Camping, Recreation, and the Arts

On a tavern wall in Madrid there is a sign that says:
"It is forbidden to sing."

On an airport wall in Rio de Janeiro there is a sign that says:
"It is forbidden to play with the luggage carts."

That means there are still people that sing,
there are still people that play.

▪ **Eduardo Galeano** ▪

YMCA Ukraine Program Festival 2004

Mediums for development

YMCAs organize youth-friendly camping, recreation and arts programming to promote character development and civic responsibility. Through singing, playing games or talking around a campfire, YMCA programs nurture leadership and responsibility, develop life skills and self-confidence, and foster positive behavior and a respect for diversity.

Camping pioneers

YMCAs have played a pioneering role in organized camping over the past 150 years and continue to develop innovative camping adventures to this day. Early on, it was recognized that camping had an extraordinary developmental and educational value.

In a camp setting, participants must rely on cooperation, teamwork and decision-making skills. YMCAs utilize camping as a 24-hour youth development activity. The informal aspects of camp life contribute as significantly to the physical, mental, social and spiritual growth of the participants as do structured camp activities.

International camps are another component of YMCA history, combining the benefits of camping with international exchange, education and community service. YMCAs around the world organize International Work Camps each year for youths from around the world. Through daily outdoor and group activities (biking, climbing, telling stories and discussing traditions around a campfire), and community service (tree planting or rehabilitating a community building), campers form strong and lasting bonds. Over one to two weeks, young people develop strong bonds through cultural exchanges and shared experiences.

Camping out is an experience that every girl and every boy should have…

There are certain sides of our nature that will be underdeveloped if we have not the campfire for our teacher. The experience that softens the heart and kindles friendship and the imagination is no less educative than the knowledge that instructs the head.

Henry S. Curtis, 1914

Recreation for body, mind and spirit

"Recreation," taken literally, means: to create anew, to restore and refresh. For YMCAs, recreation is key to refreshing the body, mind and spirit. It is also instrumental for building and creating vital youth assets.

Recreational sports contribute to the health and well-being of young people. Studies show that participation in sports increases self-esteem, scholastic performance and goal achievement. It also decreases the potential for substance abuse. Research consistently demonstrates that the positive impact of participating in sports is even higher for young women.

> "Involvement in sports increases self-esteem in the domains of athletic and scholastic competence, physical appearance and global self-worth."
>
> **Search Institute** study on the impact of youth development programs

Persevering Through Conflict

▼ A best practice from the East Jerusalem YMCA ▼

If "to recreate" is to create anew and restore, nowhere is recreation more necessary than in zones of conflict and hardship where goals of education, employment and mobility are challenged by insecurity and hopelessness. In the West Bank and Gaza, maintaining youth opportunities for play, enjoyment and self-expression are critical.

The East Jerusalem YMCA is combining recreation, camping and the arts to create safe spaces for youth. These are places where young people can renew self-esteem and heal wounds of the spirit and the mind. The Youth Opportunities II Program, supported by the USAID West Bank and Gaza Mission, builds youth capacity for employment through training, education and economic development. The program focuses on creating recreational opportunities, including camping and after-school activities, for abled and disabled youths in urban and rural areas.

Over five years—a period when few organizations have been able to operate effectively in the region—dozens of youth service centers, community playgrounds and multi-purpose recreational centers have been newly constructed or rehabilitated throughout the West Bank and Gaza. The centers now serve more than 250,000 youths. Summer camps have continued to operate, providing young people with unique and safe opportunities for asset building, community service, relationship strengthening and play. Demand for camping is increasing and currently exceeds YMCA capacity.

Participation in recreational and competitive sports is particularly important for youths with disabilities. It creates a positive impact on the physical and psychological well-being of participants.

The East Jerusalem YMCA specializes in recreational activities for disabled youth, including sports leagues. In addition, through infrastructural projects, accessibility to schools, houses and public buildings across the West Bank and Gaza has been strengthened.

