

a touchstone for action

A Bill of Rights for Children

Former Mayor Tom Potter (Portland) and
Nate Waas Shull Director of the Multnomah Youth Commission

interviewed by Cynthia King-Guffey

The Multnomah Youth Commission (MYC), the official youth advisory body of the City of Portland and Multnomah County, is the lead group working to prioritize and implement the actions for youth in Multnomah County. These young commissioners participate as non-paid volunteers working with city/county officials, community leaders, and other youth to create positive change for the youth. The purpose of the MYC is to involve youth in all levels of community decision-making that affects them.

This diverse group (ages 13 to 21) must live, work, attend school, or an out-of-school program in Multnomah County. The youth commissioners strive to be advocates for an agenda of positive policy changes guided by the MYC Bill of Rights. Former Mayor Tom Potter was a primary advocate of the project.

The MYC is supported and funded by the Commission on Children, Families, and Community of Multnomah County (CCFC) and the City of Portland. In the following interview, former Mayor Tom Potter and Nate Waas Shull answer questions put to them by Cynthia King-Guffey, *Sockeye's* guest forum editor for our series on youth development.



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King-Guffey: Mayor Potter, you were instrumental in helping key stakeholders in Portland, including youth themselves, outline six basic rights of children and youth. Nate, I'm wondering if you can outline those rights.

Waas Shull: The process really started with the mayor and the county chair asking people, including youth, "What are the most important rights for youth in the community?" And they came up with a lot of specific rights—many more than these six.

The first area is a touchstone for everything that follows. It is that youth have a right to a voice in matters that affect them. It goes on to talk about youth rights to education, rights around family, home and community, rights around general wellness, rights to such basics as food, shelter, and clothing, and the right to recreation. It was a process of youth sitting down with the feedback that they had gotten from their peers and saying, "How do we organize this?" The creation itself was an exercise in positive youth development.

Potter: Because of their age, we mistakenly think youth are not capable of forming the thoughts and solutions that will address their problems. But over 3,000 youth participated in the creation of the Bill of Rights, and this umbrella-look gave the adult population a direct view of what our youth think is important. During one of the very first meetings, a 14-year-old girl stood up and said, "I think every child has the right to play."

I thought all children could play. But because of family situations, too many have been forced to act like adults. They can't recreate or build relationships with their peers. Those are the things that the adult population is struck by, because we can never anticipate fully what kids' issues are until we give them a seat at the table and listen to what they have to tell us.

What we wanted to say, also, through this message of the Bill of Rights, is that children do have rights, not just when it's convenient, not just when we have the money—they have rights all the time.

King-Guffey: What are some more of these rights?

Potter: Children have a right to shelter, they have a right to healthcare, they have a right to play, they have a right to loving adults in their lives. Too many children live without the love of adults in their lives—and in Oregon, 20 percent of our children go to bed hungry. The clear message from our youth is that this is not OK.

And that was a big, big step for those 3,000 young people. We have the Youth Bill of Rights out on the front counter because many kids and adults come through the mayor's office, and we want to tell them that there is nothing more important than our youth, because they are our future.

King-Guffey: A lot of people like to say that nothing is more important than our kids, but it seems that you've done something fairly unique as far as cities go.

Potter: In Portland, we start every council meeting with a question: "How are the children?" In many communities around the world, adults greet each other this way, because they know that when the children in the village are well, the village is going to be well.

Ours is the only Bill of Rights that's been written by young people. In other cities, the Children's Bill of Rights is created by adults saying, "Here's what we think is best for them."

King-Guffey: Can you speak to City Hall's efforts to make the Bill of Rights actionable?

Waas Shull: It's fair to say that The Youth Pass, and everything else that involves youth engagement in the city and county, flows from the philosophy of positive youth development and is the Bill of Rights come to life.

The Youth Pass has involved organizing the Multnomah Youth Commission to create an action plan, which included assuring every student in grades 6 to 12 free access to public transportation.

Potter: The Youth Pass is a perfect example. Young people told us and the superintendent of Portland Public Schools, over and over, that some kids choose between lunch money and bus fare. Here we have young people taking on a problem that is systemic in our community. But rather than the adults saying, “Tsk, tsk, we need to solve that,” we gave it to the young people and said, “We’ll support you, now run with it.”

Waas Shull: The MYC got ahold of this issue and created a subcommittee, and since just last February, they were able to organize support from city legislators, from the Portland Business Alliance, from groups like Big Brothers, Big Sisters. They were calling people up, like the executive director of Open Meadows, selling him on the project.

Mayor Potter and Commissioner Adams together brought a resolution to the City Council that said our children should have access to the city and the city should be their learning environment, not just our school buildings. They said, “Let’s get our kids to internships; let’s get them out of just hanging around the mall.”

