

GROWING YOUNG HEROES

*Real people in real churches who are
engaging the next generation*



Produced by the Fuller Youth Institute

FULLER YOUTH INSTITUTE

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Copy: Daisy Rosales and Brad Griffin
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THE STORY BEHIND GROWING YOUNG HEROES

Our team at the Fuller Youth Institute spent the last four years studying standout churches engaging young people. With all the recent bad news about churches shrinking, aging, and closing their doors, we wanted to find those that were doing the opposite: reaching and inspiring the next generation of teenagers and young adults.

And we found them. We met them. We traveled more than 80,000 miles altogether just to speak with them face to face. From young adults to senior leaders, these congregations were full of life—and most of all, every church shared six core commitments in common.

Inspired, we wrote and published *Growing Young: 6 Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church* in September 2016. Soon after that, we started hearing from pastors, volunteers, and parents who loved these ideas and wanted to see them implemented in their own churches. But they wondered, what does it really look like? How is warmth embodied? How do churches truly prioritize young people? They wanted more examples.

We are convinced that the answers lay somewhere, if a bit hidden, in the life of every church. In nearly every congregation, there are unsung heroes who show up tirelessly to mentor, teach, lead, and love young people. We also know this small-but-mighty tribe of world-changers likely receive no special titles or accolades for their hard work. And we want to share their stories, thanking them for leading the way and living out Growing Young long before our research hit the press.

So we asked you, our community of leaders and parents, to tell us about your own Growing Young Heroes. You wrote to us with passion, love, and perhaps a tear in your eye. You nominated individuals who were young and old, male and female, ranging in diverse income and education levels. They all had one thing in common: their love for Jesus and his people. Especially for kids, teenagers, and young adults.

Thank you for sharing their stories with us. Thank you for pouring your heart into these nominations so that we can celebrate these heroes together. It is our joy to share your nominations with the wider church as it seeks to understand and embrace young people.

And as we put this storybook together, we are well aware that there are even more unsung heroes in our midst. We know you see them and love them. We invite you to thank them with us.

Let's make the church the best place for young people to grow.



MYRON S.

Myron has been investing in the lives of youth for decades, primarily through the ministry of Young Life. Now in his seventies, he still went to Young Life camp in July, attended sporting events, knew at least 300 students by name at the high school, met weekly with students who had graduated and were still in the area. Myron was the catalyst to start Young Life at the school nearly seven years ago. The ministry has grown to reach roughly 250 students at Young Life Club every Wednesday at lunch.

Myron embodies Jesus. He meets people where they are and helps bring them closer to God. He is an encourager, one who gives hugs, affirmation, reaching out to all students with a constant theme of grace and inclusion. A retired lawyer, Myron doesn't just love students where they are, but longs to see students make wise choices and move forward in a positive direction. He has helped numerous students find work, navigate getting into college or a certain career path. Myron develops relationships with the parents of students, teachers, administrators and classified employees on campus. He has always recognized the importance

of all aspects of a youth's community.

Some of Myron's biggest fans have been administrative assistants, security guards and coaches. Myron disciplined players on the basketball team for years and has continued to regularly meet with some of the basketball players years after they graduated from high school. He has also disciplined numerous Young Life adult leaders. His laugh disarms even the toughest students, and hundreds of students have been treated to a meal by Myron after a sporting event or practice. **Myron proves to me over and over that youth ministry at its core is not about being "hip," culturally relevant, or aware of what is trending.**

At its core, youth ministry is about loving students. Listening to students. Hearing their fears, joys, and struggles. Always encouraging, always being willing to enter their world, know and value their story. For Myron it is pretty simple, the incarnation of Jesus was the youth ministry model for the church (John 1:14, "The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood"). Myron has been with students at dances, sport practices and games, pep rallies, funerals, walking amongst them during lunch, after school, at camp. He walks where they walk. Always ready to give a hug, to provide a safe place and encouragement. Over the last five months, Myron has been battling cancer that has sidelined him from his usual ministry. It has been difficult for me not to have Myron around campus. Due to less energy and extended time in the hospital and resting at home, Myron is now reaching students more through social media.

