

# Youth Voice / Youth Action / Youth Justice

Aubrey Edwards

How do we create and provide viable platforms for young people to be visionaries in their own communities and within our democracy? The Youth Justice Institute co-creates spaces with young folks where they can discuss issues that affect them in their communities, explore these issues with adults, community leaders, and envision their futures through art-making.

I have worked alongside young people in an array of capacities for the last 20 years, often making art and always in awe of how they navigate their worlds. Youth advocacy is a realm and practice I have dedicated my life to, and it is a joy to be in service to young people. Young folks are our community members who are not yet old enough to vote, while simultaneously being harmed and impacted by systems and legislation spearheaded by adults and their respective ideologies. Wyoming has one of the highest juvenile incarceration rates in the country, topped by the highest youth suicide rates in the country. Upon moving to Laramie via New Orleans in 2021, I co-founded the Youth Justice Institute (YJI).

Since its inception, YJI has taken three distinct forms: the pilot YJI afterschool program, the YJI partnership with The Partners for Rural Impact Summit, and the YJI summer institute. Each iteration is grounded in amplifying youth thought, voice and action within their communities and beyond. As a model of valuing young folks as artists and thinkers, it is important to note that YJI pays participants an equitable wage for their participation in the program.

## **YJI Afterschool**

Partnering with Laramie High School, the pilot YJI afterschool program met weekly over the course of three months. The theme of the pilot program was “know your rights,” and each week our group of 24 participants welcomed an adult ally and advocate who explored their civil rights with them. These guest engagers included creatives, artists, policy makers, social workers, organizers, and activists. It was through these guest engagers that YJI created partnerships with the UW Restorative Justice Program, Wyoming Equality, and the Defender’s Aid Clinic. Alongside adults, participants learned advocacy tools, mapped crucial resources in their community, learned about their civil rights in and out of school, and made artwork in response to systems that affect them.

Their individual artwork and accompanying writing were published and donated to 10 Wyoming public libraries. The institute's culminating event was a community celebration and art exhibition at the University of Wyoming Art Museum. Six participants took part in a public panel at the event, sharing their visions for their community and encouraging adults to listen to the needs of young people (see addended gallery of their work). As one Youth Justice Institute participant told the audience, “Adults need to listen to us. And what a gift for them to see the world through our eyes and our lens.”

## **YJI and the Partners for Rural Impact Summit**

Through my national network of teaching artists, I reconnected with educators Bob Martin and Carrie Brunk in Owsley County, Kentucky, and Monique Verdin in Southeast Louisiana to partner on an ambitious youth-led project. Partners for Rural Impact—a Kentucky-based organization that supports rural leaders and communities to accelerate educational outcomes—invited Bob to establish a youth cohort spanning over three rural regions to present at their annual conference. Supported by their teaching artists, youth from Wyoming, Kentucky and Louisiana would meet over zoom for three months to build relationships and begin conversations around community envisioning. I selected six exemplary young leaders from the YJI after school pilot program to create the Wyoming cohort. During these three months, the youth participants slowly started to brainstorm what their morning plenary at the conference could be, but understood that the three cohorts would have a mere 36 hours in person together in Charlotte, NC to fully develop the presentation for the conference.

All three cohorts arrived on the Friday of the conference and immediately joined each other for a meal. Young folks who had only met on zoom were able to meet each other in person, and connections were quickly formed. The next morning, all cohorts and supporting

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adults grounded themselves in the hotel conference room, where we would spend 13 hours that day developing our presentation. In collaborative artmaking speak, we “got in the room” together. Bob, Monique and I led young folks through envisioning activities, listened to each other's lived experiences, and collaboratively created a framework for our presentation. Grounded in the question, “Is rural a culture or a place?,” we supported young folks as they created songs, skits, and monologues that would convey the challenges and hopes they experience in their communities. We worked to weave these stories together into a 45-minute-long performance that received a five-minute standing ovation at the conference the next day. “They are experts in their own lives,” an educator and conference participant told me, “It’s time adults listen to them.”