Every step of the way when we met resistance, young people in the MYC were able to stand up, often in a room of very powerful folks, and say, “This is why we want this and we want to work with you.” They did this with the county board, the school board, the Tri-Met board; and each time, regardless of the in-board conflicts, they were able to get agreement. The Youth Pass is now in its pilot stage, so every youth in Franklin and Jefferson High Schools has a sticker on his or her student card that allows them to travel for free in the public transportation system.

King-Guffey: I hear you shifting the paradigm from youth as problems to youth as resources and partners, in very practical terms. I’m wondering what you have learned about youth strengths, maybe even during your week at Jefferson High School, and what you think our city needs to do to support the development of those strengths?

Waas Shull: I think you’ve touched at the heart of youth development, which is shifting the paradigm from youth as problems to youth as partners who are part of the solution. You have to be willing to embody this—which the mayor did by moving his office to Jefferson High School for a week—to get us out of our comfort zone, to create the space where youth have an opportunity to reveal their abilities and provide solutions.

Potter: It always starts with the same thing: listening. For me, the week we spent at Jefferson High School was probably the best week of my four years as mayor.

King-Guffey: Can you say more about what you think is your

role as mayor in supporting youth development in Portland?

Potter: Mayors must understand that leadership isn’t always about stepping out in the front; it’s making room for other people to step out in front and become leaders.

And we develop our future by developing the potential of youth leaders. These young people have energy, they have ideas, and they are idealistic. Our roll is to provide pathways and let them be part of the decisions that affect their lives.

Waas Shull: One of the specifics of youth development that the mayor has helped and other mayors could focus on around the country is: hire youth. Put youth in paid positions, in unpaid internships, get them involved in bureaus and the offices in the city. The mayor helped support a new program to ask young people, “What do you think should be the plans for our city in 20 years, in 30 years? It’s going to be your city.” So there are actually young people working as planners and outreach workers at the Bureau of Planning, addressing the long-term plans for the City of Portland, from the perspective of young people.

Potter: We also give grants to youth groups, up to \$1,000, that want to solve a particular problem in their neighborhood or in their school. We give them the money and they go out and make it work.

Waas Shull: The mayor also supported a pilot program exempting city employees up to four hours of their workweek to be involved with youth as tutors and mentors.

King-Guffey: What are some of the key challenges that can be addressed to make enormous change in how we support our youth?

Potter: It’s important to understand that authority is about helping others solve problems. And who is the best person to solve a problem but the person who is affected by it? And in our society, we have so many issues around young people and children, that if we were to listen to them and engage them, many of these problems that seem intractable would be solved. Sometimes it’s making the change in our egos. I know that I don’t always have the answer for our young people; it’s out in the community, it’s with the Multnomah Youth Commission.


King-Guffey: One concern in Oregon is silo planning which is often perpetuated by really well-intentioned people who decide, “I’m going to do this project, or start this nonprofit,” but who work only in their own domain, non-comprehensively, sometimes even working in competition with others. Have you seen any promising ways to shift us towards a more systemic approach to youth development?

Waas Shull: Connected by 25 is a group of local schools, nonprofits, businesses, and leaders who are organizing around: “How do we reduce the dropout rate, how do we connect every youth to school, work, and community by the time they are 25?”

Another exceptional group is The Leader’s Roundtable, a place where all the local superintendents can sit down together with representatives of the city, the county, and business leaders, around: “How do we engage with issues that are affecting our schools, when it comes to academic outcomes—as a system, as a community?”

King-Guffey: My final question is: What are your key outcomes of success, the indicators of thriving that will give you the sense that we’ve done right by our youth here in Portland?

Waas Shull: Outcomes of success would be: seeing young people at the table on boards, on city commissions, on planning commissions, civically engaged, running for office. A recent graduate of Multnomah Youth Commission ran for city office. Do young people have a sense that they have a voice? Is the community theirs? The partnership model has been the mayor’s model.

Potter: A few years ago I saw the movie, “Pay it Forward,” and the premise of the movie is that somebody does something good for you so you do something good for someone else. By paying a good deed forward, you create a community of care, which becomes the norm rather than the exception. In 20 years, I want these young people that I see today paying it forward. I want them to be engaging the next generation of young people and give them the opportunities, give them the voice. So that, “How are the children?” becomes the way we all do things in the Portland community. To me, that would be very satisfying, because it would be a dramatic shift from the way we do things today. 



Our Bill of Rights: Children and Youth

I.

A voice and opinion in decisions that will impact our lives.

II.

A quality public education that will help us succeed in the future, beginning in preschool and continuing through high school and beyond.

III.

Physical, mental, and spiritual wellness.

IV.

General well-being and the tools that will lead to a healthy and productive life.

V.

Loving care and a healthy environment at home, as our homes, families, and community provide the basis for our development.

VI.

Recreation: access to safe and clean recreation areas.