He is now receiving hundreds of prayers from students, many of whom he has been faithfully praying for.



VIRGINIA C.

Virginia is a long-time advocate for young people at our church. Every spring she gives each graduating senior a gift along with a handwritten note. Virginia recently invited a group of middle school girls to her home where she shared about her life and faith. This semester she also took a group of fifteen college students to lunch after church to make them feel welcome away from home. **At 103 years old and having been the first female physician in this city, Virginia has a lot of experiences to share. She cares deeply for young people, and continues to work in our church and community to make young people a priority.** Virginia is a wonderful example of how significant connecting generations can be. Her example helps our congregation grow young.



TOM D.

Tom and his wife are raising their 14-year-old granddaughter (since she was a baby). They have also taken in an unrelated teenager who had been mostly homeless. **He volunteers every Sunday in our church as an elementary teacher, working with the special needs kids in our church.** And he now also volunteers Sunday evenings at a different church, because one of the special needs kids at our church attends AWANA there and only responds well to Tom. He is a dedicated hero.



RANDY W.

Randy has been serving the Lord and teens as a youth leader for 25 years! He has served faithfully and sacrificially to help transform the lives of several generations. For the 9 years I served with him in youth ministry, there was not a teenager who didn't love him. He has a deep passion for teaching the Word of God and is gifted to do so in an engaging way. **The reason he has such a fruitful ministry is because the teens know he loves them and he takes a genuine interest in each of their lives. He is always the first one to give teens a hug and offer words of affirmation.** In an overly critical world, I believe this is why teens love Randy and why he has had a lasting impact on several generations.



DALE C.

Dale is passionately serving to make an impact in the lives of our niece and nephew, middle and high school students, and young adults. A week after I accepted a full-time job, our 1- and 2- year old niece and nephew were placed with us. It's been a year now, and he continues to stay home and work while caring for them daily.

In September 2015, three of us started a ministry for young adults. One night a week they come to our home, we prepare a meal (for 20 adults), and we do leadership training. Then on Monday nights the young adults lead their own ministry worship night where they bring a message, testimony, and worship to their peers. **The group has grown to be a powerful outreach in our community.** Dale also stepped in to run the middle/high school youth program after we moved away and then returned. His ministry has made a huge impact over the last 14 years.



TOMMY C.

Tommy has been in youth ministry for 35 years. He has been at our church for over 20 of those years. He serves as the chaplain for the football team, boys' soccer team, and girls' soccer team at one of our local high schools.

While he serves the students and their families at our church, there is a whole culture of students that connect with him on social media even if they don't go to our church. These are students he has met along the way through our students or as a chaplain. Just last week, he was surprised by a visit from a young lady and her mom. They do not go to church with us, but had been connected to our church through her friends. She asked Tommy to perform her wedding this summer. This is definitely not the first time someone outside of our youth ministry has connected with Tommy and has seen him as their minister.

I would say this on my own, but I have also heard others say things about Tommy such as: He's the best of the best. There's no one like Tommy. He's the greatest youth minister you'll find.



BROOKE H.

Brooke works tirelessly to mobilize THIS generation to reach the NEXT generation for Christ. **She can routinely be heard telling our teams of volunteers that children are not the church of tomorrow, but the church of today.** She rallies a team of 300 volunteers weekly to pour into the lives of children at our church where she serves as the Children's Director. I truly believe she is the best in the country at this job. She sacrifices, pushes for excellence, pays attention to details, and (through it all) truly cares for the needs of the individuals involved.

In her spare time, she volunteers at her children's school, and has a huge impact on all with whom she comes into contact. Our city and our church are blessed to have her.



MIKE C.

Mike (and his wife Joy) have decided to be extremely intentional about the way they influence their grandchildren and pass on their faith. Each year, during the week between Christmas and New Years, they hold a "camp" for their grandkids complete with day trips, crafts, and Bible studies. Their grandkids love it!

