

Interview: Rhonnel Sotelo, The Stuart Foundation

By: Ingrid Hu Dahl

Published: October 27, 2010

Category: [Interviews](#)

About The Stuart Foundation

The Stuart Foundation, located in San Francisco, Calif., is dedicated to the protection, education and development of children and youth and works to ensure that all children grow up in caring families, learn in vibrant and effective schools, and have opportunities to become productive members of their communities. The foundation focuses its investments in California and Washington.

The Foundation partners with selected organizations that:

- develop and disseminate innovative programs and practices
- contribute to effective public policy to improve conditions for children and youth (I don't understand this point.
- support and develop the potential of young people

In turn, the Stuart Foundation dedicates time, money, expertise and advocacy to each partnership. Many of their partnerships are long-term, and some have spanned over a decade of successful collaboration.

comments

[Comment on this article.](#)



About Rhonnel Sotelo

Rhonnel Sotelo oversees implementation of grantmaking strategy, directs the management of the foundation's grants, and oversees all of the Foundation's daily operations. Rhonnel also continues to direct the foundation's initiatives for community schools and youth development.

Prior to joining the Stuart Foundation, his nearly two decades of experience included directing The San Francisco Foundation's West Oakland Initiative and Multicultural Fellowship Program, and owning and operating Urban Works in Seattle. Trained as an urban planner, Rhonnel focused the firm's community planning and design work to assist neighborhoods, nonprofits, and small towns on livable communities in the Pacific Northwest and California.

Rhonnel holds a Master of Arts in Urban Planning and a Bachelor of Arts in English, both from the University of California, Los Angeles. He is a member of The San Francisco Foundation's Koshland Committee for Civic Unity, sits on the Advisory Board of the Center for Effective Philanthropy's Youth Truth Project, and has served on several committees and task forces for the National Coalition for Community Schools. He lives in Oakland, Calif. with his wife, Chris, and their two daughters, Quin and Kate.

YMR: What has your experience been at The Stuart Foundation with investing in youth media / youth development programs?

Rhonnel Sotelo: It has been powerful and extremely influential in how we have shaped the Foundation's overall strategy. Our board and staff have had the distinct honor of experiencing firsthand the transformative power of experiential and project-based learning, which has been most exemplified by our work in youth media.

In many ways, it has taught us the importance of having the principles of youth development present in lives of children and youth in their classrooms, home life, and communities. When you look at our schools and neighborhoods throughout the country, it is very clear that the engagement of young people precedes any conversation we have about their achievement. Youth development has a role to play in public education, neighborhood revitalization, and community health. These 21 “Promise Neighborhoods” that just received grants from the United States Department of Education need to make it a central piece of their planning efforts.

YMR: From your point of view, what does the funding landscape look like? What are investors interested in and what overall trends do you see?

Sotelo: For the better part of this decade, the Stuart Foundation has provided a great deal of support for the field of youth development. Since 2003, the Foundation has made more than 180 grants totaling nearly \$15 million in support of youth media, college success, and experiential-learning opportunities.

Since the adoption of our strategic plan in 2008, the Foundation has gradually decreased its funding to a select few organizations in youth development. We continue to fund in the field because we believe it has a great deal of knowledge to impart on our nation’s public education systems.

Youth development funders are changing course and now funding public education—a recent pendulum shift by the greater funding community.

YMR: From your point of view, why or why aren’t funders interested in investing dollars in youth media?

Sotelo: Results—that goes both ways. The most ardent youth development funders know and value the impact of youth-media programs—strong, caring relationship with adults and peers, pathways to career and life success, power of youth voice, more positive social norms, and meeting high expectations. They are comfortable with the type of impact youth media programs create and celebrate them.

Those who are more skeptical require more outcomes. They need to understand the contribution, or more unrealistically the attribution, of program service delivery on the youth they serve. Some might want results to impact education or community development that likely are one or two degrees of separation from program purposes. The youth-media field, as a whole, needs to strategically communicate its value and power on meeting the needs of young people.

YMR: What recommendations do you have for practitioners/educators in the field who seek new investors and new stakeholders, outside those that already support youth development/youth media?

Sotelo: Owning your outcomes and results are key. This comes in multiple forms. It could be through rigorous program evaluation. It could be through quality strategic communications. It could be through strong articulation of mission, vision, and values by an organization’s board, staff, and students.

Continuing to seek partnerships, collaborations, and influence in other fields such as public education, health, foster care, and community development are also critical for youth development and youth-media organizations. The opportunity is there today to make in-roads through efforts such as community schools, choice neighborhoods, and promise neighborhood efforts.

FACT: Youth media has important institutional knowledge that has implications for other fields.

ACTION: Partner to share knowledge. Public education is one area that could benefit youth media partnerships.

FACT: Youth media has value and power to meet the needs of young people.

ACTION: Communicate this widely as a field and individually.

FACT: Youth media organizations tend to be self-centered.

For example, the Youth Speak! Collective, a digital media arts and multidiscipline youth development organization in Los Angeles, is a key organization in a community schools collaborative in the City's Pacoima neighborhood. Youth Speak! Collective not only provides outstanding services to the most disengaged youth, its Executive Director plays a central role in the leadership of the collaborative.

ACTION: Encourage funders to support conventions, capacity building, networking, and research for the field as well as communicate the value of youth media with other grantmakers.

Similarly, Reel Grrls in Seattle has done an amazing job of building and growing their organization by partnering with other nonprofits, local schools, and county agencies. Through these partnerships, they are able to provide real-world experiences and client projects for their students.

One final word of advice—utilize your existing funders for field-focused support beyond grant. Some of the ways funders can support these efforts are sponsoring convenings, research, and/or making introduction to other funders