



**YLF Class of 2006**

# youthleadershipforum

## YLF...Twenty years later....

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#### Class of 2006 6

**By Barbara Blair**

In the early 1980's, Leadership Birmingham's first class identified an opportunity. They felt that a program similar to the one they had experienced would benefit the youth in the area and the community as a whole. They formed a Steering Committee which developed the Youth Leadership Forum program and continues to serve as its governing board.

As it did for the first class which graduated in 1986, YLF continues to provide experiences to a diverse group of high school students from the Birmingham metropolitan area. Participants learn about what is going on in their communities – the challenges and the opportunities – from arts and culture to local government. They not only get to know



students from other neighborhoods, but they also learn to trust and respect each other. Once students become knowledgeable about the issues in their communities, they are prepared to make a difference in those communities.

Over 800 students have completed the YLF program. Many of these YLF alumni have chosen to return to Birmingham after college and have become the

leaders who continue to have an impact in Birmingham.

While the core of our program remains the same – in order to stay current with needs of today's students, we are adding several components to the 2006-07 program. Our leadership skills development sessions will enable students to acquire skills important for their personal development, from public

*(Continued on page 2)*

**“Once students become knowledgeable about the issues in their communities, they are prepared to make a difference in those communities.”**

## ...Twenty years later....

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speaking and interviewing to consensus building and advocacy.

In addition, YLF participants in the past have told us that they want to serve their community, but sometimes don't know how to get in-

involved or how to fit it into their schedules. Through collaboration with YouthServe, our Community Service session will allow YLF participants to get involved in community service projects that will have an impact in their communities.

When this years YLF class

graduates in 2007, they should be thoroughly prepared to be involved – in their schools, churches, and neighborhoods – all of ▲ the communities they belong to.

– Barbara Blair is the executive director of Youth Leadership Forum of Birmingham.

# Voice of Past YLF Participants

## Leadership: The Unselfish Labor of Love

By Brian Hamiton

Those of us who have ever had the opportunity to lead any organization, team, or small group can attest that the leadership experience often feels like all work and no glory. In fact, once we assume leadership roles we often find ourselves asking the question “Why am I doing this?” With seemingly much more to lose than to gain in many leadership roles, the obvious question becomes why would anyone choose to lead? The answer is simple. For real leaders, with and without titles, leadership is an *Unselfish Labor of Love!*

My YLF experience has been one of the most enriching experiences I've ever had. The

opportunity to address issues such as diversity, education and economic development is unusual for the average high school student. YLF provided a framework to address those

**“For real leaders, with and without titles, leadership is an *Unselfish Labor of Love!*”**

issues, and exposure to leaders, future and current, whose decisions directly affected those very topics. Those topics were relevant then and certainly are relevant now. In my professional career both as an engi-

neer and community leader, every aspect of my day focuses on diversity, education and economic development. I continue to draw upon experiences from my YLF year, and my exposure to YLF was a major factor that influenced my return to Birmingham after attending college in Atlanta, GA.

The obligation I felt to return to my community and accept leadership responsibilities is one example of an *Unselfish Labor of Love.* ▲

–Brian Hamilton (YLF Class of 1997) graduated from Parker High School, and he is a civil engineer at BE&K Engineering and the Vice Chair of the Birmingham Jefferson County Transit Authority.

## Kem Marks's Experience

By Kem Marks

As a high school student, Youth Leadership Forum (YLF) provided me with many invaluable opportunities that I consider to have been essential to my professional development and personal growth. The experience enabled me to befriend a delightful array of students from both public and private, urban and suburban, artistic and academic local schools. Indeed, participation in YLF allowed me to venture beyond the walls of my own small, magnet school for gifted students to interact and peacefully coexist with peers of diverse interests, backgrounds and opinions. Our critical discussions were guided by mutual respect. We sought to understand each other and learned

lessons of empathy and diplomacy along the way.

Additionally, the insight I gained upon meeting Birmingham's leaders and engaging in focused discussions on relevant

city leaders in later years.

Most importantly, YLF taught me to appreciate Birmingham as I prepared to venture far and wide in youthful exploration of an infinite world. Thanks to YLF, awareness of my city's rich cultural heritage and abundant political, professional and economic opportunities accompanied me wherever I chose to roam. After many comparisons in Birmingham's favor, its comforts led me home.