Mike has used this vision that God started in his heart to begin a "Courageous Grandparents" ministry in our church. It's a ministry directed to resourcing grandparents to help them pass on their faith and influence to the next generations!



DAVID V.

I started a new position in youth ministry last fall at our church. David and his wife came up to me my first night on the job and offered to do "whatever we can" to assist me in my transition into the role. I asked them if they could take on Sunday night youth gatherings while I wrapped my head around the large Wednesday night gatherings and the afterschool program my church hosts. They did.

They took on Sunday nights and grew this ministry to about three times its size in a month's time. Why? How? I think for a couple of reasons: 1) David genuinely loves students and they love him, 2) David is a kid at heart and is amazing at planning fun activities and games that students love, and 3) David always makes a beeline to Jesus at the end of every youth gathering. **He loves to have fun, but even more, desires to see students' hearts connect to Jesus.**

David is handicapped from an accident several years ago, and because of that has been a stay-at-home dad while his wife

works full time. When I approached him 3 months into my job and asked him to be my "right-hand guy," he answered with tears in his eyes. "Yes. You don't even know how much of an answered prayer this is ..."

Come to find out, David had been a youth pastor long before I knew him, and has always had a deep desire to minister to the next generation. When I asked him, it was clear that this was his heart's desire. As of October this year, we have officially brought him on as part-time staff as a senior high/support pastor.

David plans weekly activities for our programming, leads our student leadership/discipleship team, pastors and leads our senior high students, and is also in charge of monthly student outreach events.

Every time he talks about student ministry, I can't help but tear up. He is so passionate and full of God's heart for them. What a treasure and a gift!



KINGSLEY O.

We all know him as Uncle Kingsley. He has general oversight of the entire Junior Church, and he plays a pivotal role for the Teens Church too. **We are so grateful for his dedication towards ensuring that the essence of our faith is passed on to the teenagers.** His counsel and propositions lend credence to his passion and zeal for the work.



HEIDI J.

As a parent, Heidi cared so much about making sure that older high school kids were not getting left out that she started a Bible study in her home for high school boys that helped them feel like they had a place to belong and to grow.

As a pastor, she pioneered a program to help senior high students become deacons and be fully involved members of that team. They help with funerals, they deliver meals, they collect funds to help others, and they've even served communion to the whole church body. They do all this alongside adults and have found a meaningful place to belong. All of that is because of her leadership and taking the vision of a church growing young seriously.



DOC D.

Doc has been a great member of our church who is always helping fix things and keeping our church looking nice. He and his wife also help with youth activities, barbecuing and hosting events from ultimate frisbee to an upcoming Confirmation lunch where he has been my son's mentor. I really appreciate him taking time to share the Lord with my son. He has also helped us with movie nights, making popcorn and running the snow cone machine. Doc has recently retired, and spends his time mentoring and doing lots of things at the church, for which I am grateful. **He and his wife are just there for our kids in a way that some of the other leaders can't be.** I am thankful for Doc and the time that he gives to the church and to our kids too. He is a blessing to our church.



JEN W.

Jen works part-time at our church's Mother's Day Out program, which ministers to young, largely unchurched families by sowing into their kids a few hours a day, allowing mothers to run errands or just get the rest that they've been lacking. **She shows our community how much we love families, and has been one of our church's biggest attractors of the locally unchurched.**

Jen also facilitates our elementary students' small groups. She determines our small group activities each week, and prepares all of the lesson materials. Our small groups literally wouldn't happen each week without her touch.

Jen ALSO is our VBS Director. Every year, our VBS brings 100 kids into our church, many of whom do not know Jesus. Jen works with me to select the curriculum and programming, provides leadership to our team of 75 volunteers, and loves our kids so well that they KNOW that there is a Savior, and that he cares deeply for them.



OTTI S.

