Library services to young adults, typically defined as youth ages 12–18, have been improving and expanding rapidly since 1957, when the Young Adult Services Division (YASD) was established as a separate division within the American Library Association. YALSA (Young Adult Library Services Association) remains the active group in setting the standards for services to teenagers in libraries across the United States.\(^1\)

The initiatives outlined by YALSA include providing “library programming that meets the needs of young adults.” By “needs,” YALSA is, in part, referring to the 40 Developmental Assets for Adolescents Ages 12–18, as developed by the Search Institute, a non-profit, non-sectarian organization that promotes research on the needs of young people and develops programs to help youth succeed (see www.search-institute.org). The American Library Association encourages all of its member libraries to use the 40 Developmental Assets as a guideline for creating programs, special spaces within library buildings, and collections of library materials for teens (see http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/yalsa/profdev/programmingyoung.cfm).

So, how do our programs at Culpeper County Library match up with the Assets? To find out, let’s look at some of the needs of adolescents that we are trying to satisfy with our teen gatherings. The following list, selected directly from the 40 Developmental Assets (see http://www.search-institute.org/content/40-developmental-assets-adolescents-ages-12-18) are the ones we focus on:

1. Support:
   • Other Adult Relationships: Young person receives support from three or more nonparent adults

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2. Empowerment:
   • Community values youth: Young person perceives that adults in the community value youth.
   • Safety: Young person feels safe at home, school, and in the neighborhood.
3. Boundaries and expectations:
   • Adult Role Models: Parents and other adults model positive, responsible behavior
4. Constructive use of time:
   • Creative activities: Young person spends three or more hours per week in lessons or practice in music, theater or other arts
5. Commitment to Learning:
   • Reading for Pleasure: Young person reads for pleasure three or more hours per week
6. Social Competencies:
   • Interpersonal Competence: Young person has empathy, sensitivity and friendship skills
7. Positive Identity:
   • Self Esteem: Young person reports having a high self esteem

Each young adult program at the library fulfills at least three of these assets. When teens attend any library sponsored event, they are welcomed into an environment in which they feel safe, encouraged to enhance friendship skills, and given clear boundaries and expectations by event leaders. Recently, we actually asked teens participating in programs at the Culpeper County Library if we were in fact meeting these needs for them.

The seven teens who regularly attend our Random Writers group were asked to complete surveys. Most teens attending this particular program come to share writing they have done outside of the group with other teens for feedback, though some attend just to listen to the writing their peers read aloud. On the completed surveys, program attendees indicated that they feel supported by the library staff member who runs the group (Asset 1), that attending the group encourages them to produce more writing (Asset 4), that they check out books more when they come to the library to attend such a program (Asset 5), that their understanding of interpersonal relationships is improved by the nature of the meetings (Asset 6), and that their self esteem is improved by being a participant in the group (Asset 7). One teen chose to explain the way that library programs impact his life in his own words, in lieu of
completing a survey. He wrote the following passage:

She [the coordinator of Young Adult Programs] is supportive and kind in her endeavors. I believe that she places a high value on people of all ages. The programs she runs provide a caring, joyful place to meet with others of my own age and temperament to discuss and improve upon various social, analytic, and creative skills. They provide a safe environment where adolescents can grow and be motivated to learn and have new experiences.

The feedback provided by our teens, via surveys and written input, is encouraging. Here it should be clarified that one need not start a young writer’s group in order to offer teens such rewarding and assets-based experiences. Programs such as Anime Night, Book Talking, and Game Night are also valuable. When surveyed, eleven teens attending an Anime Night program at Culpeper County Library “strongly agreed” that assets one, five, six, and seven were being fulfilled for them. All of the teens strongly agreed that the adult who coordinates teen events creates an environment where new people feel welcome and participants are considerate of one another's feelings. There were some interesting anonymous comments written on the surveys, such as these remarks about our Anime Night programs:

- It [Anime Night] makes me want to talk to others.
- It makes me feel like I can express my opinion without being judged.
- It keeps me preoccupied and gives me something to think about for the month until next time.
- I don’t interact much or at all with other people unless it’s over a computer.

Let the fun begin! Culpeper youth enjoy a variety of activities that target some of the 40 Developmental Assets described by Search Institute.
• It’s an open group, and it’s a lot of fun to be with other Otakus!

The comment regarding not interacting much “at all with other people unless it’s over a computer” was interesting because all of the teens in attendance did interact on some level, and because it brings to light the idea that an event requiring less interpersonal communication than most programs do might fulfill a very specific social need.

One of the “assets” our library staff consider especially important is empowering youth. Offering teens the opportunity to participate in the planning process is a wonderful way to help boost self esteem and encourage a buy-in to future programs. Most teens, when offered ideas and choices, will actually choose or invent situations in which they will feel empowered, creative and safe.

At a recent planning meeting for 2010 Teen Summer Programs at the Culpeper County Library, 15 teens were given a list of possible programs to choose from. The programs included Game Lounge, Improv Night, Halloween in June, Anime Night, Pen and Paper Role Playing (specifically Mouse Guard) among others. After looking through the list, the teens began to brainstorm, in itself evidence of the creativity they possess and want to apply, and came up with Space Café.

What exactly is Space Café? The teens at the planning meeting combined the suggested events, Paper and Pencil Role Playing and Halloween in June, and invented the Space Café. They want an event where they can come in costume and eat sweets. They also want to create characters for themselves and confront challenges while in character, in the same way they would in a role playing game. Thus, Space Café will be an LARP (Live Action Role Playing) event.

Teens can begin participating in the Café now by creating characters, in this case aliens, and home planets. Once they have created characters online, the teens can participate in the Space Café Forum, which is a bit like Facebook for aliens. The best thing about the forum is that the kids are doing a lot of creative writing there. They have even created their own Wiki pages about the history of their planets.

The actual LARP event will take place on Saturday, June 26th. All those who wish to participate must contact the Culpeper County Library Youth Services Department by June 21st.

In June, we will transform the Library’s Meeting Room into an intergalactic meeting place for the teens who are currently creating characters online at http://www.obsidianportal.com/campaigns/space-cafe. There will of course be plenty of alien food (cake and candy) and all teens present will be dressed in costumes as the aliens they are representing. There will be at least two GMs (Game Masters) present to give teens the opportunity to be challenged while in character. Will this program support the assets? Look them over again and judge for yourself. I say, you betcha! Are libraries across Virginia running assets-driven programs for young adults? Visit your local library and find out. I’d venture you’ll discover the answer is another resounding “yes!”

Notes