



# **Hope Community Youth Listening Project Report 2008**



**Hope Community  
Youth Listening  
Project Report  
2008**

# Hope Community Listening Sessions

*In 2007, Chaka Mkali, an organizer at Hope Community, began a "Listening Project" reaching out to teens and young adults in the areas surrounding the organization a mile south of downtown Minneapolis. Hope Community developed a community listening process that had already involved over 1200 people in small dialogues. The process involves reaching out to people in the community where they are gathered.*

*Chaka began the Listening Project documented in this report by building relationships with staff and/or leaders at youth organizations or organizations where youth gather. Several organizations agreed to participate by bringing together a group of teens and young adults for listening sessions. Young leaders connected to Hope attended the sessions with Chaka.*

*As the Listening Project was moving forward, a youth and young adult leadership group was formed at Hope, now called SPEAC (Sustainable Progress through Engaging Active Citizens). Leaders involved in that group took on the Listening Project and the last 12 sessions were arranged and led by teens and young adults. Members of SPEAC have also produced this report.*





# Hope Community

Hope Community Inc. believes in the power of people and place. Hope began as a shelter and hospitality house for women and children in 1977, and has since grown into a community development organization that in 2008 owns and manages 125 units of housing with more under construction. Hope's approach to community development includes revitalization of housing and public spaces integrated with extensive community engagement that involves hundreds of youth and adults each year.

Hope Community is located in the Phillips Community of Minneapolis, a mile south of downtown. Phillips is historically diverse with American Indian, African American and European American communities. Today there is a rapidly growing immigrant and refugee community including people from countries in Africa, Latin America, Eastern Europe and the Middle East. The median income of the 20,000 residents is about 1/3 of the metropolitan median income.





## Hope Listens

To create broad and ongoing community connection, Hope developed a community listening strategy that has engaged over 1500 diverse people in small group dialogues since 1997. These formal listening projects inform Hope's work. Youth and adult participants have talked about the importance of community in their lives, as well as jobs, education, housing, and more. One Hope listening project created the master plan for a local park.

For many reasons "business-as-usual" public participation methods attract very little response. Hope's community listening projects reach out to the community across culture and age to involve people who are almost always silent in community dialogue. The listening process is not simply a group facilitation method. It is an approach to connecting to a variety of groups through relationships in the community; involving community people in shaping the overall plan and individual listening sessions; and using an approach to group "listening sessions" that builds trust, invites broad participation, and engages people around challenging questions that are important to them and their community. The results of a listening process include: 1) A collective raising of voices through a report that speaks from the voices of people who were involved; 2) Some people from the community who first begin involvement through the listening process remain involved in leadership in other ways; and 3) The process itself is an opportunity for some community people to take leadership roles in helping to organize, facilitate sessions, and prepare reports.

# Youth Hear

Youth leaders emerged at Hope through strong teen and young adult programming including an aerosol art and mural project, The Power of Vision, a free youth studio, The Art of Mc'ing class, and a young women's group, Articulating Our Voices Now. All of the programming involved learning and experiencing speaking out of one's voice, leadership and community. This Listening Project had several purposes:

- to learn about the Twin Cities youth organizations
- to build relationships with local youth leaders
- to listen to the hopes, dreams, ideas, and concerns of youth
- to recruit youth into youth programming at Hope Community
- to introduce Hope youth leaders to this unique way of working and engaging the community
- to further develop and challenge Hope youth leaders to facilitate listening sessions with their peers.

This group of youth leaders and community organizers in training are now engaged in building community organizing at Hope Community Inc. through SPEAC, Sustainable Progress through Engaging Active Citizens.



# Who We Are

Many of us were already involved with public work, or work that affects ourselves and impacts others.

Many of us had varying levels of experience with organizing.

One of us was already a teacher, using organizing strategies to help her students learn how to approach and work alongside those with political power.

One of us is a teacher's aide.

Many of us are students.

Most of us are people of color.

