

Young Professionals

By: Victoria Ford

Young Professionals.
Photo credit: Victoria Ford



As many young career-driven individuals have discovered, in-person networking is an integral part of the process of getting ahead. For those in the nonprofit industry – so often motivated by their commitment to improving others’ lives, or to

preserving some aspect of heritage or culture, or to otherwise benefiting the community or environment – connecting with peers and gaining insights into similar lines of work can prove especially valuable.

The Young Nonprofit Professionals Network of New Jersey was formed in January 2014. On the second Wednesday of each month, members and curious newcomers gather to mix and mingle, discuss relevant topics and hopefully take away useful names and information to help them meet their particular goals.

“The vision has always been to advance and activate young leaders in the nonprofit sector by providing opportunities for professional development and networking,” founder Amanda Blount explained. “I believe strongly that nonprofits need young professionals with vision, drive and strong business skill sets to help steer them in an ever-competitive and ever-changing political and social climate. Nonprofits are uniquely positioned to solve many of the challenges facing our communities, and in order to do so, their leadership must be highly skilled and well networked. I believe YNPN provides that kind of training ground for those entering the sector and builds a strong foundation for our future CEOs and Executive Directors.”

Two years earlier, Blount had learned of YNPN and joined the organization’s New York City chapter while living in NYC and working for a nonprofit. In researching ways to expand her network, she discovered YNPN is the only organization dedicated solely to the professional development of young people working in the nonprofit sector. Later, when she took a new job in Princeton and didn’t know anyone else in the area who worked in the nonprofit sector, she found out New Jersey did not have its own YNPN chapter.

At the Princeton Community Works conference in January 2014, Blount met Craig Weinrich, who had also been a member of the NYC chapter of YNPN, and got him onboard with forming the New Jersey chapter.

The first mixer for young professionals in the nonprofit sector was launched in March 2014, marketed to nonprofits and associations in the central portion of the state. From there, she assembled a seven-member steering committee of volunteers interested in helping to build the chapter; several remain on the Board of Directors today, including Christopher Seiz, former executive director of the Long Beach Island Foundation of the Arts and Sciences in Loveladies.

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“Similarly to other sectors, nonprofits have a language and protocol all their own,” Seiz said. “For many, nonprofits are a way of life, but those in the field find their own organization’s ability to advance their career limiting. YNPN-NJ helps members excel in their field by building a supportive and thriving network of professionals who make the choice to enter and stay in the nonprofit sector of the future.”



*Young Professionals having a good time.
Photo credit: Victoria Ford*

The national YNPN umbrella organization welcomed YNPN-NJ as a “novice chapter” in July 2014, after it had begun to establish itself, Blount explained. The new chapter filed for nonprofit status in January 2015 and, at that time, began an open application process to fill the seats on the board. Formal membership to the organization began in April 2015.

The chapter now has 79 current paid members and 250 people on its mailing list. Members spread from northwest New Jersey, as far north as Warren County and as far south as Camden. Blount said she hopes to expand membership to every region of the state in the coming year.

As it is, members come from nonprofits of all sizes, from small community organizations focused on local issues to national and international organizations with much farther-reaching missions. The range of work encompasses access to education, healthcare equality, mental health, resources for seniors, disease research, environmental advocacy, social work, animal protection, capacity building, the arts, and much more.

“Nonprofits in New Jersey are tackling every kind of issue you can imagine, and I am proud that our membership is representative of the diverse nonprofit sector in the state,” she said.

YNPN-NJ is governed by a Board of Directors; there is no staff. All programs, marketing and membership are handled by the volunteer Board.

The board plans events with input from members and partners. In addition to providing professional development workshops, panels and webinars six to 10 times per year, the chapter hosts a free monthly networking mixer on the second Wednesday of each month in different cities throughout the state.

As Seiz pointed out, in Ocean County, cooperation among nonprofit organizations, widespread as they may be, allows for much stronger delivery of programming and services. Without a vehicle such as YNPN there is no real way for those organizations to connect, share, collaborate, integrate.

“At YNPN’s first mixer in Ocean County in September 2014 (at the Arlington Restaurant in Ship Bottom),” Seiz said, “we had representatives from four different theater companies who had barely ever been in the same room together before, conversing and sharing experiences, challenges and successes in their field. It’s

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not every day you have a community organizing project talking with an arts organization talking with a private foundation talking with a hospital.”

Stay tuned for the calendar of 2016 events at ynpnnj.nationbuilder.org and on the Young Nonprofit Professionals Network of New Jersey Facebook page.

Additionally, the chapter has forged formal partnerships with The Center for Nonprofits and the Bonner Foundation, and working collaborations with many other associations and organizations, including Chambers of Commerce, nonprofit coalitions and nonprofit leaders.

Member benefits include: discounted admission to various conferences, such as the Center for Nonprofits annual conference; a \$500 tuition discount to any Nonprofit Management program of Fairleigh Dickinson’s Center for Excellence; discounted admission to all YNPN-NJ Events and other YNPN chapter events when possible; opportunities to be featured in YNPN-NJ newsletters and to be part of YNPN-NJ board and direct programming.

“These are just the current benefits,” she clarified. “We are constantly working with new partners and organizations that can provide our members with more benefits and opportunities. We have some exciting new conference opportunities in the works for 2016-17 that will be announced in the coming months. We also hope to launch a members-only job board with exclusive information on positions available in the state.”

Asked to describe some of the chapter’s most rewarding accomplishments to date, Blount replied, “So many!

“I am really proud of where we have come as a chapter and am most excited right now about our partnerships with Fairleigh Dickinson University’s Center for Excellence, the Center for Nonprofits and, our newest, The Bonner Foundation. We have a lot of exciting opportunities to provide our members, thanks to these great partners, and we continue to strive to connect our young professionals with programs, workshops, trainings and networking opportunities that will help propel them both professionally and personally.”

The chapter is moving “full speed ahead” into 2016, according to Blount. “Ultimately, I’d like to see the New Jersey chapter of YNPN become the first place young people turn to when they decide to choose a career in nonprofit.

“Working for a company that has a mission, not just a bottom-line, can be the most rewarding way to spend your time in the office. My hope is that by providing our young professionals with the support they need to thrive in the nonprofit sector, we are contributing to a future where our sector’s leaders have the skills, networks and support they need to solve some of New Jersey’s most persistent and challenging issues.”