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# The Right Way to Put Kids to Work

By SAMUEL J. REDMAN

Berkeley, Calif.

NEWT GINGRICH caused controversy recently with his [unusual suggestion](#) that schools “ought to get rid of the unionized janitors, have one master janitor and pay local students to take care of the school. The kids would actually do work, they would have cash, they’d have pride in the schools, they’d begin the process of rising.”

While the notion that unionized school janitors are draining our economy is woefully misguided, Mr. Gingrich, the former House speaker who is seeking the Republican presidential nomination, is onto something when he says we should find ways to hire unemployed young people to maintain our educational infrastructure. And we can — by reviving the National Youth Administration.

Founded in 1935, the N.Y.A. aided over four million people between the ages of 16 and 25 in the midst of the Depression, providing desperately needed stipends to students while also working to improve and maintain the infrastructure of places like schools, universities and museums. High schools around the nation hired students to help maintain school grounds and athletic fields — not unlike Mr. Gingrich’s proposal. Other students found temporary work at museums, earning money while helping preserve and organize priceless collections of artifacts. These jobs were not terribly glamorous — some were downright tedious — but in the climate of [the Great Depression](#), students and other underemployed youths were grateful for the steady pay.

Recent oral histories collected by the Regional Oral History Office of the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, throw light on the practical difference the N.Y.A. made in the lives of those it enrolled. Jack W. Rosston, for instance, told of working on campus at Berkeley through an N.Y.A. program. “For my freshman year, I got \$10 a month,” he explained. “That paid for my transportation to Berkeley from San Francisco.”

Once in Berkeley from his home across the bay, Mr. Rosston was able to attend classes and work part time at other jobs around the campus — allowing him to complete his undergraduate degree.

He eventually enrolled in business school at Stanford and went on to serve as the alumni representative to the board of regents at the University of California, a role he relished for giving him the opportunity to give back to his alma mater.

Across the country, at Columbia University, Bernard A. Weisberger was working his way through college in similar fashion. Jobs were very hard to find, but he was eventually recruited to be a research assistant by a professor on campus who had received funding through the N.Y.A. Mr. Weisberger had a knack for picking up foreign languages, and on this basis he was offered work by other faculty members who were similarly provided with federal funding. Eventually, he would leverage those skills in the Army, where he was selected to study Japanese in a facility near the newly constructed Pentagon. Within months, he found himself translating intercepted Japanese communications in the Pacific theater. Mr. Weisberger went on to become an accomplished historian, writing several books and advising the filmmaker Ken Burns.

Leon W. Mason also worked for the N.Y.A., but during high school, helping to maintain the athletic fields adjacent to his school. “I would do the cleaning up myself,” he said. “Nobody was supervising. You just took it for granted that I was doing what I was supposed to because the coaches would see that, and the school would see that I was doing my job.” Afterward, Mr. Mason worked for another New Deal agency — the Civilian Conservation Corps. Alongside crews of young men from around the country, he helped put out forest fires in California. He would then find work, during [World War II](#), in the rapidly expanding shipyard industry in the Bay Area; before long, Mr. Mason was drafted into the Navy construction battalions (nicknamed Seabees) to build airstrips in the Pacific.

The stories of Mr. Rosston, Mr. Weisberger and Mr. Mason demonstrate that these programs did not represent mere government handouts. Instead, the N.Y.A. offered young people a variety of opportunities while also providing them with the income to pay for basic necessities and further training and education. The impact of the program on the lives of these individuals may not have seemed critical at the time, but the benefit of hindsight points to the long-range significance of the public investment. When I listen to these and many other stories, these New Deal era programs sound less like a gargantuan socialist conspiracy and much more like a democratizing force in our society.

While the federal government debates extensive cuts and the elimination of numerous programs, it might well consider the successes of the [National Youth Administration](#). Until its elimination in 1943 — when the country’s wartime economy brought unemployment down and made the N.Y.A. appear less necessary — the program succeeded in employing and training young people while

serving as an economic bridge as they continued their education.

In an era defined by ballooning levels of student debt and heightened levels of unemployment among young people (including recent college graduates), a program modeled on the N.Y.A., employing a broad and diverse array of underemployed high school and college youths, would not only preserve our infrastructure — our school grounds, museums and urban parks — but throw a lifeline to the country's young. Mr. Gingrich's proposal, by contrast, fails to capture the inspiration and promise of the N.Y.A.

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