

NEXUS

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From my window seat, I watch children go to school. A youngster stands on the bench outside the window of the coffee shop and does a back flip. I give him a thumbs up.

Another small boy waits with the crossing guard on the corner. His parents send him to school early. The crossing guard is a strong, proud woman. She waves and says hello as people pass by. She is there every morning.

Today it's below zero. The crossing guard brings the small boy into the coffee shop. He sits across from me on a chair, his feet dangling. I smile. His eyes smile back above the scarf that covers his face. The owner brings him a hot chocolate and cookie.

Down the street is a youth center with a metal detector at the front door. Youth go through it as they enter, then later they go back on the street. I grew up in a neighborhood not too far away. We used to walk at night to the playground to play basketball. There were no metal detectors then.

Last summer I attended a picnic with several children, youth, parents, relatives, and youth workers, some from the youth center down the street from the cafe. Some of the youth were part of the independent living program we run at the Child and Youth Care Learning Center. Others came from high school groups and inner city youth organizations. They brought friends and relatives (parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles) and some of the youth brought their own children. Many of the youths' foster parents were also present.

Several of the youth workers, who had just completed a continuing education course, prepared activities and brought along ethnic dishes—greens, deviled eggs, a variety of pastries, sauerkraut, and a host of other dishes—to add to the brats and burgers. One youth worker brought a dream catcher crafts project. Another worker brought chess. One brought a set of plastic boxes to decorate. They played basketball, catch, and volleyball. Two workers worked the large grill, which had been borrowed from a friend of one of the workers and served as a gathering place for feeding: conversation, food, and drink.

In conversations workers, parents, foster parents, neighbors and relatives got to know each other. Although many of them worked in different programs and lived in different neighborhoods, many knew the same children. They talked about ways of working together.

People huddled around the grill and food tables, eating. As the day went on, several children displayed dream catchers and new jewelry and coin boxes. Noting that many of the children and adults were playing volleyball for the first time, a youth worker changed the rules to let players hit it on one bounce. The game continued with laughter.

Youth and youth workers came back sweating from the basketball courts. Although the park was in an area infested with gangs, gang activity was not evident that day on the courts.

It couldn't have been a nicer day — sunny in the mideighties with low humidity. At one point during the raffle in which almost everyone got something, a girl from one high school threw a piece of cheese at another girl from a community center and within seconds they were going at it, each girl backed up by five or six youth from her group. Quickly several youth workers jumped into the middle of the action and restored order.

One student brought a youth from a shelter. He had just arrived in Milwaukee from the South and was trying to be reunited with his father. For a while he sat and observed or talked with adults. Then he joined volleyball.

Since then, funds have been cut for most of the centers and more cuts are expected. The doors open later and close earlier, leaving the kids on the streets longer.

In Fall, a sales tax was approved in Wisconsin to pay for a new domed baseball stadium for the Milwaukee Brewers. "The new stadium will bring jobs and boost the economy," the proponents argued. Opponents, on the other hand, pointed out that jobs would be mostly low paying service jobs and a few multimillion dollar salaries for ballplayers.

For me, the decision seemed almost surreal. It was as if hope for the future was in domed villages, the shopping malls and sports arenas of America instead of the children. Why don't we have a sales tax for better schools, schools that would open early in the morning so kids wouldn't have to stand in the cold while their parents scurried off to make ends meet.

Or why not a sales tax for a sort of civilian conservation corps that put youth to work cleaning up the environment. They would recycle, clean the streets, preserve the forests and rivers, protect the wild life, things that would be fulfilling and have lasting worth to the community.

Such foolishness.

I watch the crossing guard. She is at the center of the neighborhood. People wave as they pass in their cars on their way to work. Children count on her to help them make safe passage from home to school.

Future youth workers will be more like this crossing guard. Workers from many programs will help youth transition from one to the next. This series of transitions and connections will help create safer, more empowering communities.

In an hour I will meet with a class of youth workers from several programs—community centers, group homes, detention centers, and foster homes. We'll talk about the crossing guard and the neighborhood center with the metal detector. We'll try to figure out how to make neighborhoods better places.

Yesterday in a recall election one of the politicians who voted for the stadium was thrown out of office. People rose up and said if we can't afford a tax for schools and kids, we can't afford a tax for a stadium. Perhaps the mood is changing.

The boy, who came in last winter to warm up, looks in the window and smiles.