

Newsday

March 2, 2008 Sunday
NASSAU AND SUFFOLK EDITION

GENERATION NEXT; LI's YOUNG CIVIL RIGHTS ACTIVISTS PUSH FOR LOCAL AND GLOBAL CHANGE

By Dave Marcus

From the halls of the Nassau County Legislature to church soup kitchens on the North Fork, a new generation of activists is rising.

They push for affordable housing and livable downtowns. They confront leaders of street gangs. They organize immigrant workers and fight open-air dumps.

Although activists of their grandparents' generation integrated schools and lunch counters, these young leaders are busy lobbying politicians, analyzing data and writing economic-impact reports. They are more likely to carry BlackBerrys than protest signs.

Tawaun Whitty is one of the new activists. Since high school, she has been trying to improve the quality of life in her Brookhaven community, Gordon Heights, by bringing in jobs and stores while keeping criminals out. Now, at 28, she mediates among Gordon Heights residents, developers and planners, many of them twice her age.

"Back in the 1950s and '60s, activists fought for major causes like justice," Whitty said recently between meetings in Gordon Heights. "Now, I think, we're fighting more for the intricate details of these causes."

Eddie Bergman, 27, is an activist whose reach stretches thousands of miles. As a junior at Northport High School, he showed his zeal for community service by building houses in Nicaragua. He then found his entrepreneurial side when he started a DJ company. He blends that and his other passion - running a nonprofit group, Miracle Corners of the World, that has raised about \$2 million in seed money to encourage mechanics, farmers and others in Africa to start their own businesses.

As a refugee in war-ravaged Rwanda, Jacqueline Murekatete, 23, took a different route: An uncle in Queens adopted her after a wave of genocide killed the other eight members of her immediate family. By her first semester at Stony Brook University, she was crisscrossing the country to tell her story.

Audiences were fascinated by the way Murekatete wove her personal story with messages of tolerance.

"I'm definitely glad I've been given this opportunity to speak out, without fearing any type of retribution," Murekatete said recently, after keeping an audience of teenagers on the edge of their seats at Calhoun High School in Merrick. Still, that's not enough. She's applying to law school to specialize in human rights law because she wants to change policy, not just people.

Fighting for the details

Although Martin Luther King Jr. and her other heroes pursued equality, Whitty spends much of her time trying to ensure that convicted sex offenders aren't dumped in Gordon Heights. After combing through data, Whitty and other residents confirmed their suspicion that their community has a disproportionate number of sex offenders. After attracting the attention of newspapers and TV programs, they have joined politicians to draw up legislation limiting the number of offenders.

When asked what makes her proud, she talks about working with Rep. Tim Bishop (D-Southampton) to land nearly \$500,000 in federal money for sidewalks to improve the look of blocks and keep children from getting hit by cars.

These activists come in all stripes, from all backgrounds. Although they don't claim to be colorblind, they do move easily between different ethnic groups. Whitty is African-American and a third-generation Long Island resident. Murekatete bridges two continents. Bergman is white and Jewish, the grandson of Holocaust survivors. He was recently appointed executive director of the Africa Travel Association, which promotes tourism to create jobs.

"I could fear being young, being the wrong color, having the wrong religion, or focusing internationally when there are so many problems locally," Bergman said. But he quickly added, "At the end of the day, you can let fear eat you up or you can do your best to make a difference."

In his early 20s and newly graduated from New York University, Bergman worked with the UN Mission in Sierra Leone to persuade international

peacekeepers to build community centers. Then he connected donors and faraway activists to open three community centers and a health clinic in Africa. Then he sent dentists and other health workers to help in Africa.

Like many 20-something activists, Bergman worries about what he sees as an economic crisis that is destroying America's working class. For the past 10 years, he has run a youth leadership training program that joins inner-city residents with young people from Long Island and other suburbs. They spend a week discussing how best to tackle homelessness, poverty and other problems.

New causes, new means

Many of the activists rely on relatively new technology to put pressure on public officials. Maurice Mitchell, 28, the lead organizer for the Long Island Progressive Coalition, used e-mail blasts to get voters to pressure New York State legislators to change the funding formula for public schools statewide. It took years, but now poorer school districts receive more money.

Mitchell also has rallied to keep toxic waste out of poor neighborhoods. He's interested in what he sees as a new front for 21st century activists: environmental justice.

Sergio Argueta, 29, is a former gang member in Hempstead. By age 16, he had been arrested three times. When a friend was killed and two others went to prison, Argueta took steps to turn his life around. He graduated from high school and enrolled in college, eventually becoming president of the student government at Nassau Community College.

Now, as head of a Nassau anti-gang group called Strong, he sees himself as a citizen vigilante. For example, he speaks proudly about the time former State Sen. Michael Balboni, a Republican from East Williston, held a news conference to demand harsher penalties for crimes. Argueta's demonstrators interrupted, demanding job training programs.

Other activists don't want to be agitators; they want access to the halls of power.

In 1979, at age 5, Marianela Jordan came to Freeport as a refugee from the Dominican Republic, where her family's home and restaurant had been destroyed by a hurricane. Now 33, Jordan is a close adviser to Nassau County Executive Thomas Suozzi; she runs the county's office that helps Latinos.

"When I was given the opportunity to become educated here, I wanted to give back," said Jordan, who earned her bachelor's degree at the University of Virginia.

Even as they talk about giving back, Long Island's young activists worry that the best among them will leave because of the shortage of high-paying jobs and affordable housing.

Whitty holds seminars to teach homeowners how to stretch their budgets so they can pay mortgages when interest rates rise. Yet she confesses that she can barely afford to live in the place she loves.

If she does relocate someday, Whitty said she'll leave a legacy: young men and women dedicated to making Gordon Heights a better place.