Young Fresnans gain storytelling and leadership skills

BACKGROUND

This case study highlights how young people in Fresno gained valuable skills through their participation in a TCC-funded, paid youth leadership program. Led by the Youth Leadership Institute and Fresno Economic Opportunities Commission (EOC) Street Saints, the program is a component of the larger Transform Fresno Community Engagement Plan (CEP).

Interviews for this story were held in November and December 2024.

Christopher (second from right) and Delilah (right) table for Transform Fresno with other Youth Leadership Development Program participants. Photo courtesy of Youth Leadership Institute.

CHRISTOPHER grew up in Fresno, born there after his parents emigrated from Mexico. A senior at Washington High School, he lives with his parents and younger sister. For much of his life, he has helped support his family, at times joining his parents working in agricultural fields or selling various products at a local swap meet near the Fresno Fairgrounds.

In August 2023, at the start of Christopher's junior year, he and a few friends joined the TCC-funded Youth Leadership Development Program. Jointly led by the Fresno EOC Street Saints and the Youth Leadership Institute, the paid, year-long program helps young people develop leadership skills and provides training in environmental justice, advocacy, public speaking, and more.

Much of the program centered around a leadership project: Christopher and his fellow program participants wove together their personal stories and photos taken around their neighborhood into the Transform Fresno zine, which presented a collage of Fresno's youth experience.

Christopher wrote about several topics, including his experience as the child of agricultural workers, calling for awareness of their value and how he sees them being underappreciated. "Agriculture is like a fundamental backbone of America, and sometimes the workers are under-appreciated, undervalued, underpaid, working in harsh conditions," he said. "That was my favorite story that I wrote."

Christopher described the projects he worked on in the leadership program as more relevant and interesting than school projects tend to be. Rather than drawing from external knowledge, this collaboration was grounded in each person's experiences and perspectives. "Every person has their own mindset. Our team is like, hey, you have your perspective, your knowledge — why don't we collaborate? It works similar to how a school should, but more in tune with people's current lives. School is like, 'here's a prompt to answer.' Transform Fresno is like, 'Here's your problem. How can we solve it?'"

Christopher and his fellow program participants also went to community hearings to advocate for their neighborhood. "We would advocate for Southwest Fresno, and that really broadens your perspective of creativity, collaboration, community, strength and ... just overall makes you grow."

As Christopher became more involved with the program, he also became more aware of how his neighborhood differs from wealthier and less polluted parts of the city. The contrasts do not sit well with Christopher, and has inspired him to speak out about the harsh inequities.

"The changes Transform Fresno advocated for in Southwest Fresno opened my mind, like, 'hey, this is not okay.' I know the struggles, and I know my voice has meaning to cause change."

CHRISTOPHER

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True to its name, the program helped Christopher to develop as a youth leader, from deepening his understanding of what leadership means to putting his skills into practice. Over the course of almost a year participating, he said, the program helped him to become a more respectful, responsible leader — qualities he says would be important aspects of any job in the future. Now, he is looking ahead to graduation and college, where he hopes to study mechanical or aerospace engineering, aiming for a career with hands-on, tangible work. "I don't want to sit in an office all day working — I want to do stuff with my hands. This program helped me be more hands-on with what I do."

"To me, a leader is not only someone that takes charge — a leader helps others grow. With Transform Fresno, I would speak out with my fellow workers and talk about our stories. And then I would be like, 'enough about me, my coworker has an incredible story to tell.'"

CHRISTOPHER

DELILAH, like Christopher, was born and raised in Fresno. Now an eighth grader at Computech Middle School, she lives with her parents and five younger siblings. When she was in seventh grade, her mother learned of the Youth Leadership Development Program through a contact in the community. Delilah was interested to learn more when her mom told her about the program, so she applied and started to attend the meetings. "[I joined the program] because my mom ... told me that what we talk about in the program helps the community get stronger with the new parks, college, and more. ... Youth can have a stake in the community ... and voice how they would like to see certain changes," Delilah wrote in the Transform Fresno zine.

In the program, Delilah did many of the same things that Christopher did — wrote stories, took photos, and worked collaboratively with the other participants. But she was also one of the youngest participants in the program — one of only three middle schoolers among a group of high school students. While she struggled at times with speaking and connecting with older students, the program set the participants up to build relationships. Specifically, the other students helped Delilah to get more comfortable speaking with people she didn't know well and presenting her writing to the larger group.

Christopher (right) and Delilah (center) plant herbs with other Youth Leadership Development Program participants.
Photo courtesy of Youth Leadership Institute.

The program also expanded Delilah's knowledge of the problems her community faces. She learned about environmental problems, such as pollution from factories and deforestation, as well as potential solutions to these issues. She wrote about her ideas of potential solutions in the zine, including having clean water fountains, benches, and trash cans in parks to enhance people's experience — plus weekend clean-ups to keep the parks litter-free. She learned how to play a role in helping her community face difficult problems. She also learned more about what leadership is and how a good leader can help others.

"Being a leader, to me, is being able to lead others to do something that you think will end up being good for the community, being able to give them instructions and help them understand what is going to happen."

DELILAH

In the coming years, Delilah aims to go to high school, then college, and get a job that can allow her to help out her mom. She is interested in becoming a photographer, and the photography component of the program provided her with useful experience, including simply getting comfortable with a camera — something she hadn't used much before. The participants were encouraged to take photos of what was happening around their neighborhoods, documenting some of the things they were learning about. While many participants took photos with their phones, those without phones (like Delilah) were provided with cameras to take photos.

"Photography is something I really enjoy. I liked the experience of using a camera, taking pictures of things like grafitti or other things around my neighborhood. It helped me get experience so I could pursue photography more."

DELILAH