

Diana Manee
Youth Empowered Solutions

I am the Real Food Active Living Program Coordinator, North Carolina Youth Network Manager and I have been here four years this month [August, 2014]. I was born here in Asheville. I have an undergrad degree from UNC Asheville and a Master's degree from UNC Charlotte in Public Health. Before this job I worked at a health department in the western part of the state. I was the coordinator for a youth tobacco prevention grant, and that's how I met Youth Empowered Solutions! (YES!). They were a technical assistance provider of ours so I got to meet some of the folks through that and it was kind of similar work in that I was working directly with youth. And I think what drew me to this job was getting to the root causes issue. I feel like YES! is one of the only organizations that I've found that really doesn't do direct services. It's not about what happens in the next five days; it's about what happens a year from now based on the trainings that we give so I was really drawn to that. And I've always loved youth. I've always loved high school.

We work in partnership with youth. We hire high school age youth on as staff members and they work along side of us. We do quite a lot of training and work with them so that they are feeling really comfortable, and we work with them to do policy work. So we change communities based on policies and environment system changes, but the youth play a huge role in that because they are equal partners as staff members. At this office we have four youth. The Charlotte office has four and our Raleigh office has ten. We are a statewide organization but we work nationally; two of our staff members were at the White House yesterday. We're a different nonprofit in that we do write for

grants to fund some of the work that we do, but we also contract with folks for either consulting services or training services or a mixture of both.

I have a really hard time when I talk to people about Asheville because they're like "It seems so great and so liberal and there seem to be so many different kinds of people there and so many opportunities" and I'm like "None of those things are true". I'm like "We don't have tons of different kinds of people here." I mean we do but they're not equal. We have them but it's very clear who makes the decisions, and we portray ourselves as this super green city, but our public transportation system needs so much work, and our recycling needs so much work, and how we trash things needs so much work, and how we produce and sell food needs so much work. The people that are directly impacted by that are not being heard. I just want there to be a little bit of a power shift because I feel like the people who need to be heard are not given ways to do that. But, the hard part again is where does the money come from for that? Because people don't understand. When we're trying to talk about our work and the work that we do, people are like "Oh so you teach leadership skills?" and I'm like "We do but my end result is not that my youth are leaders. That's awesome and I hope it happens, and I work towards that, but that's not why I'm getting paid. I'm getting paid because my youth have affected their community, have created some sort of change." But people really just want to fund "Oh but are they learning public speaking skills?" They are. Not the point but they totally are.

I love the mentality that the youth are paid employees. They're not just part of the work, they are the work. They're the foundation of the work and they are integral in all of the committees and they sit on the Board. Pretty much the only thing we do without the

youth is write grants, but the direction that we are going with those grants is directed by them. We have discussions with them like “Okay what’s the next big thing? What do we need to be working in?”

I have always been a “so what?” kind of person. It’s hard for me to donate to certain causes or give time to certain places because I feel like it’s just a Band-Aid, and I totally understand why that’s needed because people are in need right now, but it’s hard for me to spend an hour volunteering when an hour spent somewhere else, like changing policy, really affects a huge number of people and so I just prefer to put that time in there. I feel like a lot of people understand those immediate needs and they’re very marketable and it’s very easy to get funding in grant dollars for that kind of thing- like the clothes and the sandwiches and the hot meals. And while those are totally needed, it’s really hard to get dollars to do grassroots organizing and those are the things that change communities for years and affect hundreds of thousands of people.

We are working towards getting the youth council started in Buncombe County. We have a lot of awesome programs for youth in Buncombe County, but they’re like service learning or volunteer programs. Those are great but there’s not really a great way for the youth to have a voice in the work that’s being done and the work that’s directly affecting them. I want the youth that I work with to feel very valued and to understand their role and to feel like they have had an effect in the community. I want to make it so they really are understanding the role that they played and the work that they did, and feeling really like they had control over that and that they participated actively in that; that they can see they’re important.

My mom was a stay at home mom when we were younger and then worked part time when we were in school. She's a very strong feminist, and in the way that I believe in feminism, in that it's about your choices and you should be able to choose whatever you want. Honestly all of my coworkers here at YES! are influential. I've learned a lot from the people I work with here, and I constantly feel a little like I need to step up my game. I've been really blessed. They're strangely mostly women and I don't know why that is because it doesn't seem like it should be like that, but I've met a lot of really strong women. And then my husband is so great. He thinks about everyone's feelings before he speaks. And I am not like that. I'm like "This is what I think, and I think it right now, and I'm going to tell you because it came to the top of my head".

