

# Learnings from YLI Alumni Conversations

During June and July 2019, eight alumni from the Youth Leadership Initiative (YLI) agreed to discuss the long-term impacts of their participation in YLI with Wilder Research staff. Alumni who participated in a focus group (four participants) or an individual phone interview (four participants) were asked questions about their overall experience with YLI, skills they gained while in YLI and how they currently apply those skills, and views on their own leadership development. This is not an evaluation of the program, but a pilot of potential approaches to gather feedback from alumni about the long-term benefits of the program. It should be noted that this summary describes the experiences of a small sample of YLI alumni and the learnings from these conversations cannot be generalized for all other alumni. Below is a summary of the main learnings from the focus group and interviews.

## About the alumni

- Alumni were involved with YLI for at least 1 and up to 3 years; six were involved with YLI for multiple years
- Two of the eight alumni were youth mentors in the program
- All participated as high school students

## What have alumni have been up to since leaving YLI?

Multiple alumni spoke about the influence of YLI on their future choices. Some said what they learned in YLI motivated them to study social work so they could continue to support communities. Others have focused on policy advocacy because of their work in YLI action groups. Alumni have used their positions in communities and organizations to spread some of the YLI values (e.g., empathy, deep listening, helping the community, speaking up for your beliefs) and try to promote what they learned while in YLI.

- **All eight** alumni attended college after high school and **six** of them graduated with degrees in social work, education, and human relations. Two alumni did not finish their degrees.
- **One** will begin the EMS Academy
- **One** started a freelance business
- Alumni are working in various fields including social work, education, fashion and make-up, and nonprofit social services

- All of the alumni have been a part of other leadership programs or have taken formal and volunteer roles with organizations like Penumbra, Multicultural Achievers, Boys and Girls Club, student body leadership positions, election judge, Big Brothers Big Sisters, Hmong American Partnership, Asian Women Association, College Possible, Hands Across the World, McNair Research Scholars, Upward Bound, and Liberian Student Association

## What skills did they learn while in YLI and how do they use them now?

Alumni shared that they developed many skills while in YLI that have helped them as students and working professionals. They have used these skills when doing policy advocacy, working with children in schools, and as college students doing team projects. One respondent commented that while she learned these same skills in other settings, YLI set the foundation for her to develop in these areas. Some of the skills they developed are related to:

- **Communication** – They are able to better articulate their ideas and have become better listeners. Some spoke about being “aggressive” with others before joining YLI, but they now have the skills to communicate without becoming angry or frustrated.
- **Empathy** – They are able to connect with people and build understanding with others even if they come from different backgrounds and perspectives. Some said they have become more patient with themselves and people they work with.
- **Developing action plans** – They are more methodical and intentional in their actions and are able to create realistic and achievable action plans. This applies to taking action in the community around an issue and creating their own life plans.
- **Teamwork and collaboration** – They understand their own leadership and work style and are able to bring those strengths to group work. Some have learned how to “step back” and support others to lead. They are better able to practice conflict resolution skills than before being in YLI.

*“I definitely gained patience. A lot and a lot and a lot of patience. When I first entered, I was very out there, but I’m still very out there as a person, but I am able to be more patient with people.”*

*“Since YLI, now I understand and tell the kids, ‘Just because you have a little voice, doesn’t mean that you don’t matter. Just because you are a kid, your voice does matter. Tell people I think that this is wrong. Don’t ever let somebody shadow what you think, or let somebody bring your voice down.’ That’s what I learned in YLI: the smallest person can make the biggest impact.”*

*“In classes I learned to be really observant and listen as well. When I am in class, I try to get everything in. For social work classes, we talk about a lot of issues in the community. So if hear and we are talking about like white privilege, I usually raise my hand and talk about my experience. I’m more vocal when I feel I should be, when there is something on my heart that I need to talk about. But sometimes, I also like to sit back and let other people talk, so I can learn about them and what they have been through. So I usually step up and step down to hear other people opinions about a topic that we are talking about in class.”*

## In what ways did their time in YLI impact them?

All alumni shared the lasting impact of their experience with YLI has had on their lives. Some common themes related their personal growth and feeling more connected to themselves and others.