Otti is a woman in her 70's who has recently been diagnosed with a rare form of cancer. She has served as a prayer friend to one of our young people, walking with the young girl through the middle school and high school years, praying for and caring for her. In addition, she has helped another young woman find her way in life through a mentoring relationship—eventually helping her to find a job in a field she's passionate about. Otti does these things quietly and without desire for notoriety. **She continues to be an advocate for our youth and young adults with those her own age who may not share her desire to support the faith growth of young people.** Though her cancer now slows her down, it doesn't stop her from showing her support of the young people in our congregation.



PHIL G.

Phil has worked with students of all ages for 20-ish years. He's been a paid worker and an unpaid awesome volunteer at different times. Phil currently works at a school with students who have disabilities, as well as an after school program. He volunteers his extra time teaching Confirmation class and leading a diverse group of middle school boys. **Current and former students love Phil and have countless stories of his encouragement, support, and love.**



BOB & SALLY H.

I am so honored to tell you about my nominees Bob and Sally. It's not every youth pastor who gets to say that their most reliable and inspiring volunteers are related to them, but I do! Bob and Sally don't just help because they're related to me—they help in our youth ministry because they genuinely love working with teenagers. They are always the first to sign up to drive or chaperone for every event, but they also help behind the scenes in countless ways. Set up, clean up, everything in between—they are there! **They go above and beyond, cheering on and supporting our teenagers at choir concerts, athletic events, and recitals. The youth are drawn to their authenticity, love and respect.** They are over 60, but the youth always ask them to chaperone our mission trips! I can honestly say that our youth ministry would have a huge gaping hole if it were not for Bob and Sally.



MIKE C.

Mike has worked with our students for the past 11 years as a volunteer in our Sunday Morning Bible Study classes and always shows up for our Wednesday evening worship. For the past 8 years, he has participated in at least one of our summer mission trips, as well as on spring break mission trips. **He not only insists on paying his way on the trip, but also sponsors at least one student for a full scholarship.** Mike is always the first one awake on these trips, preparing breakfast for students and providing them with a smile to start off their morning.

As students have graduated from our ministry and moved off to college, without fail, Mike sends each of these students a care package during their fall and spring finals. Mike not only loves our students, but their parents as well. On the rare occasion that he cannot participate in a mission trip, he is taking care of the lawns of those adults who are away on the trip. Mike is not only a great volunteer, but an even better friend to me, always encouraging and providing words of wisdom to me as a student pastor.

He is, by far, the best volunteer that I have had in my 27 years of student ministry, and I would love to honor him for his tireless work with students and his passion to see Christ promoted to those with whom he encounters.



ART T.

Art started as a leader for 2nd-grade boys in Cadets, and has stuck with this group of boys and moved up with them every single year. He transitioned with them into our middle school youth group program, and now they are freshmen! **Art is their official small group leader this year, and plans to move up with them all the way until they graduate.** Oh, and by the way, this is the 2nd time Art followed a group of boys all the way up from 2nd grade until graduation from high school. He decided to do it over again. Art is an amazing, dedicated, and loyal volunteer in the children's ministry and in the youth ministry!



JEANNINE W.

Jeannine came up through our youth ministry as a member. She then went off to university, but later returned to our church. She had a desire to serve in our youth ministry as a leader. She has been a youth leader for about 7 years now.

Jeannine loves youth, and is a dedicated follower of Jesus. She gives her time often and relates well with our youth. **She has gone on many camping and mission trips, and loves to get into the lives of our youth.** She is also not afraid to point out things that could be done better, and I appreciate that. I call Jeannine a "lifer" when it comes to youth ministry. She is a natural at it, loves it, and serves with enthusiasm and joy. I'm so glad she is part of our youth ministry team.



MIKE A.

I met Mike about three years ago when I took over as the Student Pastor at our church. Mike was volunteering with students at the time and doing a phenomenal job. **Mike is one of those people who simply never hesitates to jump in and talk to young people, to try to get on their level.** Since then, Mike has transitioned into volunteering with our children's ministry, where he is absolutely phenomenal. Mike is there every week loving on kids and often leading our Sunday morning programs when staff are out.

