



Mason City, Iowa

There's a preservation movement afoot in Mason City, and it has less to do with the legacy of Frank Lloyd Wright buildings and hometown hero Meredith Willson's *Music Man* than with maintaining a know-your-neighbor way of life in this north Iowa community.

Specifically, it means trying to hold on to people like Emily Silberstein, a high school senior with plans of studying neuroscience, dreams of foreign travel, and thoughts of maybe, just maybe, returning to Mason City to raise a family. But like many other small towns in America's heartland, Mason City, whose name comes from its brick industry, is shrinking. And the first to take off are youth: about half leave Mason City, demographers report.

"Here's our reality," says Lori Henry, a city council member in this town of 29,040. "We have an aging population. We need to attract and retain our young people to keep our base. So we need to get our young people to connect to the community, to get them to return here and raise their families here."



COURTESY YOUTH TASK FORCE

Youth set agenda

To show they meant business, the mayor and city council formalized their commitment to integrating youth into civic affairs. In 1994, 10 youth and 11 adults were appointed to the first Youth Task Force and charged with identifying needs and coordinating resources for youth-driven community projects. Since then, citywide Youth Action Teams have swung into action. This volunteer assembly of more than 240 youth and 65 adults (in which youth are respected as

Mason City Youth Hold Adults Accountable



PAT OTTO

equals) has organized such projects as a book drive, a childcare center for holiday shoppers, and an intergenerational coffee klatch at the senior citizens center.

To evaluate whether youth are building assets through these activities, Youth Action Team members complete surveys. Responses to questions such as "My involvement in the Youth Action Team makes me feel I can make a difference in my school and community" show the headway Mason City is making: last year, the rate jumped from 79 to 96 percent.

For its efforts, this HC • HY initiative was cited last year as a Jostens Our Town Rising Star. An honor to be sure, but the designation was simply not good enough for the Youth Task Force. "After last year's HC • HY conference, the four youth who attended said, 'Hey, we can win the award. We deserve to win the award,'" says Richard Dedor, a Youth Task Force member and high school senior. "We got together and thought, 'How can we affect our community and continue to grow in our asset building here?' We had very focused goals in mind, so there'd be no reason not to win." And sure enough, this year Mason City earned a Jostens Our Town Award and Grant outright.

Quick-take

ON MASON CITY, IOWA

- Location:** Cerro Gordo County in north-central Iowa
- Population:** 29,040 residents, with more than 5,200 young people enrolled in area schools
- Initiative launch:** January 1994
- Annual budget:** \$23,800 in city, county, public school and private school annual appropriations
- Staff:** Full-time director; part-time clerical support, and a youth intern
- Plans for award:** Deepen asset building in neighborhoods, service clubs, businesses, and schools
- Contact:** Youth Task Force Director Mary Schissel at 641-421-2708 or mcytf@masoncity.net
- Web site:** www.masoncity.net/mcytf

Adult engagement critical

With the award and grant in hand, Mason City youth are now putting local adults in the hot seat, demanding more engagement with youth. “Our community has a really, really low ratio of adults being active in youth’s lives,” Dedor says. “It’s a huge goal, to increase that number. We want that number to be sky high.”

Since September, Youth Action Team volunteers have begun a two-year plan to engage adults in five neighborhoods, five service clubs, five businesses, and six schools. Their vision includes neighborhoods that know the names of their children, service clubs that engage youth in community projects, businesses that support asset building, and schools in which everyone from teachers to janitors develops individual relationships with youth.

And they’re holding participating adults accountable by having them sign the Our Town Asset-Building Partnership Agreement. “Youth had some disappointments with adults backing out or not following through,” says Mary Schissel, director of the Youth Task Force. “The phrasing we’re using for the Our Town projects is ‘Turn those good intentions to positive actions.’ Adults believe it’s important, but what can they as individuals do?”

Suggestions include everything from wearing a name badge during meetings to ensuring youth opinions are valued and their roles meaningful. This means making youth voting members, not merely advisers, and providing useful jobs for them to do—not just grunt work.

