

Today's Youth: Today's Leaders

Sherry Sacino *

"No one is born a good citizen; no nation is born a democracy. Rather, both are processes that continue to evolve over a lifetime. Young people must be included from birth. A society that cuts itself off from its youth severs its lifeline." ⁽¹⁾

INTRODUCTION

Tehran resident Amir Farmanesh, 25, is a shining example of what's next in Iran; and the future is a little brighter because of his involvement.

Youth throughout the world have long had an active role in their communities as volunteers and helpful assistants to adults. But now, they are finally being recognized for their many meaningful contributions as a force that is real and powerful. ⁽²⁾

In Iran, more than 70% of the population is under 25 years old. More and more, youth are being encouraged to participate in all aspects of their community, especially molding their own future through public policy.

But without jobs on the horizon, youth everywhere are faced with challenges for the future. One aggressive program in Iran is the Youth

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Employment Network (YEN) which is focusing its resources on curbing the unemployment rate among youth.

And Farmanesh was there ready to offer what he could when an opportunity arose for his fellow countrymen.

TOWARD YEN

YEN was created under the impetus of the Millennium Declaration where Heads of State gathered and agreed upon eight measurable goals for all member states to strive toward through 2015. It was at this historic, largest gathering of world leaders that United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan first proposed the Youth Employment Network.

“Together with the heads of the World Bank and the International Labour Organization, I am convening a High-Level Policy Network on youth employment drawing on the most creative leaders in private industry, civil society and economic policy to explore imaginative approaches to this difficult challenge,” said Annan. “I will ask this policy network to propose a set of recommendations that I can convey to world leaders within a year.”

When Farmanesh heard of this plan, he wanted his home country of Iran to take a leadership role.

“I saw it as a major chance for Iran,” he said. “The World Summit on Information Society was coming up, and I knew the Iranian president, the acting Iranian Minister of Youth, and an Iranian high-ranking delegation would be in Geneva for the Summit. I arranged a meeting between head of YEN secretariat and some of these top representatives from Iran.

“As a result of that initial meeting, and about four months of work, Iran joined YEN as a lead country,” he added.

Since taking the role as a lead country, the Iranian delegation has created a National Youth Policy and continues to create internal policies to support the development of youth in all aspects of their lives so that they all have employment opportunities available as they get older and seek jobs.

Farmanesh has been serving as a volunteer since he was 18 years old. For 7 years, he has maintained a steady focus on the future and what needs to be

done today to ensure forward momentum.

“I believe in deep and slow changes,” he said. “I don’t see radical changes as sustainable.”

And time is on his side.

In 2000, Farmanesh joined a group of other young leaders what became a 3-year process to create the largest non-governmental organization (NGO) and volunteer support center in Tehran. This process was preceded by many years of discussions and concept developments. Again, he added a vital piece to the puzzle. He worked with his colleagues to create a link between existing efforts of the United Nations and Iranian national efforts.

On 6 March 2003 the municipality of Tehran announced the construction of Volunteer Center to mark International Volunteer Day during the United Nations’ International Year of Volunteers (IYV). Formally named "NGOs and Volunteer Activities Center of Tehran Municipality", the centre is the venue for volunteer activities such as workshops, trainings and meetings. The project, solely funded by the Municipality of Tehran, will cost more than USD 9 Million when completed.

Other IVD activities include workshop sessions conducted by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and volunteer groups, discussing topics such as: networking, fundraising and improving relations with NGOs and local authorities.

Through the leadership of Farmanesh, when wanting to create the NGO Center, he was able to bring a connection to the international community to many within the Iranian Government’s system by becoming involved with a high-profile project of the United Nations.

“In 2001, I begin cooperating with United Nations Volunteers (UNV) & IYV team starting the IYV program in Iran,” he explained. “I worked with UNV as the IYV NGO Focal Point in Iran. At first, because UNV had no activities in Iran, IYV was not recognized by the Iran Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA).

“Through my knowledge of the UN’s goals and the needs of the MOFA I got the formal, necessary permission. After that, we organized National Volunteer Committee with participation of NGOs and government. We

broadcast information about the IYV in our media, and as a result there were many special programs from NGOs on IYV.