We are working currently to put healthy food in a corner store here in town that is in a great location. It's in a community where a lot of folks walk. It's within walking distance to two of our public housing communities, and it's in an area where there aren't grocery stores other than Earth Fare. That's like a Whole Foods so it's not a place that a lot of folks are able to go to or even would feel culturally accepted walking into probably. I talked to the youth and said "Okay, what should we work on next?" We had been talking about the work that's being done in the state with the corner stores and talked about several other things, and they really liked the corner store idea because a lot of the time youth are the folks who are buying things at those stores. Because a lot of our youth do live in those communities that have transportation issues, they aren't next to a grocery store.

A lot of times people talk about “Well why can’t people just go to Sam’s and buy a bunch of healthy food?” Well nobody has \$80 to spend at once for food, they have \$20 to spend for food and so there’s a different sort of selection criteria when you’re doing it.

It’s something that affects youth directly because they are the ones eating those foods that are purchased there, and a lot of the time they’re the ones purchasing foods there. It’s sort of a matter of necessity over it being “Kids don’t like eating healthy foods”. But what are their choices? Especially when you’re talking about dollars. People are like “We don’t want to stock apples because kids only want to buy chips”, and it’s like here are these people saying “No no, me and my friends, we do not only want to buy chips.” That’s really helpful- having the people you are hoping to affect in the room and at the decision making table.

Hopefully at the state level there will be some work being done that helps those foods being offered to be at least competitive prices with the junk foods, you know? Even just like taxes, or can there be some sort of incentive for these big ad companies to support it? Refrigeration is a big concern because these places have refrigeration units but you can’t put lettuce in a cooler that’s made for soda because it doesn’t last. It’s a different pressure and different temperature and so you can’t carry those things if you don’t have the place to carry them. So is there a way that we can team private partnerships up with the youth folks to help them get some of that storage or signage? Like if Pepsi pays you to put their clock in there why can’t Dole pay you to put their clock in there? I know everyone’s always like “People just want to eat junk food.” Yeah, but it’s being pushed in your face. If we were marketing healthy food the same amount,

how do we know that people would choose the donut? I don't know that we would all the time.

We prioritized and tried to pick the corner stores we felt like were in communities of greatest need, and sent out some letters and made a bunch of phone calls and quietly, patiently waited. It's a hard sell. I mean people don't want to do it. Plus a lot of the time it's our youth making the phone calls. And when you bring youth places, people listen because you can't say no to a child; but when a youth is on the phone you can hang up on them really easily. So we learned a lot of lessons that way. And we were so lucky. The one woman that we are working with now has been awesome. As soon as we sent out the letter she was like "I read your letter I want to do it." She said she had done some work in the 90's but it wasn't really well received, but she was like "It's a totally different era- I really want to try it". And we were coming to her from the view of "We know you have to make money. We're not trying to put you out of business. You don't run a charity service. We want you to make money off of this, but we also want you to now play an active role in your community." We did an evaluation of the store- kind of like what she already had and where it was. She was already offering some healthy options, which is cool, but they were kind of spread out and there was no labeling or anything like that. It was kind of hidden between the Pepsi's and stuff. We are working with her to carry some fresh fruits and vegetables and I think she's going to start small. I think she's going to do apples and bananas because they're the most popular ones, and then potatoes and onions. She said she's going to try tomatoes because she says people want them. I think they go bad so fast, but maybe. And then she has some canned goods and some dairy. We were able to talk with her about maybe moving some stuff around so we've been doing some

redesigning there. The store owner is ready to go and wants to do it. She's going to put this glass case by her door that candy bars are in, and she's going to put the baskets of fruit right on top and I'm like "Yes, let's cover those candy bars up!" I love a good candy bar, but if an apple is closer and equally priced I'll be like "Fine I'll just get the apple." Right now we are in the process of waiting for her to put a couple things in the store, but we're waiting on some baskets for her to unveil the new thing and we're going to do some media follow-up. We'll have the youth write a letter to the editor and the community that she's in has a newsletter so we're going to put something in there so that folks know. We want to support her in any way we can.

We also did some surveys with her customers and asked specifically what it is that they wanted. One of the main things people said they wanted was sandwiches and wraps- stuff they could get on the go. There is an organization here called Green Opportunities. They help do some job training and help folks get different jobs, and as part of that they've got a big food security grant. So they've started a kitchen where they take produce from the community gardens around here, and then they refurbish it into sandwiches and salads and that kind of thing. So we're hopefully going to link the two of them so the storeowner can stock some of that locally sourced healthy food.