**"YLF taught me to appreciate Birmingham as I prepared to venture far and wide in youthful exploration of an infinite world."**

—Kem Marks (YLF ▲

Class of 1990) graduated from the Resource Learning Center (now the Jefferson County International Baccalaureate School) and is a graduate of Michigan and the Cumberland School of Law. Now she is an attorney with Maynard Cooper and Gale. Now she is an attorney with Maynard Cooper and Gale.

city issues added a more tangible meaning to reading the newspaper, watching the news and attending civic events. Several of the YLF sessions that I attended as a young adult ultimately equipped me with useful reference points for discussions with

## One from the YLF Class of 1987

By Michele Forman

I was a sophomore at Mountain Brook High School in 1986, aware that a wide world existed outside my family's house, my school, and my town, but the details were hazy. I yearned towards college as parole from provincialism. I was certain, as fifteen-year-olds so often are, that Birmingham had nothing for me. I began to suspect I was wrong as soon as I was interviewed for Youth Leadership Forum. The group interview itself was engaging and interesting; I remember having walked in thinking this might be an okay thing to do with my time and walking out fervently hoping I would be selected. I

**"I yearned towards college as parole from provincialism."**

wanted to be around these smart, engaged people again. I was so lucky to be part of YLF, not only because the day-long programs gave us high schoolers access to the leaders of Birmingham and a clear image of how a city works, but because they gave us each other. I am so happy to have met so many people from different backgrounds and experiences who

were so similar in their vision for a great city.

And, yes, I did leave for the big city for college (Harvard) and for an even bigger city for my first job (New York), but I came back to a place that offers me so much. YLF started what I hope to be lifelong commitment to community engagement. ▲

—Michele Forman, graduated from Mountain Brook High School. (YLF class of 1987) She is an independent filmmaker and a program administrator for UAB's Center for Urban Affairs. Michele was a producer for Spike Lee's *Four Little Girls*, a documentary of the 16th Street Baptist Church Bombing.

# Voice of Present YLF Participants

## Shelly's Story

By Shelly Franklin

**Y**outh Leadership Forum [YLF] was one of the most amazing experiences of my life. I met new people, shared interests, and learned a whole lot from the whole thing. I learned that even when I feel like nobody knows just what I am going through, there's always someone going through the exact same thing, or something worse. You take what you can get. It amazed me how close I could get to 43 different people in just a few months. I made some awesome friends from the whole experience. I would definitely recommend YLF to anyone wanting to make a difference. Plus, the friend-

ships you make from it last a lifetime. I miss all of my friends that I don't get to see often, and I'm not afraid to voice my own opinion on topics around town. YLF definitely came out for the best in me. I wouldn't give up that opportunity for the world. ▲

—Shelly is a junior at Leeds High School. She is the drum major in the marching band, and she plans to major in nursing at college.



Facilitator John Scalisi leads the Drum Circle as the YLF Class of 2006 learn about the



A group of YLF Class of 2006 take a moment to pose during the Service Project, bonding and working at the same time.

## My YLF Experience

By Amanda Peters

**T**he first time I applied to the YLF program I was a 10th grader who thought it would be fun to get out of school one day a month. I filled out an application and I received a letter informing me that I had been selected to receive an interview. I went to my interview as nervous as I could possibly be, but after it was over I felt really good about myself and how I answered the interviewers questions. A week or so passed and I got another letter saying thank you for participating but we have not chosen you for our program this year; I wouldn't say that I wasn't disappointed. So the next year when it came time for a new YLF class to be chosen, I again applied, received an interview, but something was different this time. When I received my second letter after the interviews I was informed that I had been accepted as a member of the 2006 YLF class.

My parents and I attended the orientation meeting, and for the first time I began to worry. Not because of the people or the requirements, but because of the num-

ber of days I was going to miss from school. When we left the orientation I didn't know anymore people than when I got there. The first event day rolled around, the Opening Retreat. When everyone arrived some people knew each other from school or other organizations, but mainly everyone was a stranger and the walls were lined with silent, nervous students. Everybody was looking everybody else up and down wondering who would talk first. If somebody had yelled "Quiet Mouse" it couldn't have gotten any quieter. Once everybody got on the bus people started to ask questions. Somebody would ask "Where are you from?" and others would ask "What are your plans after high school?" I'll never forget that my first conversation was with an outgoing girl named Avani Patel. When we arrived at Camp Cosby and went through the obstacle course and the spider web, (which is something I'll never forget and if

you were in my group you know why) everybody trusted and cared deeply for everyone else. We grew as friends throughout the other event days. At the Closing Retreat we were all sad that we wouldn't be seeing each other every month but we also knew that we had made life long friends. I wouldn't trade this experience for anything in the world, and I hope to influence other students to apply for the YLF program so they too can make the memories like those that I have made this past year.

I would like to thank all those involved in YLF, the students, sponsors, and Mrs. Blair for all their hard work in making not only my experience but the experience of the YLF class of 2006 all the richer.

—Amanda Peters is senior at Corner High School and President of the local chapter of the International Thespian Society. In college, she plans to major in Secondary Education and specialize in higher math.

# Youth Leadership Forum: How it Made me a Better Person

## By Avani Patel

When I first heard about Youth Leadership Forum, YLF, I thought I should apply so I could put something else on my resume, but this all changed after the first day of meeting all my fellow peers at YLF. At the opening retreat I realized the reality of this world and how I can get out of my comfort zone. I can make a difference by making new friends outside of “my circle.”