- **Self-realization** – Alumni spoke about not feeling confident or having self-love before YLI. After participating in the program, even after just one year, they have more confidence and believe they can accomplish what they put their minds to. Some shared that YLI was the first place in which they felt acknowledged and validated by an adult. They now speak up for themselves and others and are willing to try new things. One participant spoke about her new self-love and ability to forgive herself for past mistakes. There is a stronger sense of valuing themselves and advocating for what they want.
- **Deeper connections** – Many alumni shared that they have a deeper connection to their own culture and appreciation for other cultures and experiences. This was the first time for many of them to critically examine their own culture and build their own understanding of their history. The activities in YLI helped them reflect on their own identities and how they view themselves. Some shared that their world view was so limited and isolated before YLI. Now, they feel that their world is expanded and accessible to them.

*“It made me unhappy about myself. YLI opened my eyes to Hmong culture. It has been an ongoing journey of self-creation. I don’t know where I will end up. Whatever path it is, will be a wonderful. I am a good person even if I make mistakes.”*

*“Being able to explore the intersectionality between all of it. YLI provides the space for you to do that. In your daily life you are always put in a box. Even within your own culture you are put into a box. With YLI you were allowed to move around and more fluid and comfortable and it was like ‘wow, this is the first time I’m able to do this’.”*

*“My biggest takeaway was the understanding of self. I was so young. I didn’t really know as much about myself as I thought I did, which is kind of weird when you think about it. It gave me a Lot of self-realization of what I know or don’t know. What I am good or not good at and what I am passionate about [or] not passionate about.”*

## How do alumni describe themselves as leaders?

Most believe that there is no single definition of what it means to be a leader and that leaders can come in all forms. Leadership has become a part of many of their identities and they bring their own values into everything that they do. One alumnus said it is difficult to separate being a leader from her other identities; it is fully integrated into who she is today. Some ways alumni described being a leader are:

- **Being grounded in yourself** – A leader is someone who understands and trusts themselves. This way they are able to speak up and do what is right. Some alumni believe that creating a path for themselves is part of being a leader.
- **Acting on their passion** – Leaders can find their passion and act on what they want to accomplish. They are able to take issues that are meaningful and do something to make the world better.
- **Service to others** – Many alumni see themselves as leaders by helping others. A leader to them is to never leave others behind, but help them get to where they want to be. Leaders also do not control others, instead they guide them and act as resources. One alumnus believes that being a role model is being a leader to younger generations.

*“Leadership is somebody who has been through something and right by your side and guiding you through. A leader could be anybody... It is not telling you what to do, but is right there by your side if you have any questions and they are guiding you through that—so that’s a leader. It is somebody who is willing to listen and give you feedback, and be there with you through your journey. Anybody can be a leader.”*

*“Creating a path for yourself. Leadership for me is being the best follower since being a leader is still scary. It’s about being grounded as a person and being authentic with myself and being okay with that. Being able to voice what I think even if others think differently.”*

*“I think leadership is all about passion. Whatever you are doing, if you don’t have the heart for it, then you won’t go for it, because it obviously isn’t something you truly care about. My big takeaway from YLI: It is not about being verbal or being the most outstanding person. It’s about the person who really truly cares and is willing to take their time to work for it, or to give time for it.”*

## What aspects of YLI were particularly meaningful to them?

Alumni spoke about the impact of the YLI staff approach in working with them as youth.

- They shared their appreciation for being **pushed out of their “comfort zones”** through all the activities. At the time they felt challenged and nervous about some activities and conversations they had while in YLI, but now they can understand why it was important to be tested.
- For many of them, **YLI adult staff were the first adults who supported them to be their own leaders** and believed in their ability to achieve whatever they wanted to do. They loved having youth be the leaders and having youth mentors was particularly meaningful to them. It felt like “a place where adults didn’t take over,” which was a new experience for many of them.
- **Particular activities** that had a lasting impression on them were: simulations like the Underground Railroad, action groups, retreats and debriefing them together, culture days, connecting with an adult in their own community, and games like “Birdy in the Perch.”
- Having **resources to participate** like transportation and food were crucial to some of them being in YLI. Without those resources, they did not think they could have done the program.