We worked with another partner through the Community Transformation Grant funds, and they were able to buy some signage. Those funds were since taken away, but the people who were doing it were really helpful. We were lucky to have some signage and some baskets purchased through them before it got taken away. They were great and they were like "'Tell us what you want.'"

And then we looked for additional funding. We've worked with the folks in other regions and they've been really supportive and helpful which is why we applied for the dollars through the AFP grant. We were like "We already have some groups of people who want to get this work started but don't have the capacity, and we can help them." When the grant came out, I was like "We're already doing corner stores but we want to do so much bigger and more, we need dollars to support that". I ran it by the YES! financial folks and they were like "Let's do it!" And that's what the grant was, an enhancement grant. Dollars specifically for people who were already at least starting to get the work done and already had some sort of partnerships, because it's not a lot of dollars. It's I think six grand.

We received the Appalachian Foodshed Project Enhancement Grant in May [2014], which is awesome and that's going to help us continue our work here in Buncombe, but then also spread the work. We'll try to get some additional youth and adult partner groups working on this in other western communities in the state. Those dollars allow us to provide the training to other groups for free and also to spend some time on a toolkit on how to work with youth. The AFP is allowing us to broaden who we can provide services to. We can also do this so that we can say to our legislators, "Every single county in the west has a healthy corner store and would want more, like what? Help us. Like what now?"

We've also just recently started talking with another storeowner who own 8 or 10 stores, and they are going to let us start doing some surveying which is really awesome. But they're local companies. You can't get into the big chain stores. They're like "We don't have the ability to make that decision." So all that makes sense. We have to start

with the local people, so I think just them really understanding, “We’re not asking anything from you. We just want you to consider letting us in there to survey some people and then taking the survey results that we have seriously”. The in-store survey is from the Community Transformation Grant and then the Charlotte staff created the customer survey. We don’t want to ask a ton of questions. We wanted to know “Would you buy healthy foods, how much would you spend on them, what kinds would you like to see?” Most people are like, “But I like Pepsi”, and we’re like “No one’s telling you not to drink Pepsi, we’re saying if also some non sugar added apple juice was next to it would you sometimes pick the apple juice? And how much would you pay for it?”

It’s so cool to work with youth because we’ve been doing this project for about a year and a half, and that’s a long time to spend on something when you’re any age, but especially when you’re 16. But then when it happens and you’re like, “Oh my gosh. We spent a year and a half on this and it’s really happening!” They get so excited, and then you can’t help but get extra excited. Not that I wasn’t. I’m the same way. I mean I think having a store that over 80% of their traffic is foot traffic carry healthier options is pretty awesome. And just knowing that sign would not be there if it was not for us calling all these random people and starting to get frustrated because no one would call us back, but it was all worth it.

Those big wins do take a long time, but every time three years later something happens you’re like, “Oh my gosh, three years from now we could be blah blah blah” so that’s really great. And also I think when adults say, “Oh my gosh, your youth are amazing. Where do you get your youth?” that is very motivating to me. Because I say, “Yeah, well you know we spend a lot of time with them, but also all youth are really

amazing”. We joke about this “magic box.” Like there’s some sort of store that you can shop for something and the thing is they are amazing, amazing youth, but also everyone is an amazing someone. And so I think every time someone tells me, “Your youth are amazing” I’m like, “I’m going to keep doing this” because people need to see youth doing something other than knocking over a liquor store or cheating on their SAT’s or whatever else is in the news. There’s always stories about kids who give away their birthday gifts and say, “Donate to this charity instead” and that’s awesome too, but what about the youth that’s just plugging away and volunteering and going to band practice and making good grades? We never say anything about that, and they are just as amazing. Also just seeing when an adult has to step back because the youth have nicely, politely called them out in a meeting in a way that was totally justified: “Well actually I have been doing this for a year and a half” and I love those moments, because I feel like I’ve been the underdog a lot in my life and you want to see that happen.