A few of us are artists using the graffiti form to reclaim public space that may've suffered neglect otherwise.

Most of us are artists of some form.

About half of us are women.

All of us are leaders who wanted to make an impact.

Ultimately, what we have in common is a desire to ensure that each individual is able to play a role in shaping the collective future we're stepping into. We are youth and young adults, ages 18-23, who care about making change in our communities. As SPEAC, we will enact the theory and practice of organizing for a broader population. We will continue to utilize and build on these strategies. We will not wait for an institution to identify problems and implement solutions. The members of SPEAC are Chaka Mkali, Danielle Peterson, Abdulle Elmi, Shelley Martin, Alena Chaps, Jordan Hamilton, Kristy Clemons, Senah Sampong, and Thomas Vazquez.



# What We Did

Early on in the training Chaka told us, “People will tell you what they think you want to hear. If you leave blanket statements and broad generalizations unchecked, you will end up with a listening session full of catch phrases. If you challenge and agitate properly, you will gain trust and tap into what people really think.”

With that advice echoing in the back of our minds, SPEAC leaders ventured out into the community. We looked for organizations and institutions that played vital roles in young people’s daily lives. We went to churches, schools, parks, shelters, and libraries. We talked to program coordinators, teachers and students alike. We convinced them to bring together groups of youth for Listening Sessions that lasted at least an hour and a half.

**With determination, some wall post-its, a couple of colored markers, and eight core principles, we opened up the floors for discussion.**

A Listening Session is an opportunity for young people to be engaged in dialogue about their hopes, desires, and their visions for the future of their communities. These are the eight core principles that guided us:

1. You must have a facilitator to direct the dialogue.
2. Be very intentional with a clear agenda.
3. Learn to rephrase questions; always push for clarity.
4. Humor is important. It provides texture and puts people at ease.
5. Take notes. You must have a fastidious note taker. To be accountable, the notes should be visible to everyone.
6. Know the culture of the room. Plan for the unexpected. The dialogue should be fluid, not forced.
7. Recognize that you are an outsider. Always thank the participants for letting you come into their space.
8. Share reflection/evaluation with the groups that participated; facilitators must always evaluate and debrief their performances in the room.



By no means was facilitating these listening sessions an easy task. It was difficult to engage the young people and get their honest answers. We asked the basic question: What is community? The answers were short and few. It was as if no one had ever asked them before. We reconstructed the question: What is community to you? Then slowly but surely people began to speak up. When they did, it empowered others to speak. A stream of dialogue began.

***We moved on to other questions: What are some things that you see? What does this mean? What are YOUR desires and hopes for yourself and your community? Who are your role-models? What are your interests? Values?***

We heard personal stories of struggle, we heard hope and hopelessness, and often young people found their voice through the process of dialogue. For example, in one listening session one young person said, "I have always wanted to speak out like this." He pushed for clarity within himself, because we pushed him for clarity within the group.



By the end of the listening sessions we had created relationships not only with the organizations we sought out, but with the young people within those organizations and institutions. The question at the end of many sessions from the youth to SPEAC leaders was: “When are you coming back?” They said to us “people have come before, they talk, write stuff down, toss it a corner and we never hear from them again.” We explained to them that the role they played in these sessions was vital. The information we gathered in each session would be analyzed to find the re-occurring themes. We would then present it back to the community in a tangible form.

When we ventured out into the community to do these listening sessions we went with a very intentional and clear agenda. We wanted to amplify the voices of the community holding a megaphone, and invite others to join us in our work. Through the process of listening sessions we built relationships and we developed ourselves as leaders and facilitators.





# Themes From Listening Sessions

Through the process of listening sessions, community members' voices are recorded publicly. At least one person asks questions, while another person records the answers where everyone can see them. Young people's concerns and dreams grounded the process, and SPEAC members stepped up into leadership roles. SPEAC facilitated twenty youth- and young adult-centered listening sessions. The following are the themes we found as we explored what we recorded in those twenty sessions.



