

Young People In Action

GENERATION Y ... MORE LIKE Y GET INVOLVED?

STORY BY KENDALL FIELDS

Perry Graham sits at a small table at Espresso Roma at the edge of the UO campus with his brown dreadlocks pulled back into a frizzy ponytail. The 23-year-old scribbles in his notebook as he sips coffee out of a clear mug — all pretty normal for a college student on a gray fall afternoon.

You could say that Graham is just another young hippie wannabe who probably thinks peace and freedom are achieved by smoking a lot of pot. What more could he be doing with his life? He's only 23; he doesn't care about politics or the community. He's too young.

But if you thought all of that, you'd be terribly wrong. Don't be so quick to judge this 23-year-old. He isn't disinterested or uninvolved. Graham is one of the few young people in Eugene who is set on improving the community through his involvement with the Occupy movement. He was the brains behind the Occupy Eugene's Expression Center, and was arrested at the Nov. 17 bank protest.

But, come on, what can a naïve 20-something really do?

"Don't forget 2008 and the strong youth involvement that elected Obama," UO graduate student Graham says.

Historically, younger generations paved the way for change through protests such as those in the '60s and '70s. So it really doesn't matter if you are 18 — young people can make a difference.

Today it seems like the majority of young people have forgotten. Eugene's younger generations don't think they can make a difference, at least when they are so inexperienced. They are not involved in politics or civic engagement and are deemed "apathetic" by older generations because they really aren't interested in the issues of contemporary politics or they are unaware of them and do not think they have the ability to influence political change or better the community — and those who are involved only stay for a while. But there are some exceptions.

What's with all the apathy?

So, why aren't more young people involved in civic engagement in Eugene? Most adults would say it's because the youth don't care and have a general disregard or lack of respect for the community.

According to statistics from Young Democrats of America (YDA), Generation Y rivals the Baby Boomers in size and by 2015 will make up one-third of the electorate. In 2006, voters aged 18-29 made up 21 percent of the electorate, with 39 percent identifying themselves as non-white, according to YDA.

In general, young people are not actively involved in politics or even in community improvement efforts because, as Graham says, they just don't see how it applies

to them. Graham adds that he thinks the apathy stems from people being indifferent to activism because it is so common in Eugene. "They think 'Oh, it's just *another* group of protesters' and walk away."

UO post-graduate student and recently elected Interfraternity Council President Jeff Rodgers says one reason young people, particularly college students, may engage in civic efforts for only a brief time is because they come to school to get their diploma, and some are paying a lot of money to do it. "They are just here to get what they paid for," he explains.

But The Bus Project Executive Director Caitlin Baggot knows that young people can make a difference. Baggot started out as a volunteer at the Bus in 2002 when she was 24. The Bus Project, which is based in Portland, is a statewide organization that aims to engage young people in a larger set of issues — from recruiting voters to turning good ideas into laws.

Thirty-eight-year-old Portland mayoral candidate and current state representative Jefferson Smith founded the Bus Project to promote youth involvement and provide a platform to disseminate the voices and beliefs of young Oregonians. The Bus Project was launched to fame when it came out with shirts during the 2008 elections that read "VOTE, F*CKER." This declaration was a response to a shirt marketed by the popular clothing store Urban Outfitters that read "Voting Is For Old People."



PERRY GRAHAM AT
OCCUPY EUGENE

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