*Summit participant Kai after checking in at the conference*



*Summit participant Jasmine giving an on-camera interview*



*Wyoming cohort on stage performing their skit*

## YJI Summer Institute

Summers can be challenging for young folks, away from their structure and social support systems. The YJI summer institute centered community- building and served our community’s queer and queer ally young folks. The continued hostile climate toward LGBTQIA+ community members in our town, and on the Laramie High School campus, was the catalyst for YJI summer institute to focus on serving young folks who have experienced bullying and discrimination at school.

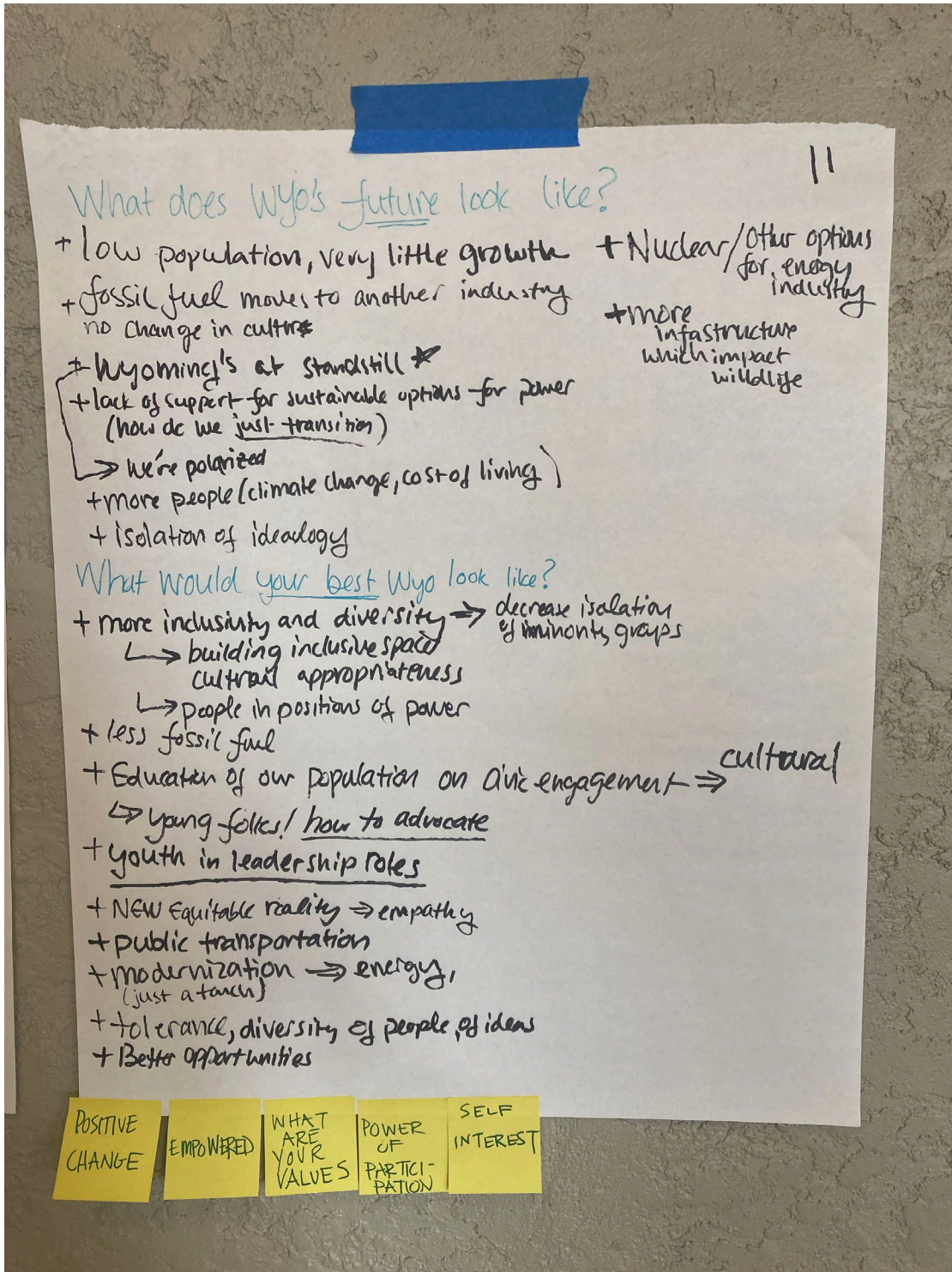
The theme of this institute was “organizing”, and young folks connected with adult community leaders who led workshops on art making as social justice, restorative justice, storytelling as advocacy, and organizing around issues that affects young people. Extending the institute's community organizational partnerships, YJI partnered with the Laramie Public Art Coalition and the Laramie Plains Civic Center. With support from these organizations, participants spent the 9-5 week exploring issues that affect them, while designing a large-scale art installation under the guidance of lead public artist Conor Mullen. They identified two major themes for their piece: celebrating diversity in Laramie by making queer and BIPOC people visible through the work and celebrating the things in their community that bring them joy. We hosted an unveiling event and community celebration at the Civic Center on September 14th, 2023. “I’m not often listened to or heard,” one summer institute participant told me, “It feels really good to be heard.”