All alumni said they would recommend YLI to other youth and think the program should be expanded so more people can participate. A few even suggested that high schools offer a course like YLI. Some alumni wish there was an adult version of YLI so they could continue their professional development in a similar setting with other peers.

*“Now we finally had a voice. As children we did not have a voice at all. Having that space. Now, an adult, sat through it and acknowledged it. It made me feel that I’m not crazy, and it was liberating. I found the power in my voice and was not afraid to speak up about it. I learned that the most important thing I can do, was to speak up for myself and to speak up for other people.”*

*“I felt like having the kids lead. I never had somewhere I went and the kids had so much voice. Because a lot of times, adults would be like, ‘Oh, you are a child. You really don’t understand.’ YLI gave us the voice that ‘You are the youth, so you really actually understand because you are in the community and you know what is really happening.’ So I really felt happy that I got the voice back and I can share what my thought is. A lot of adults would be like ‘You don’t understand,’ and my voice got much more smaller. But when I entered YLI my voice became louder and I started to speak out in things that I believed was wrong. That’s why I decided to be a social worker, because of YLI and what I did.”*

## What challenges did alumni experience?

A common theme alumni shared was around the challenge of applying what they learned in the program to contexts outside of YLI. Being in YLI felt like a safe space where they were seen as leaders and worked with peers learning the same concepts as them. When alumni leave the program, they encounter people and situations that challenge the concepts and skills that they learned in YLI. This led to difficult conversations for alumni with family members, co-workers, and other students about social justice, equity, and community needs and strengths. While this challenged alumni, they were still able to practice their listening and conflict resolution skills that they learned. A few alumni also spoke about having many other responsibilities outside of YLI. The program became a place for them to just be themselves and have the same level of responsibility as other YLI participants. They were all considered equal while in the program.

*“When I first did the program, that transition time when I go home or go to school. Once I leave, everything I learned just stays here. The roles and responsibility that I have at home are different than what I get to do here at YLI. I know that when I get home, I have to cook dinner, secondary parent to my siblings. When at YLI we are all on an equal playing field. The expectations are all the same for us.”*

*“After you leave a space to get all this information, it’s hard to leave and be in a new space and use these new skills around people who didn’t have these experiences.”*

*“Other people not going through YLI, like having an open mind and they still have narrow points of view. Going home you realize that just because I am in YLI, the world has not changed which is the reality...When I was in YLI I would argue with my dad about social justice things. He didn't think we could do anything, just stay at home and that was the messaging we got growing up. For me those were the barriers and we still encounter them.”*

## How do YLI alumni stay connected to each other?

Most alumni shared that they continue to connect with each other over social media, calling these “loose connections.” A few alumni have closer friends or relationships with others who did YLI with them. Some of them still meet and talk with YLI staff, and consider them to be mentors. Even if they do not speak to each other for years, alumni said they still feel an instant connection with one another when they do see each other. They describe this feeling like “family reunions.” Some said they know that they have support from other YLI participants, even if they do not talk regularly. They believe this is because YLI activities supported authentic relationships and that they built friendships in YLI that they could not in school.

All of the alumni expressed a desire for alumni reunions and other structured ways to re-connect with each other. They enjoy getting updates about each other on social media, but would like to meet in person as well. A few suggested having alumni meet with new mentors to provide support and answer questions for those currently in the program.

*“Loose connections but I know that these people are here. I know that I can reach out to Nou and it will still be that same relationships. That just shows how solid everything was here. You don't have to keep up with everyone, but you know that they are here when you need them. Even mentors I had back then will still come up and give me hugs. The connection is still there though.”*

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