Every time I meet with a storeowner I’m like, “Oh my God I know nothing about owning a store.” Because I want to go in there and be like, “No you can make 50%”, because some people are making 50% profit, but you have to think about sourcing. You have to think about “If I move the soda here will the soda guy get mad and stop paying me for something? And then I lose that money and so can I make up that money?” I’ve really learned so much, and still I probably know 2% of what it would take to own a store. We’ve been to so many healthy corner stores trainings and still do not know what it’s like to run a store. You do not know what it’s like to rely on that for your income. You don’t understand all of the contracts that go into carrying certain items, and so just realizing that that store owner is an expert. You are an expert in your thing, they are an

expert in their thing. You've got to figure out what your common ground is and then understand just that it really does take time. It's not as easy as like, "Oh you do want to carry healthy foods? Okay, why don't you put some apples here?" There is a whole process that has to come with finding out how much they can price that, and who's even going to go get those apples. Because usually you can't have things sourced unless you have a certain number of stores and you can carry a certain number of merchandise. Some folks are getting their apples at Aldi, and they can repurpose it and resell it. Some folks have been lucky to find some local sources. We're working with Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project because if we can get that one store owner who has 10 stores to do it then we'll have 11 places, so somebody could come here and drop off apples to 11 places that would be way better than 1 place.

It's really a hard sell to sell the long-term benefits. I keep getting frustrated about that. People are like, "It's tax dollars", but you're like, "Yeah it's tax dollars now, but diabetes, stroke, heart disease tax dollars later on are substantially higher than the tax dollars that you're not contributing to this thing right now. If you were able to just think through what preventative care is and what it does." But it's a really hard sell. And not just people but government; city government and county governments. They won't even talk to anybody about cutting taxes. That work is hard to do because it's going to be 5 or 10 years before anyone eating healthy food from that grocery store really affects anything. But it's like, "Yeah but the kid got an apple, isn't that great?" But you can't sell that. And again there are so many people that are in this area that are trying. There is a group of folks who are doing grassroots work here, and working on policy change and organizing and stuff like that, and there are so many good people who are trying to work

around preventative care. We get a lot of support and we're lucky for that. At least we get some good partners, and that's really helpful.

I'm always pulling information from my supervisor in Raleigh; like how can we align with state efforts, or how can we get support from this statewide organization. And the youth are just amazing help. Gosh, I wish you could just meet them. They're so smart and just have all of these talents that we do not think youth have. Some of them are because the program works, but some of them are because they are also human beings that unfortunately until they turn 18, we don't see them as that. We just see them as using their cell phones and walking around. It's like, "How often do you put your cell phone down as an adult?"

We have a youth in the Raleigh office and I'm so excited because she's going to go to UNC Asheville which means I can continue to work with her. She's the first one I ever heard say this, but I don't know if she heard it somewhere, but I'm sure she thought it up. She said, "People are always like we need to help youth find their voices" and she was like, "We have a voice, you're just not listening" and I appreciate that very much. People are always like, "They're our future leaders" and it's like, "No, no. Right now. Youth are not the future, they're here".

I want there to be healthier food options in every single one of our stores, whether it's snacks or whether it's like the store we're working at in the sense that a lot of people shop there. They carry rice, they carry bread. Whether it's stores who meet that kind of need for communities are carrying some healthier meal options or just like, "Why doesn't the Exxon off of exit 52 have yogurt?" There is a healthy living opportunities map in Buncombe County and I did some work on some healthy, safe places to play. We were

mapping those places, and I was like, “Can we put the healthy corner stores on here?” Because then people would know where they were, you know? And so I would love maps that are like, “Okay I’m going on this route, where can I stop to get healthy snacks on that route?” And then I have dreams of linking the store that we’re in with farmers. The store has a really vibrant tailgate market, but it’s only from 4-6pm or something on a Wednesday. Which is great, but who can get there? So I want to create a partnership with some of the farmers there so they will sell her their seconds. Either it didn’t sell or it won’t sell until the next round and it won’t last for a week. So they’ll sell it to her at their regular price so that they’re making what they were going to make, or maybe 10% less, and then she can stock it for three more days at a price that then she makes a profit from. So those are longer-term dreams, but someday that’s going happen.

I think if we can get people going to that store and buying those foods she will continue to stock those things and more, especially if she’s making money off it. If we can make it so there’s a profit off of these foods, then there’s a sustainable place that will be there for years. So for this community that all walks there, a lot of which are lower income and are in public housing, to know that when they go to that store healthy foods will be there. In North Carolina there’s a lot of work being done at the statewide level to try to get movements to support, and to get bills and policies that are supporting small retail stores in redesigning and offering more healthy fruits and vegetables and locally produced foods. So that’s really cool. There are a lot of folks who have been much more successful than we are. We are just in our starting out phases.

I think I will see my contributions as successful when I see the foods in the stores. I think right now we’re still hoping that it will happen. But I mean yes. It’s taken a year

and a half to get us this far, but once I see those foods and I get success stories from her like “Oh my gosh I get people coming in and saying oh I hear you’re carrying these options” I think I foresee myself feeling like that. I don’t totally feel it yet but I think I will feel it.