As if all of that is not enough, Mike is also an electrician by trade and has donated hour after hour of work helping our church with various electrical needs, from hooking up generators to power the Fall Festival, to wiring the sound equipment in all of our kids' ministry spaces that opened Easter of this year.



LISA D.

Lisa serves as a key volunteer in our church. She is a weekly youth leader for high-schoolers. She also helps lead our children's ministry as a teacher and influencer. **She selflessly and sacrificially pours into those younger than her.**



AMY G.

Our church was launching a campaign to raise money for a campus overhaul focused on reaching the younger generations. As the youth pastor, I was asked to provide middle school students as greeters for the dinner. I found several seventh-grade girls who were willing, but I later realized that there was no room for them at the dinner! I scrambled and called Amy, who jumped at the chance to take these middle school girls out for dinner. Today, the girls are freshmen in college, and Amy is still their biggest fan and support. Through both middle school and high school she has led their small group. She has maintained a consistent and active presence in their lives over seven years. **To these girls, the church is not a location; it's Amy.** Her faithfulness and tenacity has rippled into families, church staff, and now college campuses.



HANSEN W.

Hansen has been serving in our high school group for over 8 years, basically since he started coming to our church. He has been volunteering with high school groups wherever he has lived for over 20 years. In other phases of life—like getting a PhD, or getting married—when others say they can no longer volunteer, Hansen has never wavered. He is one of those incredibly committed, unsung heroes. He does the unglamorous things like research logistics for fun events, or buy snacks every week, even thinking through ways to make them enticing while stretching our budget.

Hansen hosts guys' sleepovers at his house, and even in his 40's, he stays up until 4am with the guys because he knows that those times of bonding are invaluable. **Whenever I express amazement at his all-nighters, he talks about how it's in those late hours of games and snacks that guys open up and really connect, so he's willing to sacrifice sleep to be there with them.** He drives over an hour to youth group each week, yet you'll never hear a

complaint. He always shows up, always asks how he can help, loves the students deeply, and continually sacrifices his time in so many big and little unseen ways. As a youth pastor, he is a rock on my team, and an example of truly seeing and valuing young people.



DIANA M.

I started at my church at the beginning of 2016, and Diana was the first person to contact me through the hiring phase, was there through the interview process, and answered my questions right up until I was hired. But after I arrived at the church and started to hear other people talk about Diana, I realized how special she was to the kids. In fact, the seniors (now college freshmen) named her as their youth director. **They had seen 4 different staff youth directors since they started in youth group in 6th grade, but Diana was a constant who was there through their whole middle and high school journey.** And she is still in touch with them through their freshman year!



MARILYN S.

Marilyn has been a dedicated children, youth, and family educator and woman of God for over 30 years. She started as an English teacher, then a Confirmation teacher, became a Confirmation director, and then a certified Family Life Educator. She currently travels the nation coaching congregations, speaking passionately, and leading retreats on nurturing faith through all generations, at all times, in all places.

As a parent in one of her support groups, I have been blessed beyond measure by Marilyn's example, teachings, and wholehearted spirit. Her love for God and his children is palpable.

Understanding that families are our children's classroom, she lifts parents up, teaching us to celebrate our strengths, and encouraging us to give and receive support so we can be the best and most effective God intended us to be.

But her lessons do not stop at the classroom door. When she sees me and my son in the neighborhood, she always stops and

speaks to us by name, remembering details that reinforce our value and worth as beloved children of God. During times of need she joyously takes phone calls, and will not hesitate to suggest getting together for coffee and comfort. **And when you bring her attention to those in the community who are struggling, she does not think twice about reaching out to a stranger and inviting them into her home for homemade soup and friendship.**

This is just my testimony; I know dozens of others in our community equally edified by Marilyn. I can only imagine the hundreds of families around the country whose lives and faith she has enriched.



HEA K.

