

Empowering young women to take action

Nine years ago, in the dining room of her rented Brooklyn Heights apartment, Cecilia Clarke started the Sadie Nash Leadership Project (SNLP) organization. A non-profit promoting leadership, activism and service among low-income young women, SNLP has grown from a summer program for 16 girls to annually serving around 300 young women, ages 14-22, representing all five boroughs and over 50 public high schools in the city. In 2008, SNLP brought its program to young women in Newark, N.J.

"We are small potatoes with a great impact!" explains Clarke, SNLP's founder.

If their mission is any indication, "great impact" might be an understatement. "Our mission is to strengthen, empower, and equip young women as agents for change in their world. We run leadership programs for low-income young women to encourage them to strive for a more just and equitable world, beginning with their own community," says Clarke.

The National Summer Learning Association named Sadie Nash one of two winners of the 2010 Excellence in Summer Learning Awards. The annual award recognizes summer programs that demonstrate excellence in accelerating academic achievement and promoting healthy development for young people.

Clarke, who was recently filmed for the clothing designer, Eileen Fisher's "This Working Life" video series, doesn't take all the credit for the success of Sadie Nash. She attributes it to a 14-person board and her dedicated staff. "We are small, fierce and well-run," she says.

So, why the name Sadie Nash? Nash, Clarke's great-grandmother, was the daughter of Nebraskan pioneers and a society woman who worked with the poor. When riding a trolley car on a cold winter day in December 1902, Sadie noticed a shivering infant. She stood up in the middle of the car, lifted her skirts and shimmied out of her petticoat to wrap it around the baby. The story of the affluent woman taking off her petticoats to warm a baby in need made big news, appearing in publications around the country.

"It is the spirit of Sadie Nash and her impulse to take action, to brush convention aside and to lead by example, for which SNLP was named," Clarke explains.

SNLP helps instill that spirit with its programs. "We teach classes relevant to young women and their experience," explains Clarke. For example, one of the academic courses on women and politics — "You be the Judge" — is a hands-on reenactment of relative supreme court cases. "Behind the Label" looks at women and the garment industry; other courses analyze sexism and racism. SNLP also offers training in effective, ethical and collaborative leadership and creative courses including "Art and Activism," a theater class and "Freedom Songs," an exploration of poetry written by women in prison.

Young women in the program also meet role models with similar backgrounds including city councilwoman Melissa Mark-



Cecilia Clarke started the Sadie Nash Leadership Project nine years ago to help empower young women to become agents of change. Photo by Michael Chung for Eileen Fisher, Inc.

Viverito (D-East Harlem) and Tina Chang, poet laureate of Brooklyn.

Young women who have participated in this program have said of this experience:

"SNLP helped me find complete and enduring joy with who I am and who I will become."

"We give each other the energy to change the world."

SNLP has grown from its humble beginnings at Clarke's apartment. Today, the plywood plank across two saw horses that was her first desk now serves as a conference

table in the foundation's home at St. Anne's, located in the parish building of the Brooklyn Heights church. Clarke has grown, too.

"When your work is deeply meaningful and fulfilling, it feels rich, generative and creative. It's central to my life," says Clarke.

"I think that we are doing something unique and we are changing the lives of young women on a daily basis.

"It is my dream that as many low-income women as possible, around the country or elsewhere, will have access to the kind of programs we are doing," says Clarke. "We

know we're having an impact; it's unique and we know we want to share it."

For more information call (718) 422-8664 or visit www.sadienash.org.

— Holly Reich

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