“Our team’s greatest success was securing the initial USD 3 million needed to start the biggest Iranian NGOs and volunteer support center in Tehran, after long discussions with Tehran city council and municipality of Tehran. Based on my suggestion, UNV recognized this center officially: and UNV was listed in the Secretary-General Report of UN to General Assembly, released in 26 Nov 2002,” he said.

The development of networks and relationships with others who share similar viewpoints is vital in creating a successful volunteer program. Farmanesh is involved with dozens of programs in Iran and other parts of the world.

“I see myself more as a facilitator and a gate opener,” he said. “My major role in most of my volunteer involvement is finding new possible horizons for continuing the project or giving new directions to it.”

The role of the gate opener is pivotal. Youth bring a new perspective and energy to tasks that can shake up tradition and “business as usual.”

One of the most powerful and accessible tools for youth to utilize is the media – all forms from radio and television newspapers (in countries with privately owned press) and the internet.

As computers and access to the internet continues to proliferate, youth with varying views are able to freely express themselves in ways they have never been able to previously.

The use of personal computers has literally linked the world, and those who share common values are able to work together on projects and programs that were once restricted to geographic proximity.

Programs such as United States-based iEARN (www.learn.org) work with schools worldwide to link students together who work on various projects. Some write songs, some create cookbooks while others take on much more humanitarian issues such as child soldiers, AIDS and relief efforts for disaster victims.

Students must be part of a bonafide school which is part of the iEARN network, and are free to work on any project that interests them.

According to the iEARN website, iEARN programs are designed and facilitated by participants to fit their particular curriculum and classroom needs and schedules.

When schools join iEARN, the network is open to all teachers and students at a school, with resources available for finding iEARN projects across age levels and disciplines.

Participants may join existing structured on-line projects, or work with others internationally to create and facilitate their own projects to fit their own particular classroom and curriculum needs. Classrooms also have the option of joining a "Learning Circle," which are highly interactive, project-based partnerships among a small number of schools located throughout the world.

All iEARN projects involve a final "product" or exhibition of the learning that has taken place as part of the collaboration. These have included magazines, creative writing anthologies, websites, letter-writing campaigns, reports to government officials, arts exhibits, workshops, performances, charity fundraising, and many more examples of youth taking action as part of what they are learning in the classroom.

While many youth develop skills through school and after-school programs, the skills they learn are easily transferred to any volunteer effort they take on in the future. Perhaps the most valuable experience a person can have in participating in a multi-cultural, multi-faceted project is learning how systems work and how processes unfold, as Farmanesh and his colleagues were able to do with the NGO center in Tehran.

Farmanesh has deepened his involvement in volunteer activities and programs, particularly with the United Nations. He serves on many committees and has been named to several youth advisory boards, including the United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP) and the Global Youth Advisory Committee of the Conference of Non-Governmental Organizations in Consultative Status with the United Nations (CONGO).

The United Nations has long recognized the importance of involving youth in its development and peace projects. Farmanesh has seized the opportunity to get involved with the UN on many programs that impact Iran

and youth in general.

“The UN is one of rare active international agencies in Iran which has a global perspective when setting proper, acceptable goals and activities worldwide,” he said. “For me, supporting these efforts was a natural step, as the UN has an open door to young ideas.”

“I sought every chance for involvement with the UN. It was a very slow, step-by-step process and I learned a lot along the way.”

Farmanesh’s efforts at such a young age have been noticed by many adults who want to contribute to his momentum. He has been awarded a full scholarship from the World Bank to earn his master’s degree from Syracuse University, and continues to be tapped by the UN as an advisor.

He currently maintains an active schedule with three projects with the UN: an environmental program with United Nations Environment Program (UNEP), the youth employment project discussed previously and authoring a book with a team of youth about young involvement in the Millennium Development Goals with UN Youth Unit.

The UN has made it a point to seek out and enroll some of the best and brightest youth in the world. This description of the UN policy on youth is from their website:

EMPOWERING YOUTH FOR DEVELOPMENT AND PEACE

Young people are a major force in the contemporary world. They are at the forefront of global, social, economic and political developments. In addition to their intellectual contribution and their ability to mobilize support, young women and men have a unique perspective. How our societies progress is determined, among other things, on how much we involve youth in building and designing the future. But in many countries, it has become more difficult for young people to be involved in the life of their societies.

