

Civics Day

Dr. Gloria C. Duffy, President and CEO

They are the “farm team” for The Commonwealth Club, said my friend Michael Gallagher when asking me to serve as a judge for a competition among middle schoolers and high schoolers for civic engagement projects. Each year, a national organization, Generation Citizen (GC), organizes and sponsors youngsters to form groups, select a civic “action project,” and carry it to completion during a semester and sometimes longer. Their mission is “to ensure that every student in the U.S. receives an effective action civics education, which provides them with the knowledge and skills necessary to participate in our democracy as active citizens.”

Teachers advise the student groups. They also have “democracy coaches,” students from local colleges such as UC Berkeley, Mills College, St. Mary’s College, SF State and USF who mentor their younger student colleagues.

Then, on Civics Day in May, the students present their projects to a group of judges drawn from local government, businesses, non-profits, foundations and educational organizations. The projects are rated and awards are presented to the student groups with the most effective projects.

The mid-May Bay Area Civics Day at which I served as a judge was the first time I’d heard of GC, which has been hosting action civics projects for eight years. They are filling a vacuum caused by the decline of civics education in our schools, and trying to reverse the lack of voting and political participation by younger generations in our country. In the process, they are improving on the traditional teaching model for civics. Whereas civics was previously taught through classroom lessons and books, they are giving students the initiative, helping them learn how to practically and effectively address social issues through action.

The organization was started by two Brown University students, Anna Ninan and Scott Warren, and first operated in Rhode Island. Now GC is operating in six areas in the United States, including the Bay Area, Massachusetts, New York City and Central Texas.

On Civics Day this year, students from schools in San Francisco and Oakland presented 25 of their projects at the Milton Marks state office building in San Francisco’s Civic Center. Each group had a table where the students presented storyboards summarizing their project. The judges circulated and talked with the five or six students representing each project as they explained their effort and how it met the criteria set out by GC.

Generation Citizen uses a consistent methodology to guide and evaluate the student efforts. The student groups must first think about broad community issues, then narrow their focus to one issue, then determine what they think is the root cause of the

problem, then set a goal to address the problem, then identify the targets of their campaign, then adopt tactics to meet their goal. The judges evaluated the groups in each of these areas, as well as on the effectiveness of their projects.

There were some extremely creative and productive student projects at Civics Day. I was impressed by the group from Abraham Lincoln High in San Francisco that focused on their school’s sustainability. They analyzed their school’s heating system, redesigned how it could be more energy efficient, saved \$5,000 in annual operating costs, which their school then allowed them to apply to an audit of bathroom hand blow dryers and paper towel use, which they were then able to make more efficient, saving more funds, which were then applied to other projects. It was a thoughtful, comprehensive project that had multiplier effects on the sustainability of their school.

Another project, from Park Day School in Temescal, worked to bring food trucks into “food deserts” in Oakland that lack grocery stores or other sources for healthy food. They dealt with local officials, health department inspections, the permitting process and other issues that definitely provided an education in the democratic process.

And a group from Edna Brewer Middle School in Oakland designed gender-neutral clothing and dress standards that would diminish sexism in dress codes and lobbied their school to adopt them.

The bright eyes, growing political savvy and articulate explanations of the participating kids were very heartening. Being taught action civics and given the opportunity to define and pursue their own projects bodes well for these kids to not just file away information about our political system, but to actively use what they have learned in the future. Hopefully they will not only be voters but parents who engage with their children’s schools, community members who get involved to solve local issues, and citizens who step up to serve in public office and provide leadership at all levels in the United States.

Generation Citizen is definitely cultivating the “farm team” for The Commonwealth Club and for all other groups, organizations and public bodies that depend on active, engaged citizens to help improve our society. They and the kids they mentor deserve an A+ for their work!



Photo courtesy of Gloria Duffy