My favorite day from the whole time of participating in YLF was Environmental Day. This day was on a Saturday, and we had to wake up extra early just to come to another YLF day. Fortunately, waking up extra early on a Saturday was well worth it. I had so much fun because

we got to hang out with everyone, talk, and best of all, go down the water slide! I was so scared to go down it, but the others urged me to go and even went down with me. I think we all got even closer after this day because we spent so much quality time together. All the other days were extraordinary! We learned about the new railroad park being constructed, listened to Artur Davis speak, and danced and played the drums at Alabama School of Fine Arts. These wide varieties of activities we participated make YLF special by informing us about all parts of our community. I learned so much about our community, the changes happening in it, and how to make it better.

YLF taught me the importance of

making a wide variety of friends from different backgrounds in order to become more open-minded and accepting. I now can say that I have so many friends who accept me for who I am. It doesn't matter how pretty, smart, or rich you are; we're all the same and unique in our own way. Accepting this will only make you a better person with more friends to rely on in your bad times. I am so glad that I decided to participate in Youth Leadership Forum because it has made me a better, more understanding, and accepting person. ▲

—Avani Patel is a junior at Vestavia Hills High School. She plans to major in Biology and is thinking about going to medi-



On Government Day, students were able to have lunch with their elected officials. Leon, Matthew, Ester, and Darah were able to have lunch with Birmingham City Councilor Miriam Witherspoon.



On Environment Day, students spent part of the day at Turkey Creek. First, learning about the surrounding area; then, having fun in the cool, clean waters of the creek, as Melanie, Arkela, and Quichaunda illustrate.

# Everyday an Inspiring Day

By Shweta Patel

While applying to participate in the YLF of Birmingham, I already knew what an influential experience I was about to join. However, after I was accepted, I had few reservations, worrying about keeping up with my school work, fretting over how I could contribute to the program, researching tidbits of facts about Birmingham.

Then, I experienced all seven sessions of the YLF program, and every session was an inspiring day.

Opening Retreat: interacted

with my fellow, diverse YLF members.

Arts Day: engaged in art and creativity in the form of mosaics, videos, story telling, dancing, and painting.

Government Day: conversed with Birmingham's elected officials.

Human Services Day: role played as a homeless person at Firehouse Shelter.

Economic Development and Education Day: participated in an Education Summit

facilitated by Sarah Verser. (FOX 6 New anchor).

Environment Day: learned about Birmingham's environmental issues and how to prevent them.

Closing Retreat: realized how I had changed because of this program.

I experienced all of these “life changing” factors simply because YLF is a remarkable program. I just had to make sure I came open-minded. ▲

—Shweta Patel is a senior at Jefferson County International Baccalaureate High School. She plans to pursue a career in the medical field.



*Youth Leadership Forum  
Class of 2006*

**First Row:** Gina Micklow (Oak Grove), Lisette Alvarado (Erwin), Ester Ha (Indian Springs), Susanne Sarver (Altamont), Darah Bishop (Fultondale), Joy Lampkin (Homewood), Melanie Womack-Orr (Ramsay), Brittany Scales (Fairfield), Shweta Patel (JCIB), Quichaunda Richardson (Jackson-Olin), Amanda Peters (Corner),

**Second Row:** Mary Beth Williams (Briarwood), Leon Horton, IV (Wenonah), Keinesha Craig (Gardendale), Channdara Thach (Pinson Valley), Khushboo Jhala (Vestavia Hills), Liangsha Xu (Vestavia Hills), Charika Kidd (Jackson-Olin), Shelly Franklin (Leeds), Jasmin Dumas (Minor), Sharonne Hayes (Ramsay), Scott Marzette (Huffman), Arkela Banks (Carver),

**Third Row:** Sarah Early (Minor), Avani Patel (Vestavia Hills), Ruth Monzon (Fultondale), Jeremy Adams (Hoover), JaQuese Smith (Spain Park), Stephen Vincent (Pleasant Grove), Theo Benson (Holy Family), Jessica Heard (Carver), Jalesa Story (McAdory), Jasmine Love (Holy Family),

**Fourth Row:** Keith Haywood (Parker), Charlie White (Hewitt-Trussville), Joel Gardner (Minor), Christopher Young (Mountain Brook), Hudson Harper (ASFA), Christopher Brown (Ramsay), Trent Thompson (ASFA), Matthew Russell (Central Park), Rachel Simon (John Carroll), Richard Perry (Woodlawn)

**Not Pictured:** Phillip Woods (Shades Valley)

**This is the First Youth Leadership Forum  
Newsletter, which was produced by me,  
Shweta Patel (JCIB and YLF Class of 2006)**

**I would like to give Specials Thanks to those who  
have made the YLF Newsletter possible:**

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|------------------|-------------------|
| ▲ Barbara Blair  | ▲ Avani Patel     |
| ▲ Brian Hamilton | ▲ Amanda Peters   |
| ▲ Kem Marks      | ▲ Shelly Franklin |
| ▲ Michele Forman |                   |

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made the YLF program possible:**

- ▲ YLF Steering Committee and Program Committee,
- ▲ Sponsor: Leadership Birmingham
- ▲ Co-Sponsors: Birmingham Southern College, Birmingham YMCA, Miles College, Samford University, University of Alabama at Birmingham, and the YWCA of Central Alabama.