



# Sewing the Fabric of Civil Society in Poland

*By Sheila Kinkade*

**For Polish youth coming of age in the early 1990s** it was as if Christmas had come and gone without any presents. A growing disillusionment had replaced the euphoria surrounding the collapse of communism in 1989. Unemployment, virtually unknown during the Soviet era, was on the rise. Social services were disappearing, along with after-school activities.

“Everything was changing. Young people were lost. Families had to adjust to a completely new world,” recalls Maria Holzer, who at the time was a juvenile justice lawyer. “Youth had no idea what kind of education they needed and how they should develop. No one was there to guide them.”



Just after its own founding, the International Youth Foundation (IYF) set out to support Polish youth during this fragile stage in the nation's democracy-building process. In 1991, it commissioned Holzer and sociologist Teresa Ogrodzinska to research the most pressing youth needs in their country. Based on their findings, IYF partnered with key donors to support the creation of the Polish Children and Youth Foundation (PCYF)—a locally-rooted, locally-run organization with a mandate to support the development of the nation's young people.

Today, PCYF is Poland's largest grantmaking organization serving children and youth, ages 5 to 25. Cumulatively, it has made more than US\$14 million in grants, providing in excess of 200,000 young people annually with educa-

tion, life skills training, and other critical support to launch volunteer activities. Town by town, community by community, PCYF has nurtured the growth of civil society institutions, helping to professionalize the sector, while sparking a spirit of volunteerism among Polish youth.

200,000 community members benefiting indirectly. "Nokia's long-term commitment is highly unusual," says Holzer, PCYF's Executive Director since its earliest days. "Because of Nokia's continued support, we've been able to fine-tune the program over time, leverage the experience and commitment of program alumni, and make significant strides in mainstreaming youth volunteerism nationally."

Equally important, there are signs that the program's impact will be sustained through grants now being offered to youth groups by local government authorities. "Whereas 20 years ago government authorities would have never trusted young people, now they see them as partners," Holzer adds.

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### YOUTH GET INVOLVED

For its part, IYF provided technical assistance and links to donors, among them global companies, including General Electric, Lucent Technologies, and Wrigley. One of the longest-standing supporters of PCYF is Nokia, which, over the past decade has invested US\$2.1 million in *Przylacz sie!* (in English, “Get Involved”), a program that provides Polish youth, ages 16 to 22, with training and small grants to launch volunteer projects in their communities. More than 15,000 youth have participated so far, with nearly

A quick glance at a list of those youth-led projects jointly supported by PCYF and Nokia over nine years testifies to young people's creativity and passion. Recognizing that their peers had little to do in their free time, youth organized recycling campaigns and film festivals. They built skateboard parks and painted murals. They

preserved their history through restoring landmarks and relived the past through resurrecting medieval games and tournaments. Fifteen percent of those youth-led projects supported by PCYF have become formally registered as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). In addition to contributing to their communities, participating youth acquired leadership and life skills, including teamwork, conflict resolution, and critical thinking—skills vital to their success in the workplace.

An outcome measurement study of the program conducted in 2006 by Brandeis University's Center for Youth and Communities found that more than 75 percent of respondents had improved in a range of life skills and that nearly half continued to volunteer an average of 23 hours per month within six months of graduating from the program.



Not only do they continue volunteering, but graduates want to stay connected to each other and share their enthusiasm with their non-program peers. Through a thriving Alumni Club, former *Przylacz sie!* participants raise funds to host events and conduct exchanges with youth groups in other countries. In the summer of 2009, club members held a two-day festival in Koluszki, a city located in the heart of Poland, designed to encourage young people to participate actively in their communities. The event, featuring workshops, concerts, exhibitions, and a theatre evening, reinforced the notion that community service not only benefits volunteers and society, but can be fun.

With support from Nokia, PCYF has also shared its experiences and lessons learned through *Przylacz sie!* with other IYF partners operating similar programs in the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Romania. The net result: stronger, more impactful programs overall.

## A NEW GENERATION OF NATION-BUILDERS

As scholars such as Robert Putman emphasize, the building of social capital—or social networks—in which people are inclined to do things for one another, is critical to nurturing and maintaining the civic infrastructure of a democracy. To the extent that PCYF has instilled values of collaboration and community engagement among thousands of youth, it can be said to have strengthened the nation's political and social foundations.

What's more, PCYF has contributed to a new perception of youth as problem-solvers. Hundreds of articles and media broadcasts have told the story of youth leading change across the country—helping to redefine how society views young people and spotlighting their role as present and future leaders.

“Young people now know that volunteering is not only important to do, but can be fun and satisfying on many levels,” says Holzer. “I’m most proud of the thousands of youth who have gotten a chance to start projects in their communities. We’re the one institution that trusts young people, supports their visions, and treats them as partners.” **Y**

## THE POTTERS FROM GARNEK

A group of university students in south central Poland came up with the idea of creating a pottery studio where their peers could exercise their creativity, while reviving part of the region's cultural heritage.

“We wanted to prove that the art of pottery is still alive and not boring,” explains Agata Panka, one of the young ‘Potters from Garnek.’ “Young people often choose partying or playing computer games as opposed to doing something that’s useful.” Looking for help to launch their efforts, the group applied for—and received—a US\$1,500 grant through the Polish Children and Youth Foundation. While one step closer to realizing their dream, the potters still needed studio space and equipment.

Putting their creativity to work, they spread the word about their plans and eventually received support from another foundation and local businesses. With the money, they purchased three potter's wheels, a kiln, and clay. Their prayers for studio space were also answered when a priest donated a barn for the group to use as a workshop.

With their studio finally complete, the young potters distributed leaflets announcing their first workshop. More than forty children, youth, parents, and grandparents attended the event. “All of them were delighted,” says Agata, who credits the project with teaching her new skills in planning, goal setting, and teamwork.



# Celebrating Our Partners

As we commemorate IYF's 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2010, we honor some of our partners who are also celebrating milestones this year.



## Congratulations!