mike Yoder, Associate Director and State Program Leader for 4-H. Past President Accor was inducted into the NCACC Hall of Fame, as her vision back in 2009 led to development of YouthVoice, which has positively impacted hundreds of North Carolina’s youth to-date. Kotzian and Yoder received the Friend of the Counties Award on behalf of 4-H, in recognition of their instrumental role in developing and launching the YouthVoice program.

As NCACC contemplates the future of YouthVoice, it is clear that all are

committed to keeping it fresh and thriving. “I hope we are doing this for another 10+ years,” remarked Kotzian, “I think in the next 5-10 years we will continue to look at where young people are, what are their interest areas, what are ways we can keep them engaged, and involved so we can tweak our program to fit their needs.”

King has his sights set on expanding county involvement in reaching young people, “I would love to be able to see this spread into counties and see county governments take on – maybe it’s not the same elements that we use in YouthVoice but some sort of platform where they are engaging their youth on a regular basis. They can stay in their home county wherever that is in North Carolina and make a big difference in its future and where it is in the present.”

To learn more about YouthVoice, go to www.ncacc.org/youthvoice.

Watch an interview of Jason King and Sarah Kotzian discussing YouthVoice and its impacts at www.ncacc.org/decadeofyouthvoice. ■

YouthVoice Alumni

We tracked down some early participants of YouthVoice. Take a look at what they had to say about their experience...



Sally Dixon first participated in YouthVoice in 2010 representing Haywood County. She is now an Extension Agent for 4-H Youth Development for the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, and identifies 4-H youth to participate in YouthVoice, and serves as a chaperone.

“YouthVoice strengthened what I had decided that I wanted to do after high school. I decided when I was a junior in high school that I wanted to be a 4-H agent but events like YouthVoice strengthened the foundation of knowing that the career that I was going into would provide amazing opportunities for the youth I would work with and continually evolve to be better.”



YouthVoice participants pictured at left with Rowan County Board of Commissioners and below with Brunswick County Board of Commissioners.



Bryan Hartman first participated in YouthVoice in 2010 representing Stokes County, and returned in 2012 as a 4-H State Officer. Bryan is an Extension Agent for Agriculture and Natural Resources in Stokes County.



“One thing that stuck out to me was when we talked about financial budgeting and planning. I really thought that was interesting and how relevant it was to everything we do and the way county commissioners and our government works. The biggest takeaway for me first was meeting other individuals around my age group from different counties that were very involved too, giving me a chance to take back information about what they were doing or how I could get more involved with my community.”



YouthVoice participants pictured above with Franklin County Board of Commissioners and at right with Guilford County Board of Commissioners.



Madaline Jones participated in YouthVoice in 2012 and 2013, representing Yadkin County, and then again in 2014 as a 4-H State Officer. She now works as an Extension Agent for 4-H Youth Development in Yadkin County.

“When I was a kid, I didn’t know much about commissioners and what they did. So getting to see them and see what they were voting on and seeing what powers they have in the county, it was very impactful. It helped me realize their job and what exactly they are doing for the county. It was really an eye opening experience at that age. It helped me with my political stance and to have a better appreciation about the people who are making decisions for our counties.”