

# Students learn system of government through YAC program

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Around the turn of the millennium, Cottage Grove City Manager Richard Meyers sent his children to school to distribute a survey among their high school peers. The survey asked civic questions on topics like who the governor was, what kinds of services local government provides and how certain officials were selected.

"The results were astounding," Meyers said. "They didn't have a clue how the mayor was selected or that the post office was one of the things the city ran."

Sitting on a state committee which was trying to figure out ways to engender civic education in youths at the time, Meyers was compelled by the survey results to create a local opportunity.

In 2004, the Cottage Grove Youth Advisory Council (YAC) was formed. Open to high school and middle school students, the council serves as a communication link between City Council and youth in the community, offering members a seat at City Council meetings as a "youth representative."

YAC Co-chair MJ Raade, a high school sophomore, has been a member since seventh grade.

"YAC has given me the opportunity to learn about local government, how it works, and then also state government, which I think is really important for youths to know," she said. "I think a lot of people my age want to know — they just don't have the resources."

Beyond the walls of the chamber hall, YAC also teaches students life skills. Through regular meetings, youths must learn to make cases to a group and develop negotiation skills.

Meyers emphasized that encouraging the youths to be proactive problem-solvers is an important take-away from the program.

"Giving them a voice, and then they don't do anything, that's just whining," he said. "If you're going to have a voice, then you need to do something."

Meyers recalled past councils that butted heads.

"One year we had a group that was really divisive," he said. The group held sessions and learned to find common



COURTESY PHOTO

**State Rep. Cedric Hayden (left) meets with YAC members (from back left) MJ Raade, Kourtney Owens, Abby DeGarlais, Natalie Milligan and Payton Bickford (front) during the Cottage Grove students' Feb. 18 field trip to Salem.**

ground, fostering the ability to listen and mediate when disagreements arise.

"We work with the kids, but they take it home and they share it with others," Meyers said, extolling the benefits of having a deeper perspective of a functioning community. "They learn that there's a big process to treat water, or that it takes a lot of work to treat sewer, or we teach them how to get along when they don't agree with other people. That's one of the things that's been most exciting about working with the YAC — we've got kids that have different opinions."

Also, every spring, the city hosts the YAC Academy, a one-day event in which YAC members get a full city government experience through a city tour, conducting a mock planning commission meeting, role-playing an emergency preparedness tabletop exercise with dispatch equipment and witnessing a simulated felony traffic stop with police officers.

"They're seeing all of the day-to-day stuff," said Meyers. "It's a full day of activities. Usually we run out of time rather than activities."

Meyers hopes that this peek behind the curtain gives young people a better understanding

of how and why a city works the way it does.

Besides the acquisition of these skills and knowledge, graduating seniors may also be awarded with the Pat Patterson Scholarship. The city puts aside \$500 of financial aid that is divided among seniors for their next level of education, though no seniors are on this year's council.

The program also awards YAC members community service hours, which are a required element of high school graduation. Some of those service hours come from events like Bohemia Mining Days, in which the students volunteer to assist parade staff.

The group has also occasionally hosted free movie nights in various venues, arranged an annual Battle of the Bands and organized youth fairs which held events, games and opportunities for young people to sign up for summer programs.

While the group contributes much to its own community, YAC has also focused on broader legislative missions. Once per year, YAC students are taken to Salem to visit the state legislature. Support for the students there is strong.

Raade appreciates the amount of weight youths' voices carry on trips to the state capital. "They always really listen and pay attention to what we have to say," she said. "That's really important to us."

Even when the group was unable to make the trip last year, area representatives Sen. Floyd Prozanski and Rep. Cedric Hayden came to the city to meet with the students.

The group's relationship with state legislators has grown over the years.

A decade ago, YAC hosted a joint House-Senate committee meeting in City Hall to address methamphetamine use and drug addiction.

Then-Governor Ted Kulongoski and other legislators from around the state attended and listened to presentations by state police and rehabilitation service providers. During the session, one of the YAC members testified, recounting her experience living in a home with someone addicted to methamphetamines.

"That was more forceful than anything else," said Meyers.

Future YAC iterations continued the theme of raising drug awareness. In 2017, they held an assembly at the middle school to talk about tobacco use, sharing the assembly with the American Cancer Society's fundraising event Relay for Life. There, YAC came up with the idea to distribute differently colored bracelets to audience members, illustrating the percentages of Americans affected by tobacco-related illnesses or death.

The group's crowning achievement, though, began in 2016 when a youth representative attending a City Council

meeting listened to a parent give testimony about her son's use of nitrous oxide and how readily the drug was available in the community.

