

To Baggot, the notion that young people are apathetic is totally untrue. “Old people always think young people are lazy,” she says. “The argument that young people are apathetic is a cover to systematically disenfranchise them.”

And sometimes it’s simply that the youth don’t know how to get involved, Baggot says, noting a recent national study that found the reason most 18- to 25-year-olds aren’t involved or don’t show up to vote at the polls is because they don’t know how, when or where.

At the Bus, volunteers strive to empower youth, educating them about current issues and learning about what really matters to them. In one day of volunteering, a group of 80 canvassers knocks on upward of 400 doors, promoting progressivism in Oregon and for the nation as a whole.

Baggot has seen firsthand how passionate youth can be, as well as the kind of difference one young person can make. “One of the most heartening things,” Baggot says, “is seeing high school students who can’t yet vote themselves but can get other people to register. They can’t cast their one vote but they know they are personally responsible for 600 votes, and they are so proud.”

Why are the youngsters in Portland so much more involved? Is it something in the water? The Portland youth may be such a foil to Eugene youth in terms of civic involvement, Baggot says, because of outreach within the Portland community.

At the Bus, Baggot and her peers work to give young people the tools to make a difference. “In the

current partisan environment, I think young people are really hungry for a place they think the conversation is alternative,” she explains.

Youth In Action

Yet some young movers and shakers, like Graham, are making a difference in their communities, proving that young people can make a difference and set an example for their indifferent peers.

Though Graham has been committed to civic engagement since he was a child living in Washington, D.C., and volunteering for the Invisible Children organization, he didn’t find his true passion until the Occupy movement came to Eugene. The conflict resolution and dispute management masters candidate created his thesis project in the fall. Graham’s thesis focuses on the structure of the Occupy movement and the communication and conflict management within Occupy sites.

Graham says he hopes to find out what works so that future protests can be more successful. The bright-eyed, dreadlocked optimist plans to continue researching the structure and management in Occupy sites nationwide, in an effort to find out what techniques work best for future protest movements and peacekeeping efforts. He says one reason the youth who are involved may leave Eugene is restlessness — at least that’s one of his main reasons, aside from planning to study other Occupy sites across the nation. But Graham says most likely he’ll stay involved in

community efforts because of how rewarding it is. “I feel more alive doing this type of work — I shouldn’t even call it that,” he says. “My life is richer because of it.”

At age 24, Creswell City Councilor A.J. O’Connell is a prime example of a young person succeeding at making a difference in his community. O’Connell, who was elected last year, says it is so crucial for youth to be involved in their communities because “the future is them.” Young people, who he defines as people aged 30 and below, can bring a new perspective to governing.

In less than a year in office, O’Connell has spearheaded efforts to make Creswell an anti-hate community, to honor a fallen police officer on the 40th anniversary of his death, and to re-route the TransAmerica bike trail through Creswell in an effort to stimulate the economy and create jobs. He has also been on the forefront of creating a sister-city relationship with another community.

But O’Connell says his biggest accomplishment is altering the political dialogue in his community. “It’s not just a good ol’ boys network,” O’Connell says. “The people will be heard and we (elected officials) act as a vehicle for the people.”

O’Connell frequently challenges Creswell’s local government, creating controversy in the community. He says his primary mission is to serve as an advocate for community members, though he is often shut down and says he feels silenced in council meetings.

At the Dec. 11 meeting, O’Connell presented his ideas for the TransAmerica Bike Re-Route and a winter coat donation program, with the goals of stimulating the local economy and improving conditions for the poor. The City Council voted against both proposals and, as O’Connell writes on his website, “they and the mayor failed to present valid arguments against their passage. It was clearly obvious that the mayor had orchestrated a dissenting vote in advance of the meeting simply because I was the one presenting this.”

O’Connell says the mayor and city manager placed their own political gain before the interests of community members, alleging they blackmailed potential supporters of the project by threatening to pull their city funding if they supported the measures. O’Connell says that less than half an hour after the council’s vote, the mayor proposed that the city manager get an increase in salary.

“I will not rest nor will I ever quit in the face of this daunting challenge,” O’Connell wrote. “The people of Creswell need to know that I will always be their advocate and that I will never back down in the face of bullying and intimidation.”

Holden Center Service Learning Program Coordinator Leisha McParland came to the UO to pursue a bachelor’s degree in Spanish and international development, and she’s stayed in Eugene specifically to foster what she considers a wonderfully unique community. At the Holden Center, McParland and her peers aim to create a bridge between nonprofit volunteer organizations and willing volunteers — they want students (or community members) to be able to fulfill their most elaborate desires.

Rodgers, a student staff member at the Holden Center, is working on a petition to get the Chinese government and the university to bring potable water to impoverished areas of China. He credits such involvement to his drive for leadership and to tackle something bigger than his own self-interests.

On an Alternative Break program through the Holden Center, Rodgers went to the Dominican Republic, where he says he was finally able to do something significant. He volunteered as a dental assistant and worked with a team to provide routine dental care, including reconstructive surgeries, for inhabitants of a rural village. Rodgers says he realized his ability to make a difference when he saw a girl, emerging from hours of oral surgery, smile for the first time.

Why youth should care

“I think that youth just need to realize that they have the most at stake since they have the most time left to live on this planet,” Graham says. “And the current ways that we are handling business is not painting us a pretty picture for the future.”

But this means more than just realizing that young people have the most at stake, Rodgers says — it’s an

