

What It Means to Put Youth in the Driver's Seat

“ There have been numerous occasions where adults have said things like, ‘you will make the decision,’ or ‘your input is valued,’ when in reality it never works that way. At least it was never the case until I became a Youth Peace Leader for the Social Fabric Initiative. I was told that the youth would be making all of the decisions, and I could not believe it. Part of me was still kind of skeptical because I was not going to believe it until I saw it happen. But for the first time in my life, it was true.” — Kaseba Chibweth, Social Fabric Initiative (SFI) Season 1 Youth Peace Leader



The SFI Interns act as liaisons between the Youth Peace Leaders, SFI Mentors, and program staff. They create the space in which the Youth Peace Leaders can think innovatively and learn what it means to be Changemakers.

Adults often look to youth as future leaders, and we construct our programs and curricula around how best to prepare them for success later in life. With that mindset, we can easily fail to recognize their power as leaders now. Yet, youth all over the world are spearheading efforts on [voter registration](#), [peace and security](#), [environmentalism](#), [gun safety](#) and [menstrual rights](#), among many other issues. Youth are leading change and engineering creative solutions to social justice and environmental problems not just in their own backyards but world-wide. They have built incredible online networks and social movements that bring together millions of people despite their differences.

We at the Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice (Kroc IPJ) wanted to help cultivate youth peace leadership in our own communities, so we created the Social Fabric Initiative (SFI), a program that takes a multi-dimensional and intergenerational approach to peacebuilding and changemaking through the creation of Threads: small and diverse teams of Youth Peace Leaders, a university Intern and a field-based Mentor. This Thread spends the summer designing and implementing a small-scale community change project on an issue about which the youth are passionate.

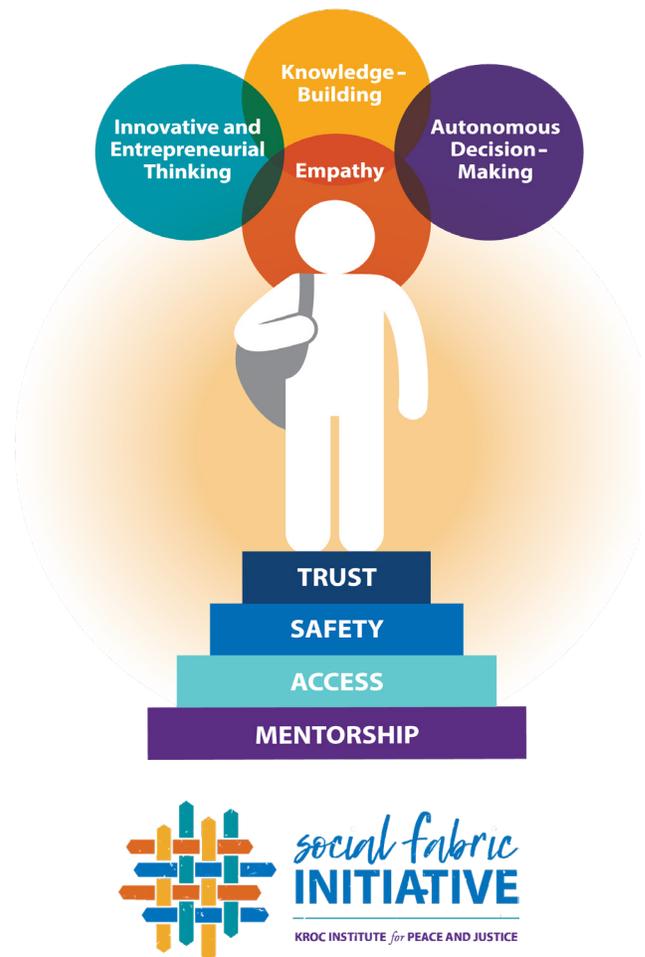
We were ready to launch a program that would open space for youth to take the lead as creative Changemakers. What we weren't expecting was to have youth wait for us to tell them what to do.

KEY CAPACITIES FOR YOUTH PEACE LEADERSHIP

SFI's summer programming launches with an opportunity for Youth Peace Leaders to meet local professionals—their potential Mentors—working on environmental and social justice issues in our San Diego and Tijuana communities. This is a chance for the youth to learn about the issues and decide with whom they would like to work. The Mentors' role is to be a guiding light, to offer insight on the context of an issue, and to provide feedback on the feasibility and potential impact of the youth's project ideas—not to provide a project and tell the Youth Peace Leaders what to do. Yet, at our 2018 Season 1 launch event, many youth approached these potential Mentors and asked them questions like, "If I worked with you, what would our project be?" Truly putting youth in the driver's seat sounded exciting to us, so the youth's hesitation and disbelief when given this opportunity caught us off guard.