# Who's/Whose Community?

Young people believe belonging to a group is the foundation of community. People use definitions of units, like family, collective, or tribe. They talk about social connection/unity and communicating with/supporting one another to work toward common goals with people from different backgrounds/cultures. Youth think the values of community are recognition, value, acceptance, and opportunity. Young adults are seeking and wishing for growth and connection. Renewal can occur through engaging each other as community assets, and not being isolated as a single person working alone. Another person added that community “can be reborn through our actions.” People working together for common goals build community and create unity instead of dividing people’s power.

## Going Beyond the Ghetto: Shifting Voices

Youth see problems in their community and speak truth to them. Many youth are angry about the state of their community—frustrated to be living in the ghetto or in poverty where confronting violence and drugs are a daily battle. Words describing community are ghetto, gentrification, and battling for resources. False expectations, hypocrisy, lack of accountability, and conflict disillusion young people from building community. One person imagined that “a shift in voices” is needed to improve community. Youth should be listened to in order to transform ghettos into healthy communities. Society chooses not to listen to youth, and many youth felt surprised that anyone wanted to listen to their concerns about community. This shift in voices can build community and personal power.

# Acting Like Robots

Almost all of the youth feel isolated and want to feel more connected to members of their community. One young person said that “people are acting like robots.” Society wants people—especially youth—to go through the motions of life with blinders on, and not acknowledge their personal power and the potential for change. People have misdirected energy that fails to focus on common goals and public work. Without positive direction and hope for people, self-destruction happens because “they get frustrated which leads to violence.” Violence and poverty are community issues that almost everyone thinks need to change. One person felt that “poverty will either break you or humble you.” Challenges for youth are negative energy/negative members of the community/negative involvement, misrepresentation, and lack of opportunity for both jobs and leadership. Common experiences and goals can be used to provide a basis for people to work together.



# We're Following Failed Strategies

Although young people identified huge problems within their communities, they are hopeful about their possibilities as individuals and together. However, they feel divided by stereotypes, racism, classism, and sexism. Someone observed that “there aren’t enough people coming up with new strategies; we’re following failed strategies.” Youth feel that strategies used so far have made divisions and created a feeling of powerless. They think that people need to have more resources and more access to those resources. One person said that “never do for someone what they can do for themselves.” People can change their own communities because they are the experts on what needs to change. Youth view problems and divisions, but have dreams of changing their communities. Many youth said that they try to be the change they wish to see. They feel that they could be a positive force for change in the face of problems. With this positive force, the focus needs to be on “more commonalities in the community,” not the aspects that divide community. Working around people’s strengths can build better communities.





# Recognition, Accountability, & Expression: Feeling Accepted

Young people want to be understood and accepted by peers and leaders in their community. They feel that recognizing and accepting shared common interests make them feel part of something larger than themselves – and part of community. Young people think that people in communities need to be held accountable to themselves and one another. One person said that “accountability is more valuable than power.” Accountability builds trusting and successful relationships; these relationships increase the power of active citizens within communities. Another person echoed the same idea that “people want expectations.” Expectations and accountability create a feeling of value. However, many youth feel that adults are not accountable to them. Learning to trust and being able to trust others make youth feel part of a community. Young adults think that another aspect that builds community is making public expressions of community and self through art (music, murals, writing, and dance.) Forming support networks when using public spaces for celebrations or playing basketball also develop a sense of community.



# Public Spaces

Public space gives a physical place and a public arena to build relationships. Young people think about public spaces as part of the definition of community, as a way to contribute to community, and as places to go when not at school or work. Having public spaces to meet and to play is an important part of feeling part of a community. An important part of that connection is celebrations, as well as spaces for people to hang out. Many young people also think about institutions and places like schools, stores, and libraries as valued places within communities. They want better parks and more community centers.