*Summer institute participants measuring the space for their art installation*



*Summer institute participants with Restorative Justice facilitator Connor Novotny*



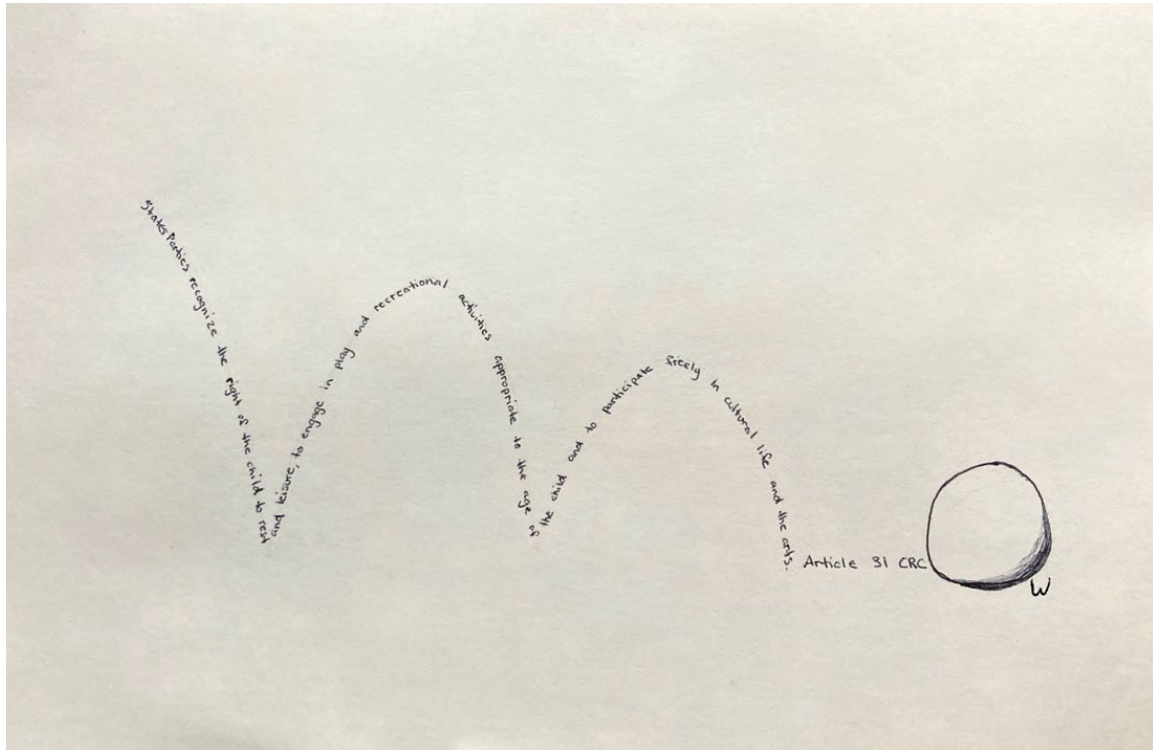
Envisioning activity completed by summer institute participants:  
What would you like to see in your future communities?

