

# Building Community as a Cool Commodity: Empowering Teens as Local Changemakers

by Emily Hope Dobkin

In preparation for when historic surfboards returned from Hawaii to Santa Cruz in July 2015, teens in the Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History (MAH) youth program, Subjects to Change (S2C), helped create a section of the exhibit *Princes of Surf*.<sup>1</sup> They served as cultural researchers who explored the remarkable story of these surfboards and through the story of surfing learned the concept of leaving an unintended legacy. Diving into this story helped these teens feel more connected to Santa Cruz's history, discover how traditions grow and change while a community identity is formed, and gain skills in documenting and presenting local culture.



In the summer of 1885, three Hawaiian princes, David Kawanānākoa, Edward Keliʻiahonui, and Jonah Kuhio Kalanianaʻole, started Santa Cruz on its journey to becoming a city of surf. While visiting family, they introduced surfing to the world beyond Hawaii by crafting surfboards from Santa Cruz's redwood lumber. They rode the waves here and returned to Hawaii with their boards. The princes were teenagers at the time; never did they intend to leave such a legacy in Santa Cruz. The impact of their stay rippled from coast to coast and shaped the cultural identity of Santa Cruz County.

On this 130<sup>th</sup> anniversary of their epic ride, two of the three original redwood surfboards returned to Santa Cruz to be displayed at the museum. In preparation for the *Princes of Surf* exhibit, S2Cers explored how these boards set the course for developing Santa Cruz's surfing identity. They curated a section of the exhibit that includes interviews they conducted with three local teens who are "making waves" in Santa Cruz through their own talents and crafts.

When S2Cers were first invited by the museum's exhibit team to participate in this process, they knew their first challenge was to establish that they were not only changemakers, but spacemakers: they believe in making space to empower more teens to get involved with our community. They decided to use the exhibit space to celebrate and honor three local teens they believe will have a legacy in Santa Cruz County.

Their first step was figuring out exactly who those three teens were. At an event they hosted in late April at the museum, they set up a "nomination station," asking visitors to share names of teens who they think are making an impact. From there, they narrowed down a list, did further research on these local teens, and made their final selection. Thereafter, S2Cers designed questions and arranged interviews with the three teens they selected to highlight in the exhibit.



"I liked asking the subjects, 'What is your advice for other teens wanting to make a difference in their community?' It was inspiring to hear each of them be so transparent and genuine in their responses. This question seemed to come the most natural to all of them," explained Mikaela Byers, former S2Cer and Youth Media Intern at the MAH.

For teens interviewing teens, the experience is much more than simply gathering information. It gives them a chance to bridge differences and share with one another. "This project gave me exposure to other teens that I otherwise wouldn't have connected with. It was great to finally talk with people I had only passed in hallways," Mikaela further explains.

As a teen who has been sparked by the documentary process and plans on studying film in college, Mikaela took on the role of editing and compiling the majority of the [Teens Making Waves](#) film for the exhibit. Through this, she learned how to share a story that reflects her community: "Making nonfiction film is my favorite form of documentation. I've loved learning everything from interviewing to the editing process. I think documentary film is special because you are able to combine both images and sound. Both photo and film are able to utilize the power of visual art, but video is special because of the amount of effort and time that you (as the director producer, etc.) pour into it. Getting the footage is just the beginning."

The resulting message that Mikaela and S2Cers produced is powerful: "Young people are often underestimated in their ability to create positive change in the community. It's unlikely that the Hawaiian princes knew just how integral their surf session would be to the U.S., and the world. This video shows three teens who have very different passions, yet all have carved out space for themselves in the community. Teens will make the biggest impact on the community when they pursue things that they love to do, whether it be surfing, singing, science, or skating."



Subjects to Change is a youth-driven program that empowers teenagers to engage as active community leaders through community discovery, collaborative arts, and creative experiences. Based upon the youth empowerment model, S2C has two primary goals: 1) Empower teenagers as community changemakers using the arts to develop projects that inspire positive change on local issues that matter to them and 2) Create opportunities for teenagers to become community ambassadors at the museum and for other community projects.

Through skill development, community collaborations, and community-based projects, S2Cers learn how they can make an impact both on an individual and a collective level. Participating teens share their passion for activism through a series of informal art workshops. Whether using improv theatre techniques to complete a team-building exercise, exploring the root causes of a local issue through a printmaking project, or expressing distant relations to our underutilized river with poetry, S2Cers are exposed to a variety of local culture and artistic media to inspire change while finding their own creative voices. This group loved taking on the challenge of conducting research into the living legacy of surf culture in Santa Cruz.

## How S2C Works

S2C runs on the trimester system, serving a cohort of 15 to 20 students ages 12 to 18 from across the county per term. We have found that teens rarely have the opportunity to interact with other teens beyond their schools. S2C aims to connect youth throughout the county using art, culture, and social activism to empower teens across differences and locations.

During their first term, S2Cers research and identify community issues that they feel most passionate about. From there, teens brainstorm how to raise awareness on those issues creatively. A key issue that youth have identified is the lack of creative safe spaces for teens to go to on Friday. To fill this gap, S2Cers created a space by initiating bimonthly Teen Nights at the museum.

