

Socieda Latina: A Learning Lab for Young Leaders

By Anne Eigeman

Sociedad Latina is a nonprofit organization based in Roxbury, Massachusetts that engages an estimated one thousand youths between the ages of 10-24 with programming designed to build skills in four areas: Education, Workforce Development, Civic Engagement and Arts & Culture. Through its ongoing work and research, the organization has found that Latino youths tend to have low rates of civic engagement and so has worked extensively to keep programming in this area robust.

Juan Maldonado, Director of Arts, Culture & Civic Engagement and Tomas Leyton-Nolan coordinator of Civic Engagement, created a Youth Voices program, in which they do extensive interviews with students new to the program to identify topics of strong interest. In addition to the regular pre- and post-testing they do on the program to monitor its effectiveness, Maldonado and Leyton-Nolan find that another indicator of success and source of organizational pride is the number of students who return annually. In fact, many students stay with the organization from middle school to college.

Wilmer Quinones, the current Youth Engagement Coordinator at Sociedad Latina, was a freshman in high school when he applied to be a participant in the Civic Engagement program, an experience that included 10 hours a week of paid work. Because the program was full at the time he applied, he started volunteering in Sociedad's middle school program. He also joined the organization's Mission Possible program, which focuses on college readiness as well as its Ninth Grade Academy for added academic support. During this time that he was building his skills as a student, Wilmer was simultaneously developing his skills as a student leader. The following is an interview with Wilmer to explore his experience as a youth leader:



Wilmer Quinones working with youth

What was important to you about Sociedad Latina's 9th Grade Academy and the experience that it gave you? When I testified at my school committee as a youth community organizer, that's where I really felt like I could make a change. I thought that I was the only kid who got in trouble for speaking Spanish in school and then I found out that I wasn't. I was always looked at as a trouble-maker. I became the first student member of Boston Public Schools' English Language Learners Task Force, a group that goes through reports and curricula. Then, with help from Sociedad Latina, in 2010 we created a proposal to form a new youth advisory group to the city's ELL Task Force. The group had 15 students and two adult facilitators and had other native Spanish speakers and

students from Somalia, China and Cape Verde.

What was it like for you to move into the paid role of Program Assistant in 2012 at SL after your high school graduation? I started out as a Youth Leader for Sociedad Latina in 2010. By 2012, I was able to see

what was happening with youth participants in the Civic Engagement program because I was already involved in creating work plans and agendas.

What has changed for you now in your current role as Youth Engagement Coordinator at Sociedad Latina? This year, I've already been to a few trainings to help students become trainers themselves. We have a program called "Cuidate" and the 12 participants, mostly in 9th and 10th grade, are responsible for learning health education material over the summer and then coming back to train 200 students in our community about the risks of teen pregnancy. Already, the level of responsibility that they have shown has been great. They retained the information well and it has been amazing because adults sometimes don't feel comfortable with this topic and the students were leading the sessions.

What other projects are you working on with students as part of the Civic Engagement program and how did you come up with them? We asked them what they wanted to do to change the community and they said they wanted to clean the area and get rid of all of the plastic bags outside. Giving participants the question of what they want to do to gives them more ownership of the program. The students want to replace all plastic and paper bags in local stores with re-usable bags with a new logo that they will design themselves.

Wilmer Quinones working with youth

The youth have done a lot of work around the education reform. Recently they partnered up with COSEBOC and hosted a youth gathering where young men of color shared their challenges at BPS. This was featured on the Boston Globe. The young men shared their concerns and expressed the need to improve their experience in BPS. One of the recommendations included students being part of the hiring process of teachers and making sure BPS hires teachers who are culturally competent and well trained.

The youth also organized and led a campaign called *Learn Us to Teach Us* where youth recommended that teachers learn the history and culture of the students they teach to improve the students' learning experiences at schools.

They have also been talking to community leaders and business owners in Roxbury and even Cambridge, MA and plan to do a flash-mob in the spring. They look like young professionals in the community working on this project. The level of respect, appreciation and support that we've gotten from Sociedad Latina as the program has grown has been amazing.

Wilmer Quinones is Youth Engagement Coordinator at Sociedad Latina <http://www.sociedadlatina.org> and attends college at Franklin Institute of Technology. Anne Eigeman can be reached at aeigeman@gmail.com.