The Beit Sahour Youth and Sports Center, recently opened near Bethlehem, provides affordable recreational services to 10,000 disabled and at-risk youths. The center has become home to a wide range of community development activities and is used for events such as Christmas parties and for gatherings during Ramadan. Work is underway to build a second YMCA youth and community recreational center in Ramallah.

The East Jerusalem YMCA has found a way to continue and strengthen its work, despite instability in the region. Youth and community development programs are particularly needed in the area, and the YMCA remains a major source of innovation and hope for tens of thousands of youths in the West Bank and Gaza.

Research conducted by the YMCA of Montevideo, **Uruguay** and other YMCAs across **South America**, shows that recreational programs are valuable for developing critical thinking and understanding, especially when combined with structured participation and reflection. Rather than focusing on competitive goals, YMCA programs and games foster peace, respect, cooperation and solidarity.

Creative explorations

Like recreation and camping, the arts provide opportunities for creative expression. Through pictures, writing, music, stories, physical activity and other forms of expression, arts enable young people to record, explore and celebrate their culture.

Art work by youth from the YMCA of Zimbabwe

YMCA arts programs benefit youth participants, their communities and YMCAs in a number of ways:

- The arts provide creative ways to address internal and external challenges, and provide opportunities for self-expression, critical thinking, mentoring and imagination. Participation in arts programs is proven to increase test scores and academic achievement, especially for youths at risk.
- Arts programs provide a safe and unique platform where community members may explore other cultures, learn more about their own community and confront complex issues.
- Arts programs are effective for increasing membership and outreach, engaging community members who are not physically active and developing new partnerships with local artists, cultural organizations, and public institutions. In addition, these programs generate new sources of income.

Animating the message

The YMCA "Ten Sing" initiative is an example of how youth development goals are achieved through the arts. Ten Sing is a teen program that combines performing arts (music, drama and dance) with leadership and character development goals. Popular in YMCAs throughout Europe, Russia, Ukraine and Belarus, the Ten Sing program consists of a peer-led group process in which participants set goals—such as implementing a public concert—and then work cooperatively to achieve these goals. Participants take on the leadership roles of band leader, drama leader and choreographer.

> Arts activities generate opportunities among youth for self-expression, critical thinking, mentoring, risk taking, creativity and conflict resolution

Dance, music and drama are often used as tools to animate and communicate youth development messages, such as HIV prevention or anti-stigma messages. Through popular and creative forms, YMCA messages reach new and diverse audiences in ways that are both comprehensible and transformative, challenging audiences to think analytically about issues that affect their lives.

Advocates for fun

The YMCA Honduras runs a Ludoteca in the impoverished inner city community of Colonia San Francisco in Tegucigalpa (the capital city of Honduras). Ludoteca loosely translates to "a place to learn through games." Founded 12 years ago, the Ludoteca currently serves 100 participants ages 3-14.

At the YMCA, the Ludoteca is a safe haven in the community and encourages children to use imagination and games to better themselves and their surroundings. At the Ludoteca, children and teens take advantage of a variety of games, books and puppets. These free-time activities stimulate learning and community interaction. When applied to early childhood, the Ludoteca methodology is proven to improve social skills, community relationships, physiological functions, intelligence and self-esteem.

Ask us about…

- ☑ The YMCA's National Writer's Voice Program with indigenous youth
- ☑ What brought 8,000 YMCA youth together in Prague in 2003?

Having pioneered youth programs for camping, recreation and the arts, the YMCA will continue to be an advocate for holistic youth development strategies in which play, fun, creative expression and campfires play a fundamental role in building strong youths, strong families and strong communities.

To achieve our common goals in camping, recreation, and the arts, the YMCA of the USA partners with national YMCA movements in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States, and the Middle East. YMCAs everywhere work jointly with local communities, local and national governments, faith-based organizations and NGOs, the private sector and the international donor community.

The YMCA has collaborated with:

European Youth Foundation ▪ UNICEF ▪ United States Agency for International Development