Hea came to our church about six years ago and immediately started serving the youth in our church as a college student. From the beginning, she had a willingness to learn. Growing up, she did not have a place to go and be encouraged by a community of Jesus followers, so her desire has been to make sure that the next generation of teens in our neighborhood have that option at our church. She has always had a heart for outcasts in our group, and the work she has been doing with them has been a blessing for the church. **There have been countless stories of non-Christian teens who came to our youth group meetings looking for community, whom she disciplined, and are now committed Christ followers who attend church on a weekly basis because of Hea.** Today more and more teens and parents are going directly to her for advice and guidance. Because of her example, the teens and the former teens who are now in college are flourishing in our church.



JEANNE C.

Jeanne is gifted at creating learning opportunities for the different ages and abilities of children. She is a retired teacher with a big heart. **She gets to know the kids and encourages them to love Jesus as she does.** Jeanne is an essential part of realizing our vision for our church's Sunday morning "Faith Connections" learning hour: building and sustaining our faith community, one relationship at a time.

Jeanne also wrote and directs our children's Christmas play at one of our Christmas Eve worship services. She custom-wrote the play to match the gifts and ages of the children who want to participate.

Jeanne also works at our church's before- and after-school daycare program for Kindergarteners through middle schoolers. She helps with homework and generally makes herself available to kids as a kind and caring presence. Many of the children in the day care are unchurched. Jeanne quietly shares God's love with them as she works and plays with them each day.



BOB S.

Bob is a passionate follower of Christ. He greets everyone he meets, especially our youth and children, with enthusiasm and sincerity. **He freely and honestly shares personal stories of faith, transformation, and struggle to teach how Jesus has changed his life.** He had no exposure to faith until his mid-50's. At first he wanted to do nothing but show up on Sunday morning, but today he is an integral part of a variety of ministries and lives—involved, supporting, and leading.

Spend ten minutes with him, and you will find his passion for Jesus is unmistakable in the most inviting way. He is loved by all members of our congregation, whether 1 year old or 99. He is passionate about continuing to grow in his faith, showing up for and participating in Sticky Faith Family Training, even though his children are grown adults with families of their own. He is an eager disciple, following after Jesus with his whole heart. He is full of joy, laughter, and compassion. I have been deeply blessed to serve the church with him by my side. Thank you, Bob, for who you are and all that you do.



JULIA G.

Julia is a retired teacher who has influenced most of our community. She is the adoptive grandmother of every student we have, and most of their parents as well! She makes banana pudding for everyone randomly, sends them all cards, and if I am a week late with our college students' addresses, she is the first to remind me. She gives the students a big hug each week.

Just last week she showed up to our Family Worship Night with bowls upon bowls of sweets she had spent all day baking just to show them how much she loves them. **Every student who encounters Ms. Julia knows they are loved and they are special.** She is a hero to me, to this church, and to this community. She is as humble as they come, and as gentle as can be. Julia takes pride in all her friends in the community whom she has influenced as their teacher, champion, and supporter in the faith. Julia is a true example of what it means for a church to grow young!



LESLIE S.

Leslie's heart is deeply entrenched in mentoring. She loves and is committed to building relationships with young people—her ministry organization is entirely devoted to mentoring—and she is wonderfully gifted in it. **The best part is, you don't even realize you're being mentored because you're having so much fun with her.** Basically, she's awesome.



JERRY B.

Jerry is a retired NASA engineer from the Apollo era. Although Jerry is older, he has reached out to the youth in our congregation in intentional ways. He responded to the call for adults to lead Sunday school classes and did an amazing job in learning with the kids about the story of Noah. The engineer in him had them all work together to make a scale model of the ark.

Since then, Jerry has been active in our VBS each year and helps lead our science station. Jerry encourages creativity and asking questions. He likes to get kids thinking on the next level and they respond to the challenge. Jerry is a Confirmation prayer partner this year. He is not afraid to interact with the kids, talk with them, get to know them, and comes to every youth event and camp send-off. **The kids know that Jerry is on their team and cares for them greatly. Jerry's faithfulness is something I see a number of kids admiring.** And when we have cross-generational events ... guess whose table fills up the quickest?