# Dreams

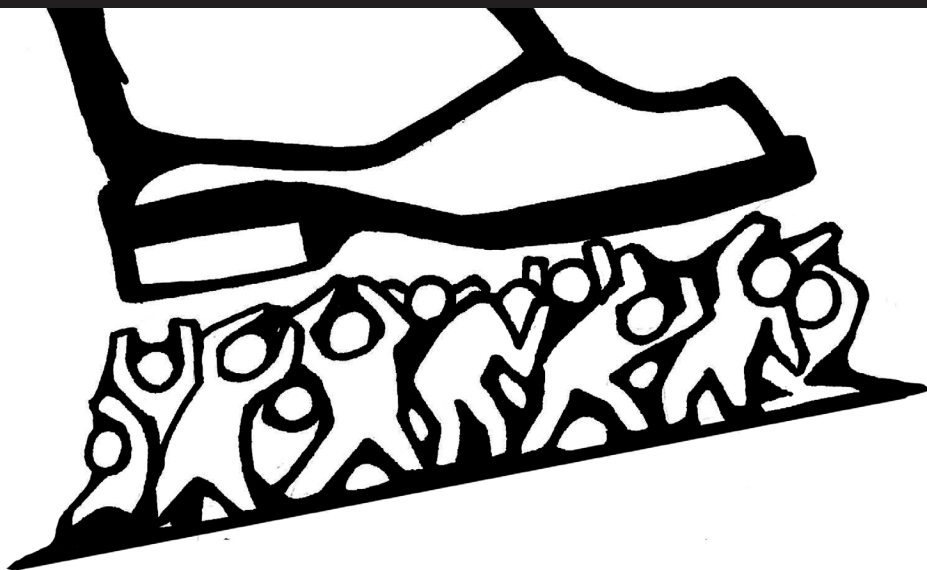
Freedom. Equality. Democracy. Being responsible. Material success. Beating stereotypes. Traveling. Art. Gaining knowledge and sharing it. Having enough. Revolution/being a revolutionary. Influence and connections. Making enough money doing fulfilling work. Experiences/living by example. Building/changing community.

# Role Models

Artists. Rappers. Visionaries. Mentors. Family: mother, brother, sister, father, grandmother, aunt. Teachers. Peacemakers. Friends.