During their second term, S2Cers hone in on a specific theme related to the social issues they have been exploring and focus on implementing their ideas at Teen Nights to serve the greater youth community. They collaborate with local community members, organizations, artists, and musicians. Additionally, they create their own interactive social justice themed projects for Teen Nights. Teen Nights are free and attract about 300 diverse teenagers to the museum, allowing more youth to get involved with their community.

In their third term, S2Cers become further integrated into the museum's regular programming by volunteering at our public events and festivals as activity facilitators. S2Cers begin to take on leadership skills by engaging with diverse visitors, stepping out of their comfort zones, and leading strangers in creative and cultural activities. S2Cers also intern in various departments at the museum or organizations within the community.





The heart of what S2ers do is initiate change through building community. It's been exciting to see how Santa Cruz teens flourish not only individually but also collectively as a group and beyond by encouraging additional teens to connect with their community. I've been thinking about how the tools that I've acquired in developing S2C can be used in other educational settings. How can we get more arts for social change happening in classrooms? The following are ways that I think any educator can apply what we've done with S2C in their learning environments.

**Explore the foundation: Self-identity vs. community identity.** Taking time to establish that teens (or any students) are meaningful contributors to their community is crucial. Within S2C, we emphasize how communities are not built just by architects or city planners; communities are built upon connections with one another, positive relationships, and a sense of belonging. We begin our time together by completing a series of identity workshops and projects to create a safe space to explore larger issues in our local community. This not only bonds the group, teens are also inspired by one another and develop camaraderie. Through further discussions and ventures into the community, teens later move on to explore community needs and assets, as well as issues that surface for them on a daily basis.

**Get out there: Identify, connect, and collaborate.** We always start with a community mapping activity. I ask teens to doodle a map of their personal communities. Every time I lead this activity and ask S2Cers for their thoughts, a common response is, "Wow, my community is really small; I just go to school, then to x (soccer practice, band rehearsal, etc.), and then home." Sharing various resources, inspiring community members, getting out in the community, and doing activities like a photography scavenger hunt of downtown Santa Cruz allows our teens a shift in perspective and new ways to get involved with their community. We also focus a considerable amount of time on our collaborative partnerships. All spring we participate in various community events across the county to share what we're about and learn from other organizations.

After one outreach project, S2Cer Mariah reflected, "This experience really opened my eyes to how little exposure I have had to Watsonville and all of the wonderful people that live there. It is so important that we continue to bridge the divide between north county and south county. It feels really good knowing that we as changemakers have the power to do that in a creative way through collaborative art projects...and we must."<sup>2</sup>

**Let them build and more will come.** When creating this program about two years ago, we learned that in teen centers and other youth programs across Santa Cruz, teenagers are recipients of programming, not co-creators or leaders. S2C gives teenagers real responsibility and leadership opportunities in a supportive environment.



Within a structured system, teens are given the reins to plan their own events and projects. Initially, S2Cers brainstorm issues that affect them and their peers directly: public safety, litter and pollution, homelessness, gender stereotyping, the Santa Cruz County divide, mental illness stigmatization, and the juvenile justice system. They then create a theme incorporating these local issues, followed by making marketing materials, meeting with potential collaborators, and designing interactive activities. Amazing projects have resulted from this such as a [photo booth that explores stereotypes](#),<sup>3</sup> the establishment of gender neutral bathrooms at the museum, and a [self-care zine](#)<sup>4</sup> highlighting local resources for teens. Beyond the core group that meets weekly,

hundreds more teens have increased exposure to community building through Teen Nights. These events ultimately offer new ways of exploring Santa Cruz by providing teens a space to share perspectives creatively while promoting social activism.

**Changemaking leads to spacemaking.** As teens design projects and experiences, they are making space for others to connect to our community in fully engaged ways. Recently, S2Cers incorporated an open mic into an event. I had concerns. What if no one signed up? Did we have a backup playlist? The first person who got up on [stage sang Frank Sinatra<sup>5</sup>](#); by the end of the song, the floor was packed with couples dancing. The last duo sang a song from *The Little Mermaid*. In between, singers, songwriters, and poets shared their work. It was not nearly what I anticipated (in the best of ways), and I applauded S2Cers for creating a format for that all to take place. It was an awesome example of how they provided a space for creative voices to be heard, shared, and empowered.

It is imperative that we keep unlocking this kind of leadership potential among young people. When youth support one another in community building, there is exponentially a positive ripple effect within a place, whether it be a community center, school, or museum.

At the core, S2C is helping teens learn who they are and how to make meaning within the community where they live. They are exploring what shapes our community and celebrating the subcultures that exist here in Santa Cruz: the surfers, the poets, the Pacific Avenue street performers, the artists, the musicians, the farmers' market regulars, the young people. They discover that it is cool to play a vital role in their community, and in participating in the rich expressions of Santa Cruz culture.



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#### Notes

1. <http://www.santacruzmah.org/2015/the-birth-of-surf-city-july-3-october-25-2015>
2. See <http://subjectstochangesantacruz.tumblr.com/post/119937787225/s2c-on-the-road>
3. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/santacruzmah/sets/72157644437307071>
4. <http://subjectstochangesantacruz.tumblr.com/post/117273695579/giving-out-free-zines-on-self-care-packed-full-of>
5. <https://www.facebook.com/santacruzmah/videos/vb.107670235978659/820968551315487/?type=2&theater>

#### URL

*Teens Making Waves* film <https://youtu.be/3d9cj-UDVxU>.