Nitrous oxide, sometimes called "laughing gas," is a sedative agent that is also used as an aerosol spray propellant, commonly found in whipped cream dispensers. Recreationally, it is inhaled to cause a euphoric dizziness. In the testimony, the parent described how close her son came to death by driving under the drug's influence.

Because the sale and distribution of nitrous oxide fell under state and federal law, the Cottage Grove City Council said it was unable to act in response to the testimonial. Sensing an opportunity, the attending YAC member reported this back to the group, which prompted members to discuss, research and investigate the drug's prevalence, impacts on people's lives and how other states dealt with the issue.

A few weeks later, during the group's legislative field trip to Salem, YAC discussed the problem with Rep. Hayden, who works as a dentist and administers nitrous oxide. The legislator was surprised to hear how easily obtainable the drug was among youths.

After some months, Rep. Hayden helped YAC draft a concept and soon a bill was created which sought to limit the sale of canisters containing nitrous oxide to people 21 and over. YAC members traveled to the Oregon Legislative Assembly to testify to the House Committee on Health Care and push for the bill's introduction to the Senate floor.

The process provided some insightful learning moments for the group. One moment came when the bill was assigned to the Judiciary Committee.

Meyers remembers at the time, "I asked them, 'Why? This was in the Health Care Committee in the House. Why did it get assigned to Judiciary?'"

After some deliberation, one of the students realized that it was because Sen. Prozanski was on that committee.

"And we go, 'Yeah! That is exactly why it got assigned to that committee,'" Meyers said. "The President of the Senate, Peter Courtney, assigned it to Prozanski because Prozanski's constituents were wanting the bill, it was a good bill, it had the support of the two parties and so they sent it to Judiciary."

Knowing that their senator

had their back, the group was excited to move forward.

Another senator on the Judiciary Committee, James Manning from the Eugene area, visited with the YAC students and talked with them about the bill as well as their fight against tobacco. The students made an impression.

With two senators on their side, the group traveled again to Salem to testify to the Judiciary Committee. As the group entered the Senate committee meeting, Manning waved to the group with a hand sporting a tobacco-free wrist bracelet in support of their cause.

"It was amazing," Meyers said. "They did spectacular in testifying. They prepared. They knew how to address the committee. ... They followed all of the protocols. They did better than some of the staff from state agencies."

The bill then moved on to the Senate where there was debate about the age limit. Though YAC members had been pushing for 21, they settled for a Senate amendment to lower it to 18, partly as a strategic move. A simultaneous debate at the time about raising the tobacco purchasing age to 21 was a key element in accepting the lower age limit, effectively avoiding an embroilment of their bill in a lateral debate.

"They were thinking ahead on that one," said Meyers.

In its final draft, HB 3030 restricted the sale of nitrous oxide canisters to individuals aged 18 or older, making it a Class A violation for first-time offenders. This version of the bill passed both Senate and House without a single "No" vote and was signed into law in June 2017, eventually being carried into effect Jan. 1 of the next year.

Riding on the bill's momentum, this year's YAC group has considered taking their bill to the national level, even posing this question to Oregon's senior senator Ron Wyden during his recent town hall in Cottage Grove. Wyden recommended researching how nitrous oxide moves throughout the states and how that might apply to the nation's Commerce Clause.

The amount of time and effort, however, might be too much for the small group of students.

"I'm not sure if we'll take it that direction," said Raade.

More locally, YAC is currently planning a Youth Town Hall for Cottage Grove.

"It would be just youth and we'd just have a brainstorm session about problems in our area or problems that are youth-based," Raade said. "And then we could bring in different adult representatives that could address those problems and answer questions."

One of YAC's prime motivations is to encourage youth interest in their community and government. While the group only takes applications at the beginning of each school year, they welcome anybody to join their meetings, which are held every other Monday in the City Council chamber.

It's Raade's hope that the impact of YAC will extend not just broadly through the state, but also into the future.

"I think I'm going to carry on this knowledge I have because I want to do something involved with public service," she said.

Raade expressed her interest in helping to continue the YAC program for future generations, inspired by YAC summits where she sees other youths from around the state taking an interest in government.

"It'd be nice to see that grow," she said.

## 6-day weather forecast

<b>THURSDAY</b> 44°   32°  <b>Rain</b>	<b>FRIDAY</b> 43°   30°  <b>Rain</b>
<b>SATURDAY</b> 44°   31°  <b>Cloudy</b>	<b>SUNDAY</b> 50°   30°  <b>Cloudy</b>
<b>MONDAY</b> 50°   33°  <b>Sunny</b>	<b>TUESDAY</b> 47°   32°  <b>Rain</b>

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