## Gallery of Student Art and Writing from YJI Afterschool



Elena, *Viva La Causa!*

This piece is representative of my struggles as a Chicana in the U.S.A and how I've struggled to embrace my identity. As a Chicana I've always felt uncomfortable with my ethnicity, too White to be Mexican, too Mexican to be White. When I was younger, I was embarrassed of my ethnicity, I refused to learn Spanish from my father or grandparents and I've grown to regret it, but I'm learning to embrace my ethnicity and be unashamed of who I am. It is true that I've held the privilege of being white passing, and that my family has never had to work in the fields, but the cause for Hispanic rights goes far beyond the cliché of the Mexican farmworker, the housemaid, or the taco truck. This cause also goes to the Mexican teachers, the Argentinian lawyers, the unemployed Chilean mothers and fathers, and the struggling Hispanic youth. The Hispanic cause is for EVERY Hispanic, everyone, who, for whatever reason, struggles to embrace their Hispanic heritage. To everyone who has felt as though it's a burden to their life, that maybe they were born the wrong way, to everyone who wished they could wash their heritage off as though it was soap to the skin. To quote César Chávez, "Viva la causa!" The cause will live on, we must learn to embrace ourselves, our ethnicity, our people, our struggles. This program has helped me with that. It has helped me learn what my rights are, not only as a minor, but also a Chicana. It has taught me what rights are given to me and how to use my knowledge of my rights to help not only myself but also others. I appreciate how this program has allowed me to express myself through art and other artistic means. Remember, you are not alone, this piece is to every lone hispanic soul.



Emma, untitled

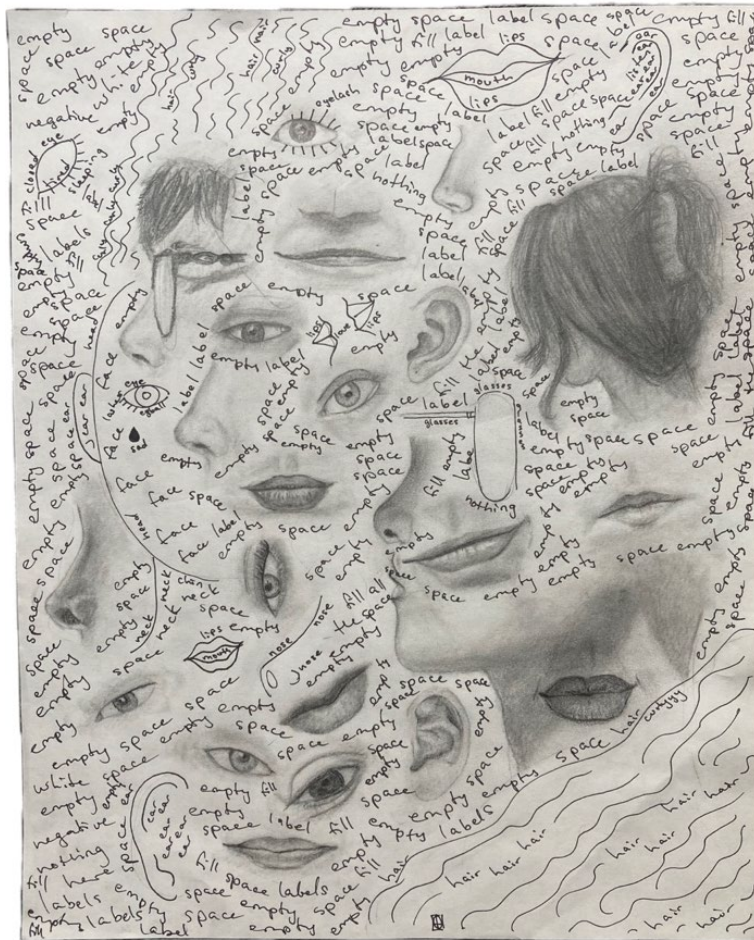
The Convention on the Rights of the Child was an effort by the United Nations to define the rights belonging to children, or more specifically anyone under the age of 18. Article 31 of the treaty lays out a right that seems trivial at first glance, but its importance cannot be understated. This is the right to play. Appropriate recreation is vital to proper social, mental, and physical development, and the 195 countries that have ratified the treaty would agree. However, there is just one country that has not ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child: the United States of America. Failing to ratify the treaty is certainly not the only way the United States has violated the rights of children, including the right to play. An overemphasis on the importance of academics from a young age results in teenagers who are burnt out and struggle to continue their education. Socioeconomic circumstances force kids into the workforce at a young age, where child labor laws are poorly enforced or often nonexistent. Perhaps most heartbreaking, an ineffective juvenile justice system takes kids away from their homes, failing to provide the assistance they need and instead just increasing their chances of reoffending after their release. We cannot just stand by and let children be stripped of their childhoods any longer. It is time to let kids be kids and allow them the right to play.