Now that we’re going about this work again, we are doing things differently. We are being very clear about what our expectations are, which there aren’t that many. Being very clear about like, “We are coming to you. These are our ideas. We want to make it work for you. Tell us what you need us to do. Tell us how we can make this work for you.” And you know, there was a little bit of a learning curve for some of the youth because I had been to a lot of trainings, and they had not been to the trainings, but now that they’ve seen it actually happen then like, now I get to hang out. I’ll say, “Oh don’t forget this” or, “Do you need me to help make a copy” or whatever. They play a huge role in the work now, but sometimes conceptually some of the stuff was more adult framed because it’s just where the knowledge was coming from, but now that they have that.

I think that this project really shows that this work has to be benefitting all of the key players. The storeowner has to be making money off of it, it has to be at a price that the people are willing and able to pay for it, and then it needs to be reliable. I think if she’s willing to commit to it then hopefully it’s a really sustainable process and will be there for years. And we are getting some public health folks involved and some farm folks involved. I think food systems work is very segregated, like “We’re doing it for obesity,” “Well we’re doing it for farmers rights,” “Well we’re doing it for animals rights.” And it’s like, “No, no, we’re all doing the same thing”. And if we could just find

some common language and start breaking down some of those barriers. Like who doesn't want healthy corner store options that the owner is making money off of? The more money she makes the more taxes she has to pay and the more we get that money back. So it's like every single avenue. The more healthy food she sells the more healthy food she can buy. The more healthy food she can buy the more farmers get to produce them. It's like there's a whole cycle of people who are being affected, but because we so often only think of like, "You only care about it being low calorie, you only care about it being local, and you only care..." it's like, "We're all working towards the same thing. Our partners can really look like anything as long as that common goal is shared."

Community food security means that every person has the ability to get the food, not have the food, has the ability to get it when they need it. That they're making enough money to get that food. That they're healthy enough to walk to the bus stop to get on the bus to walk to the grocery store. That they have some family or friend support to watch their kids while they're cooking. It is a very much more holistic view than, "Are people not hungry?" Because again I think it's segregated. Job training people don't understand the health care people don't understand the obesity people. The education people are like, "No no it just matters if they come to school." Well they can't come to school with a toothache and hungry. If their needs aren't being met it doesn't matter if they're at school or not, and it doesn't matter what a good teacher you are, and it doesn't matter if you got a raise or didn't get a raise, even though you totally deserve one. None of those things matter because their parents aren't making enough money to get them health care, which then they have a toothache, and their parents don't even value education because they didn't grow up in a society where they were valued. It's all of those things. I think it's

that successful ability to know where and how, and have the resources they need to feed themselves and their families.

I think an asset we have in Appalachia is land, and we have people who farm and we have people who know how to and want to farm. Unfortunately that food isn't staying here, and I think that has a lot to do with one of the barriers. You know our food system is based on having huge multi-miles and miles of farm, with lots of machinery and a name attached to you, and I don't think that's how people in this area farm. I think they're family farms that are plots of land, and I think we have what we need, it's just the systems that we are working in do not support the work and the processes that need to happen. And so I think it's a matter of state and local laws and where the money is going and where the money comes from that is really our biggest barrier.

I am looking forward to not being so mad about decisions that are made for me instead of with me. I'm excited about that. I really do want to live in a world where we are more valued; especially these huge populations of people who are suffering from these systems that we've created. You can't put blame on a person who's operating in a system that's holding them down. And so whether that's ageism or poverty or racism I'm looking forward to those things being a little less heavy on everything that we're doing. I mean we already do value people, we just do it wrong. The wrong people are getting paid the wrong amount of money for the wrong things. And not everyone. There are a lot of people out there making good dollars and they should continue making it, but where do we place value? And we aren't giving people the skills they need and then we're mad that they're not able to produce anything. And I'm like, "This was your system. They went through your public health care, your public school system, who do you have to

blame for that?" I totally believe in those programs, I just believe that it's too little too late. It needed to be done when they were six months old with health care and education and job training for their parents. We are constantly looking for the next policy or environment we can try to change. The youth are the ones telling us, especially because they're the ones living it. And some of it's funding. Right now we can get money to do food security work because the need is there. And so, in 10 years wherever that funding need is is where the need is, and hopefully it will be more of a holistic view.

Interview and Editing: Rebecca Landis