

## Minnesota Alliance with Youth: Bringing Youth to the Table

Rebecca Jarvis

**I**t's not hard to quantify how many young people's lives have been touched by the Minnesota Alliance with Youth. Any progress report will tell you that the Alliance works with over 100 communities and that 275 Commitment Makers pledged their services to Minnesota children.

But the real story of the Alliance exists outside the numbers: In the quality of work; the individuals, businesses, and organizations carrying out its message; and the people, like me, who lead completely different lives today because of its remarkable influence.

If the adults who sit on the Alliance Steering Committee (and who carry out its vision every

day) hadn't believed in all the young people who make up the Alliance, reaching the state of Minnesota would have never been possible. If those adults had not picked us up after school, if they had not scheduled meetings so that we could make it to them, if they had not cared, the Alliance would never have been possible.

The Alliance worked because Donna Gillen, Joanne Benson, Blanton Bessinger, Paula Beugen, Dale Blyth, Sarah Dixon, Bonnie Esposito, Larry Fonnest, Marlys Johnson, Jim Kielsmeier, Mae Schunk, and the other adults who sit on the Alliance Steering Committee shared leadership with us.

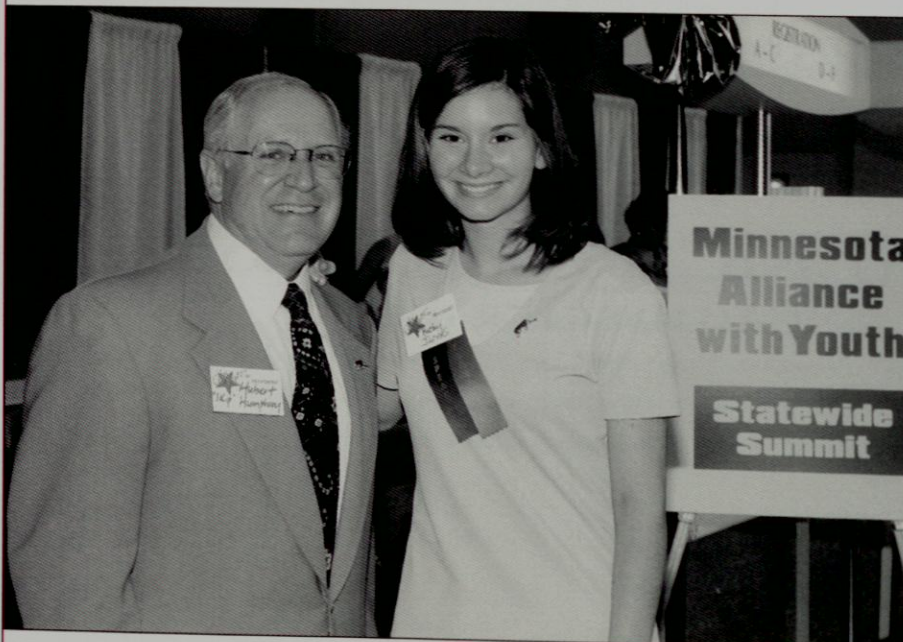
They actually asked us how we were doing and they made sure we were doing well.

### Alliance with Youth

In the summer of 1997, forty people representing government, nonprofits, businesses, churches, and schools sat at a large table in a warm room in the Minnesota state capitol building. I remember sitting somewhere on the end. It bothered me that I was the only young person at the table. Luckily it bothered a lot of other people, too. In retrospect, if no one else had cared that I was the only young person, I probably would still be the lone fifteen-year-old at the end of the table. However, a chorus of others joined my voice of dissatisfaction.

Rather than go about our way as a committee attempting to serve youth but not engaging them, we made our first decision, perhaps our

Becky Jarvis with Former Minnesota Attorney General Skip Humphrey at the first state summit.



most crucial decision, to call ourselves the Minnesota Alliance *with* Youth. We then adjourned the meeting and agreed that at least five new young people should be added to our committee. From then on, I never was the only young person at the Alliance's table.

The board members showed respect toward the young people by asking us to sit in on meetings. They then showed ingenuity by having us create the Alliance mission, vision, and goals with them. Even at that time, however, I sensed some fear and uneasiness in both the young people and adults. No one ever told us it would be easy to work together. I guess some assumed it would, and some assumed it wouldn't and perhaps the dichotomy between both preconceived notions could have torn the group apart, but instead, it drew us together.

In the beginning, we discussed all of the conflicts—When can *everyone* meet? Where can *everyone* meet? How will *everyone* get to meetings? Who will lead the meetings and speak the Alliance's message? No, we did not come to a consensus. Like any group of forty people working together, we each had to make certain sacrifices. But the Alliance Steering Committee did take into account school hours, it did help aid youth in transportation and location, and lastly it made sure that its leadership represented its goal. We decided that I would co-chair the organization with Lt. Governor Benson. If we couldn't live by our own standards, who could?

The Alliance worked out most of its logistical kinks in the beginning. It also worked out what most young people will tell you is much more important to its success, that is, the way it views and treats young people. At Alliance meetings, people listened to me (they had to because they knew they would be giving me a ride home afterwards and that I would ask them questions about what I said!).

### Youth Involvement, Adult Trust

While I tell my story of the Alliance, I do so knowing that hundreds of other young people would say nearly the same things. Adults trusted me. They listened when I spoke. They made sure that what I said counted by backing it up with action. It changed my life when they believed that I, fifteen-year-old Becky Jarvis, could be the voice of the Minnesota Alliance with Youth and let me address large groups of people, including our state legislature.

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Today, the Alliance table is no longer a ratio of five young people to forty adults. Instead, about twenty youth and twenty adults attend each meeting. Throughout communities in Minnesota, the same reality exists. Boards that were once made up by adults are asking young people to come, take part, and vote their opinions. Organizations that used to rely on a standard system of adult-only leadership are entrusting young people to help.

We still have a long way to go, but the adults I have met through the Alliance have opened the road we are walking down now. If businesses and organizations continue to take down their roadblocks and trust that young people can be the solution, rather than the problem, you'll hear many more stories from young people like me, who believe that anything can be accomplished if people just leave their comfort zones, listen, and act.