

My Turn: Youth cultivate a hopeful future

By DEB HABIB

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I write this upon return from our public high school, Ralph C. Mahar, where, along with many thousands of schools, students organized a peaceful walkout on March 14 to honor the victims of the Parkland, Fla., massacre, and to add their voice to the movement demanding schools and communities free of violence — a movement that their generation now leads.

Following the tragedy in Parkland, Teaching for Change released a compilation of 16 stories of U.S. youth on the forefront of social change movements, which can be viewed at: bit.ly/2FTF2Qq. While reading about The Factory Girls Association in Lowell in the 1830s; young Japanese American dissidents in 1942; the 1963 Children's March for civil rights; Eagle Scouts protesting anti-gay policy; and current youth leadership at Standing Rock, I was uplifted by the long history of youth leading nonviolent movements for justice. I applaud the students of our region and the educators and administrators who support them in demonstrating against gun violence, and violence in all forms. In doing so, young people simultaneously gain skills to become leaders in a nation sorely in need of compassion and vision.

There are many individuals and organizations throughout Franklin County and the North Quabbin who offer spaces for youth to develop creativity, an expanded worldview and skills for activism. We celebrate the 20th year of our program for youth, SOL (Seeds of Leadership) Garden at Seeds of Solidarity Farm and Education Center in Orange. SOL Garden cultivates leadership among North Quabbin youth as they use their bodies, minds and hearts to cultivate food and a hopeful future. This mission statement has been with us since inception, and the unification of body, mind and heart could not be more essential than it is in these times.

People have asked how we have gotten over 400 young people, ages 15 to 18 (most low-income and many disenchanted with school and society), to voluntarily participate in a gardening program. Yes, we teach skills for growing food and set the

stage for a host of other environmental, arts and social justice projects, but what I hear from the youth over and over again transcends program content. As two SOL Garden alum shared:

“SOL Garden gave me the tools to feed myself and the tools not only to heal, but grow ... I was given the environment to ground myself and expand my reach and views in this world.”

“This sense of community has renewed my hope and instilled a positive outlook on how I view the world. Being surrounded by change makers inspires my choices on a daily basis.”

While we cannot predict such personal and often life-transforming outcomes, our goal to create a dynamic and caring community of youth and adult mentors is very intentional. They come back week after week because it feels good to be fully seen and heard, and because kindness is a core value. They engage in meaningful work with their own hands, while nature provides a healing backdrop to their current stress and often the trauma they have survived. A thoughtful group setting can build a sense of community and skills for communication. Alternately or in addition, the mentorship or presence of a trusted adult can be critical during the teen years, especially for those without. Such presence can be as simple as caring and listening, or as involved as rides to interesting events or college visits for those unable to do so otherwise.

Young people of today have for their whole lives, been bombarded with junk and fast food, fed excessive technology and witnessed fear-mongering in the media and out of the mouths of too many politicians. Add to that institutional racism, classism, heterosexism and ableism. And too often, prescription of pharmaceuticals is provided as the sole means of addressing anxiety or depression, possibly amplified by any of these societal plagues. In rural communities especially, the sense of and actual isolation runs contrary to the period of adolescence when spreading one's wings with wonder and independence is a natural thing. Given all of this, why wouldn't many young people shut down or check out? I do too sometimes, even with a life abundant with loving friends and family, ample skills for self-care and relative privilege.

Yet, the human spirit is a remarkable and resilient thing. We have seen time and time again that when young people have the space and support to create and participate in meaningful ways, life expands. And, as throughout history and as hundreds of thousands of young people are actively showing us now, they create and lead their own movements for social change. As spoken by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in his

radical 1967 speech, Beyond Vietnam: “Perhaps a new spirit is rising among us. If it is, let us trace its movement, and pray that our inner being may be sensitive to its guidance. For we are deeply in need of a new way beyond the darkness that seems so close around us.”

Deb Habib lives in Orange with her husband, and Seeds of Solidarity/SOL Garden co-founder, Ricky Baruc. Deb holds a Doctorate in Education from the University of Massachusetts and is the proud parent of Levi, an awesome young person.