Most of the Season 1 Youth Peace Leaders entered into the program with the assumption that they would be told what to do—that they would be conduits for someone else's ideas. When they began to realize that this was not how SFI worked, many of them were able to shift quickly and set to work, fleshing out their ideas on how to address pressing problems in our community, from plastic pollution to gun violence, juvenile justice to human sex trafficking. Yet, others really struggled with the opportunity to truly make decisions for themselves,

needing first to change how they saw themselves: more as creative engineers than as conduits. We were curious about what accounted for the youth who were ultimately able to seize the opportunity to lead.



We therefore tracked the capacities our Youth Peace Leaders needed in order to lead successfully and what we needed to provide to allow that leadership to take shape. Based on our reflections from Season 1 and an independent evaluation the Kroc IPJ commissioned, we found successful participants had the following four capacities: autonomous decision-making, innovative and entrepreneurial thinking, knowledge-building and empathy.



Although our ultimate goal as educators is to create problem-solvers and thinkers, our standardized-test-driven system is not always set up for that kind of teaching and learning. So, naturally, when I took on this mentorship, I was ready to let the students take the driver's seat but on a well-paved road that I would provide for them. However, the SFI experience was far from a planned-out project handed to them in a classroom. There were no written directions for them to follow, and I think at some point we all felt a little uneasy about it. I knew, as an experienced activist and educator, what problems might arise before they even made the first move. It was interesting to see the Youth Peace Leaders evolve as their project moved from grand, elaborate ideas to a more realistic, detailed plan.

The transformation soon started to happen. Little by little, confidence in their project and themselves started taking over. Their personal strengths and skills learned in school came shining through: the creative mind took over the logo; the writer took over the blog; the team reached out to the community. The collaboration between them was incredible! Four students from different parts of the county, representing different schools and backgrounds, came together to work beautifully, on one common goal. In the end, I had the opportunity to observe first hand the benefits of giving students room to learn, lead and do, while allowing them to struggle along the way.”

— Jessica Moore, educator and SFI Season 1 Mentor, San Diegans for Gun Violence Prevention

AUTONOMOUS DECISION-MAKING

Autonomous decision-making involves independence, self-government and the freedom to act. [Youth need opportunities](#) to experience autonomy so that they can become healthy, productive and successful action-takers as adults.

The ability to take an idea and follow it through with action is an integral step in preparing for adulthood. It's even more important when we are talking about creating change leaders who can make an impact on the world around them.

INNOVATIVE AND ENTREPRENEURIAL THINKING

[Entrepreneurship](#) is less about starting a business and more about developing a mindset for creative and bold thinking. Great innovators are willing to take risks, learn from the mistakes, and iterate

until the design is just right. A social entrepreneur focuses on human-centered design as a way to engineer creative solutions to real-world problems. Youth need to build this set of critical skills in order to successfully launch into the 21st-century working world.



At the Summit Event, Youth Peace Leaders share their projects with SFI Mentors and program staff, community members, local organizations, families, and Kroc School faculty, staff and networks.

KNOWLEDGE-BUILDING

Knowledge-building refers to generating, synthesizing and sharing knowledge in a way that allows the individual to become a part of the knowledge itself. In other words, youth with this capacity are able to take what they learn and adapt and apply it in ways that are meaningful to them, their particular contexts and the problems they are addressing. When we allow youth the opportunity to build knowledge (e.g., to learn first-hand from our Mentors about the context of the issues and then to conceive projects that integrate this knowledge), the experience fosters their ability to design creative solutions based on evidence, best practices and genuine need.

“ *In the beginning, the Youth Peace Leaders would almost always offer a small suggestion on a project idea, stop at that, and then turn to us interns to ‘take it away.’ Or, some Youth Peace Leaders thought that there was a predetermined outline for each Thread’s project. They didn’t realize that each Thread was starting from scratch and that they had the ultimate say in their project. As Interns, we had to take a step back and learn how to get them to trust us and fully realize that they were in charge. We were there to provide the infrastructure and guidance in a safe and creative space. Eventually, we found that, because the youth in SFI had the opportunity to be in the driver’s seat and act on issues about which they were passionate, they felt like they had control and learned how to channel their passions into constructive and positive solutions. It took a lot of encouragement to get the Youth Peace Leaders to think creatively and independently; once they did, however, the projects quickly flourished.*”

— Paige Greco, SFI Season 1 Intern

EMPATHY

Higher-order thinking does not fully mature until the early 20s; therefore, building empathy in teens happens in pieces: while they still may not be able to share or relate to the emotion of another person, they are able to take the perspective of the other. Creating space to build empathy in our youth participants increases their understanding of diverse perspectives, allows them to connect to others despite their differences, increases their ability to reflect, and encourages openness. For example, Youth Peace Leaders designing a project to impact homelessness will be more effective the better they can understand the perspective of someone experiencing it.