Rylan, untitled

Young people have the ability to make great changes in the world but there is one issue, our voices are not heard. This drawing represents how youth voices aren't heard, how we are not able to speak our minds, and how we aren't able to get our messages across even though we have so much to say. The voices of youth are some of the most powerful voices we have in society. Since we are so 'young and naive' people tend to disregard our words even though there is so much that we can and should be speaking out about. We have brilliant ideas and we want those ideas to be acknowledged and considered. Instead, our voices are silenced, information isn't brought to our attention and we aren't able to advocate for ourselves. There are so many things that have great impacts on us and the way we get to live our lives, such as government policies. But, just because of our age, there isn't much we can do about it. Young people's voices should be heard and we should be able to advocate for ourselves, we need to make a difference and make these things happen.





Elio, The American Teenager

The American Teenager is an archetype that has existed as long as “teenagers” have been considered their own demographic. It is an addition to the perfect, rose-colored, and so very static concept of the American Dream. By the time one has reached high school, they have often been given the responsibilities of adults, whilst being treated as though they have but the emotional maturity of a child. When, under this pressure, many of even the most dedicated, passionate students turn to unhealthy coping mechanisms and dangerous activities; they are not often given access to the proper resources, but rather are put into systems where too few people care enough to do much than to speed them along to avoid all the extra effort that comes with incarcerated minors. While fortunately, there are programs such as the Youth Justice Institute that are dedicated to the education and spread of advocacy for high school age students; it is still too easy to just box the “troubled” and “gifted” and “average” teens into categories inaccurate and incomplete. The goal of this piece is to represent that push, and how our individuality shows through regardless, through the features of current and former students.



Suzy, untitled

Silence is a powerful tool when chosen, but we don't get that choice. We are the "children." We don't know what "the real world is really like" or the "actual issues in life." After all, we don't pay bills, or go to work, or pay taxes, or deal with complex emotions. But, we do. We pay our car payments if we are lucky enough to afford it. We work AFTER school, AFTER tests, and AFTER the shittiest days, to support ourselves. We still have to file those taxes even though we have no idea how to do that or when. And the emotional life of a teenager? We are constantly overwhelmed by emotions. IF and only if you are lucky, you MAY get support. Maybe from a parent, or more likely, from a friend who is going through the same struggles. That is the mentally and emotionally draining life that is forced upon us. But even still we are "just children?"

Our voices can't be heard until we are 25 and become representatives. And if we want to make some real, lasting political changes, we have to wait until age 35 to become senators or president. Even those of us who do try and stand up, are shoved down with "You're just a child, what do you know?" Well, a lot. We know that the earth is dying, women are losing rights, people may not be able to love who they love, and god forbid you are trans. Then not only do you have to worry about all the responsibility thrown on you, but also the added bigotry and hate. The disdain from men using the bible to strip away your rights to piss in the correct bathroom. Do you hear how stupid that is? Because you are a trans woman, you can't piss in the women's bathroom. And for what? "It's for the sAfTEy of the children." But I thought we were children? The same people forced to use the wrong bathroom are the same

children who would get hurt? No, it's an outdated way of thinking. Our generation and the generations after ours will look at these blatant violations of basic human decency and be ashamed.

Every day children take their lives. And every day the children and people affected are left with "thoughts and prayers." Thanks, but no. We need a little more than that. We need resources to be heard, then we need those who can make changes to listen. We need the voice of children that are the future to be heard.

But no. We are "just kids." We don't know about the "real world" or "real pain." So why should we get a say?

So please help us. Be an advocate for us.