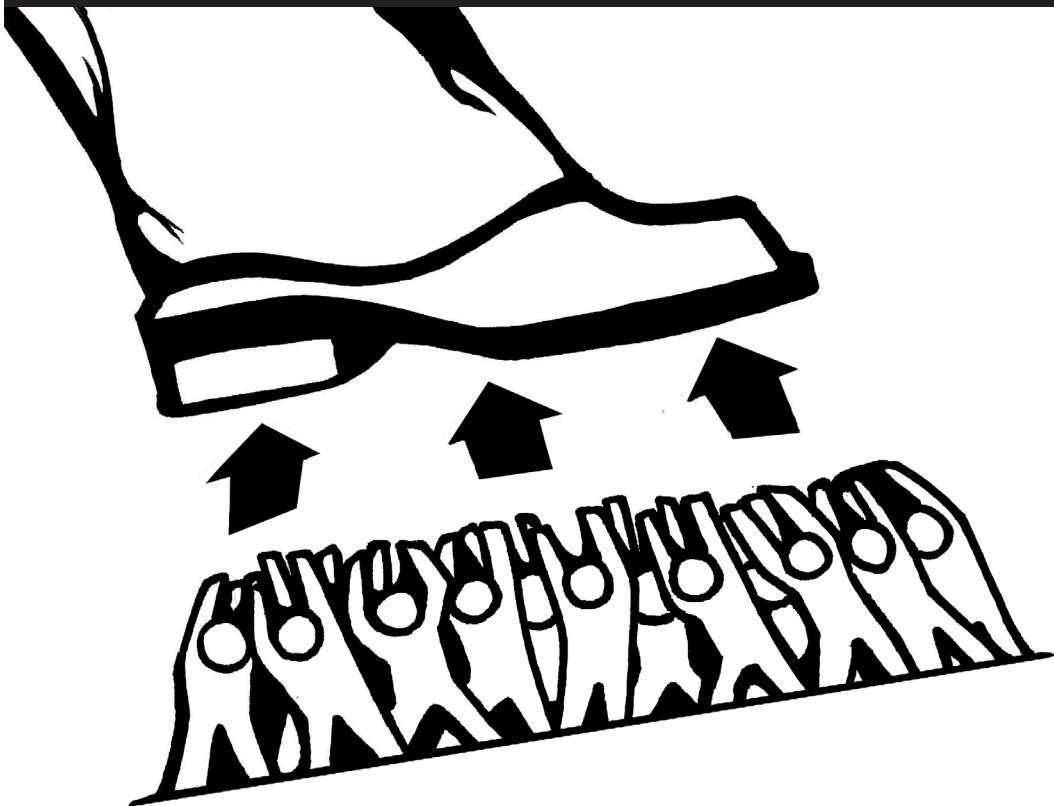


# Changing the System of Creating Powerlessness



Many young people feel powerful, but think that systems and people try to make them feel powerless sometimes. Most of the powerful people within the community have money and connections because of their race, gender, and age. Young people can feel powerless within society and community sometimes because “the system is designed to make you feel like you have no power.” Society can make communities and the people within them feel powerless, hopeless, and disconnected. One person affirmed the idea that because of, “... complacency people feel disempowered within their own humanity and don’t realize they have power within themselves.” Youth do not want to feel like robots. One young person talked about power coming from within, and someone else pointed out that power comes through strength in numbers. Each person has power, and even more power is generated when people come together under common dreams and goals. Power recognizes power, and power is the ability to make choices. Youth think that getting power requires hard work, respect of self and others, being intelligent, and organizing.







# **SPEAC and Hope Community would like to thank:**

Archdale, Walker Art Center Teen Advisory Council, Aeon (Formerly Central Community Housing Trust), Phillips Community Television, Urban League High School  
Brian Coyle Community Center, MCAD, Youth Link, Franklin Library, St. Barnabas  
Green Central Gym, Kwanzaa church, The Bridge, The Waite House, St. Paul Lutheran, Center  
For Democracy and Citizenship

---

## **And the individuals who helped support this project:**

Leigh Combs, Aaron Kupcho, Alex Leonard, Sarita Turner, John Gwinn, Tally Washington, Julie Graves, Pastor Patrick Cabello-Hansel, Mary Keefe, June Bouye, Aiyana Machado, Andres Guzman, Andrew (D Hop) Hopkins, Sam Dunne, Hashep Seka, David (Da Vini) Smith, Rick Carey, Tsione Micheal-Wolde, Doris Cunningham-Dumas, Ed Irwin, Twila Sanchez, Sue Pohl, Witt Siasoco, Maureen Hartman, Christine Atkins, Dennis Donovan, Ellen Tveit, Wayne Bugg, Michael Hay, Beth VanDam, Zoe Sommers-Haas, Adrian and Ayolanda Mack, Angela Fiero, and Sally Munger

## **The Writing Team:**

Alena Chaps, Rick Carey, Shelley Martin, Mary Keefe, Senah Sampong, and Danielle Peterson

## **The Illustration Team:**

Andres Guzman (book design), Thomas Vazquez, Chaka Mkali, and Jordan Hamilton

## **What's next?**

SPEAC does community organizing through providing organizing training as well as working on actions as an organization. Currently, we are working on action research on the Phillips neighborhood and our urban parks and recreation system. SPEAC is actively recruiting young adults, ages 15-25.

## **Contact information for SPEAC:**

Chaka Mkali  
612-435-1677  
[chaka@hope-community.org](mailto:chaka@hope-community.org)

Danielle Peterson  
612-624-0206  
[dpeterson@umn.edu](mailto:dpeterson@umn.edu)

Hope Community  
611 East Franklin Avenue  
Minneapolis, Minnesota 55404  
[www.hope-community.org](http://www.hope-community.org)