As a positive youth development program, it is our responsibility to provide safety, trust, access, and mentorship.

KEY ENABLERS OF YOUTH PEACE LEADERSHIP

At the Kroc IPJ, we reflected not just on the capacities youth need to be effective leaders but also on the enabling conditions we can provide in order to strengthen those capacities. We identified four enablers that it is our responsibility as a

positive youth-serving program to ensure are in place: safety, access, mentorship and trust.

SAFETY

In the mind of a developing teen, fear of judgment can be paralyzing. That is why providing a safe space to be bold and take risks without fear of judgment is critical if we want to see results. A safe space means there is a lot of freedom to be autonomous but in an environment set with clear boundaries and high support.

ACCESS

Even if the desire to participate is there, access can be a major roadblock. Access includes creative solutions to transportation issues, scholarships to assist with program tuition, and funding support for project design and implementation. But, for SFI, it also involves targeted outreach to every corner of San Diego county to ensure that the program's participant base represents our county's youth demographics. It also means that we utilize our position as a university-based institute to open pathways to college and career.

MENTORSHIP

Youth Peace Leaders receive guidance on context and idea generation from Mentors working directly on the issues and gain access to the Mentors' networks, but they also receive a different kind of mentorship from the Interns—mentorship on how to sustain motivation, build strong and cohesive teams, and inspire others. And reverse mentorship exists, too: Mentors are able to glean innovative and solutions-based approaches from youthful perspectives, and the Interns learn much about what it means to be a positive youth leader through their experiences working directly with the Youth Peace Leaders.

TRUST

It can be difficult sometimes for youth themselves to understand on a deep level that we are trusting them to lead. Even though they might have the capacity and the willingness to lead, they still may hesitate and look for us to tell them what to do. To live up to our claim of putting youth in the driver's seat, we consistently need to reiterate that they are the ones making the decisions and we, as program staff, are there to provide guidance and keep it safe. During Season 1, it took time—something we were not expecting—but eventually it sank in with our Youth Peace Leaders. We trusted them to be creative and solutions-orientated, and we proved that by allowing them to make mistakes, work through it, and keep going—with us there the entire time to support them—they could succeed.



SFI Youth Peace Leaders represent the diversity of San Diego's youth. They come from all walks of life and every corner of the county. Diversity in our participant base encourages a depth and range in perspective that is critical to our ability to make an impact.

CONCLUSION

The Social Fabric Initiative was founded on the idea that empowering youth as Peace Leaders and Changemakers now can have significant positive effects on the overall resilience of the communities

in which they live. Over the course of SFI's first season, however, we learned that, as eager as they may be, many youth still need significant encouragement to fully embrace the opportunity to lead. Having been told what to do all their lives, many youth are disoriented when they find out—either upon entering SFI or later upon graduating from high school—that it is up to them to blaze their own paths. Our responsibility, therefore, is to provide an environment for these youth where the risk-taking of genuine leadership can happen in relative safety, supporting them to become courageous, innovative, empathic leaders now and as adults.



Tina Medina is the Program Officer for the Social Fabric Initiative.

ABOUT

The Joan B. Kroc School of Peace Studies (Kroc School) at the University of San Diego is the global hub for peacebuilding and social innovation. Founded in 2007, the Kroc School equips and empowers innovative Changemakers to shape more peaceful and just societies. It offers master's degrees in peace and justice, social innovation, conflict management and resolution, and a dual degree in peace and law — programs which have attracted diverse and dynamic students from more than 50 countries who want to lead change. The Kroc School is also home to the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice, the Trans-Border Institute, and the Center for Peace and Commerce (a partnership with the University of San Diego School of Business) — award-winning entities which further enable the Kroc School to take applied learning beyond the classroom. Through groundbreaking research and forward-thinking programs, the Kroc School is shaping a future in which peaceful co-existence is the new normal. To learn more, visit sandiego.edu/peace

The Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice (Kroc IPJ) is the bridge between learning and practice within the Kroc School. The core of the Kroc IPJ's mission is to learn with peacemakers how to end cycles of violence and build peace, both locally and globally.

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