The problems facing youth challenge not only today's societies, but future generations as well. They include: limited resources available for funding youth programmes and activities; inequities in social, economic and political conditions; gender discrimination; insecure livelihoods; high levels

of youth unemployment; armed conflict and confrontation; ethnic prejudice; social exclusion; homelessness; continuing deterioration of the global environment; increasing incidence of disease, hunger and malnutrition; changes in the role of the family; and inadequate opportunity for education and training.

At the same time, young people can also be a major resource in the social mobilization needed to combat these very problems. The situation of young people worldwide remains precarious. In both developing and developed countries, the needs and aspirations of youth are still largely unmet.

Economic difficulties experienced in many developing countries are often more serious for young people. Youth are also affected by a growing incidence of substance abuse and juvenile delinquency. In addition, in many developing countries, unprecedented numbers of young people are migrating from rural areas to urban centers.

Although young people in industrialized countries comprise a relatively small proportion of the total population due to generally lower birth rates and higher levels of life expectancy, they comprise a social group that faces particular problems and uncertainties regarding the future — problems due in part to limited employment opportunities.

The opportunities are ripe for youth such as Farmanesh to harness and mold into what is best for them and their country. The international community is opening up fast and encouraging youth participation and seeking their guidance.⁽³⁾

The adults no longer need to wait for young people to “grow up” before asking for their input. They just need to look across the table. ❖

NOTES:

1. UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, in his address to the world conference of ministers responsible for youth, Lisbon, 8 August 1998.

2. Sherry Wheatley Sacino. "I have traveled throughout the world and always return home with the same idea...that we are all in this together. I have dedicated my life to helping others harness their vision so they can begin to create a better world for themselves and those around them."

3. Sherry Sacino is a highly motivated, energetic entrepreneurial business owner who is a master at creative problem solving. She is often tapped by organizations worldwide (as well as high-level executives and politicians), to act as a sounding board and resource in addressing critical business and social issues. Her sensitive nature has provided major companies with winning, profitable formulas to express their corporate social conscience, while making a substantial contribution to the world around them.

A business owner since 1980, Sherry has worked in 67 countries and developed socially responsible and effective work strategies for some of the world's largest companies, often in partnership with federal government agencies. In 1995, Sherry began a 4-year sabbatical to explore how she can best utilize her talents and vast resources in affecting positive change in the world on behalf of children.

As president of YEA, she served as senior advisor to the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy's national youth anti-drug media campaign during the Clinton administration. In this capacity, she was responsible for molding the partnership between the Media Campaign and the following organizations: Girl Scouts of the USA, Boy Scouts, Boys and Girls Clubs, National Basketball Association, Major League Baseball, NCAA, National Federation of High Schools and the Citizenship Through Sports Alliance.

YEA is currently working on the national Project Safe Neighborhood program to reduce gun violence for the United States Department of Justice. In addition, YEA has worked with the World Olympians Association, which includes 80,000+ members worldwide, to create, direct and execute its worldwide anti-doping program in 175 countries.

Also on behalf of YEA, Sacino has formed a partnership with the United Nations, and is responsible for creating the program to develop the United Nations Global Peace Schools, Youth Advocacy and the Youth Media Network worldwide with the UN's Department of Public Information (UN-DPI).

The author of numerous articles in major publications, she is a writer for *Sports Illustrated for Kids*. Sacino has written two books, *Keeping the Drive Alive: Growing up to be a Buccaneer* in October 1995 and *Spiritual Touchdowns: Inspirational Profiles from the NFL* in December 1997. She was the editorial and creative consultant for the Disney/ESPN youth website that launched in May 1997.

She holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in journalism and telecommunications from Arizona State University. In May 1995, she completed a 3-year Executive Leadership Program for promising entrepreneurs at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), sponsored by *Inc.* magazine. She also studied international finance at Oxford University in England in 1996 and French at the Ecole de Langue Français pour Etrangers in Paris in 1999.

Most recently she was featured in TV Guide, Success, Inc., Time, USA Today, Travel Age, The Washington Post, Reader's Digest, Writer's Digest, and others.

For eight years, she served as President of the Tampa Bay Chapter of the Young Entrepreneurs Organization (members are younger than 40 and own companies with revenues in excess of \$1 million annually). She currently serves on the International Advisory Board of Global Partners for Development and Board of Directors of the Suncoast Girl Scout Council.