“It’s a role reversal,” notes Emily Silberstein, a Youth Task Force member. “Adults may not know the best way to relate to youth. We’re teaching them how to build assets with youth because we know firsthand what works, just from living.” For example, Silberstein says, “When a teacher or employer comes up and says, ‘I appreciate what you did,’ I’ll work harder, but if an employer has hundreds of rules and regulations, I won’t.”

Bus driver buddy

Mason City youth wouldn’t be able to make such demands if they hadn’t already proved themselves as

empowered, caring community contributors, says Lorris Long, a longtime resident. “Youth, they’re brave,” Long says. “A lot of times it takes them to lead the way. The adults are impressed by it and they get on board.”

Long got on board without even intending to. When he first started driving a bus for public and parochial school routes nine years ago, students greeted him saying, “Hi, bus driver.” Now, they’re on a first-name basis. “We’re buds,” he says. In turn, he knows the names of all 50 or so of his riders—his “bus family.”

But Long is more than a man with a good memory. He’s a piece of the cement that holds Mason City together. For 11 years he has served as a board member for Francis Lauer Youth Services, a day treatment program for youth in high-risk situations. He volunteers on the Youth Action Team. And he is responsible for linking Youth Action Team volunteers and his service group, the Kiwanis Club, which, along with the Jaycees, has committed to an intergenerational asset-building program.

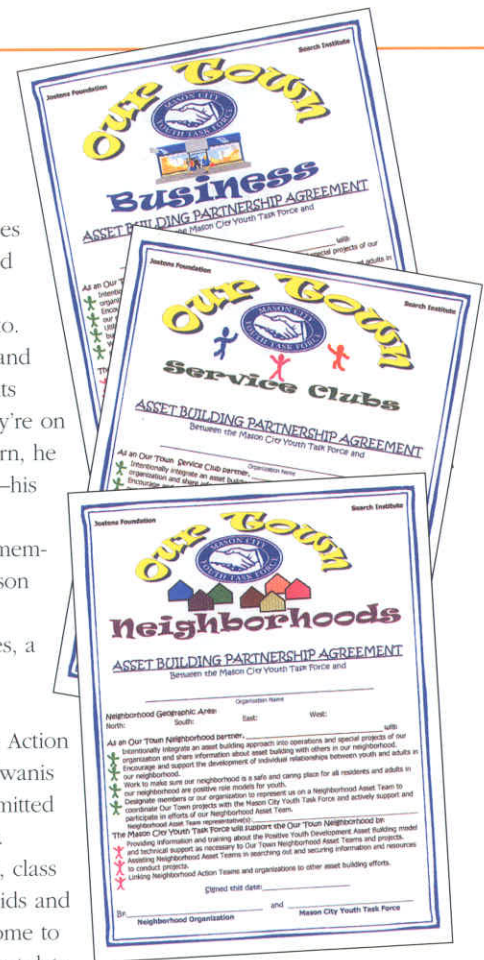
A grandfather, Long also attends ball games, class plays, and birthday parties of other people’s kids and grandkids. “When I rode his bus, he would come to my track meets and know my times and congratulate me,” Silberstein says. “I have friends who don’t come. He waits at the finish line for you.”

His dedication earned him the first-ever Hidden Hero award presented by the Youth Task Force. “I thought, by golly, if I mean that much to the kids—I got votes from every single school, it was a runaway, they said—then I should be involved and give more back to them,” he says.

It’s hard to tell whether this type of adult investment in Mason City youth will have demographic returns. But if Silberstein is any measure, the prognosis is good.

“I want to leave Mason City when I graduate,” Silberstein says. “I want to travel the world for 15 years and, after that, with a family, I can see myself moving back. I want to raise my kids in a community exactly like this.”

Diane Richard is a Minneapolis writer.



MAKING GOOD: Businesses, service clubs, and neighborhood organizations sign partnership agreements with the Mason City Youth Task Force in which they commit to helping build assets.

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