



# TOWNHALL DISPATCH

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## Cities, Inclusion, and the Next Generation Supporting Leadership of Young People in the Civic and Social Sectors: Case Study Atlanta

The role of young leaders in addressing societal challenges and shaping the future is a key issue for cities on both sides of the Atlantic. By highlighting the activism of Gen Z and young Millennial civic actors, the text reflects on the historical significance of youth power and references past movements such as the civil rights movement. The text showcases three case studies from Atlanta: Collective Community Circle, Civil Bikes, and the Stop Cop City Movement, illustrating the active involvement of young people in creating inclusive communities. Recognizing and supporting the next generation’s leadership is crucial for a more just and equitable society.

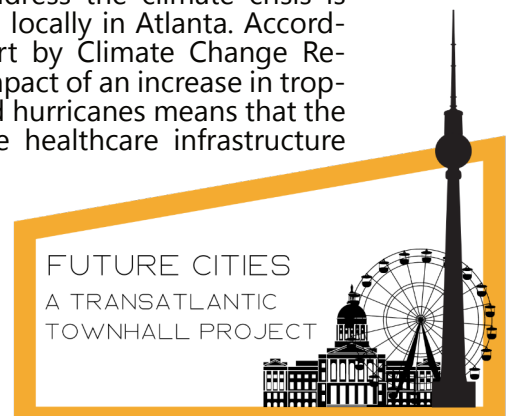
**“SNCC’s (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) new radicalism comes from nowhere in the world but cotton fields, prison cells, and the minds of young people reflecting on what they see and feel.”**  
Howard Zinn, Historian, 1964

Today’s young leaders are ardent and clear about issues affecting their lives and collective futures. Since the uprisings that occurred after the February 2020 murder of Ahmaud Arbery by three men in Satilla Shores, a suburban neighborhood outside Brunswick, Georgia, the killing of Breonna Taylor by three police officers in Louisville, Kentucky while she was asleep in her bed, and the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officers, people worldwide took to the streets to protest senseless violence at the hands of the police. The protests led to generative and solution-oriented outcomes, including federal hate crime charges, appropriately charging and convicting police officers with murder charges, and pursuing an end to “no-knock warrants.” The ongoing societal challenges play out in the civic space asking, “Who do we include?” Determined to end the marginalization of all people, Gen Z and young Millennial civic actors are instrumental in creating

new languages, instilling collaborative practices, and speaking truth to power on concerns like the climate crisis, civil and human rights, seeking justice for all people, and, thereby, highlighting the narratives of those who are most vulnerable in society.

Traditionally, the labor movement fought for better wages, reasonable hours, safer working conditions, and helped to shape a safety net for workers with programs like pensions and unemployment insurance. Today, employees of companies like Amazon – ranked #2 by Fortune 500 – and Starbucks – celebrated as #14 on the world’s most admired business list – are revamping the labor movement through their fight to unionize to support their labor rights. In 2022, workers of these companies in Atlanta used strikes and walkouts to fight for better wages and health care as the corporations made record earnings.

The growing concern and engagement in activism to address the climate crisis is also witnessed locally in Atlanta. According to a report by Climate Change Resources, the impact of an increase in tropical storms and hurricanes means that the need for more healthcare infrastructure



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will increase. Atlanta recently lost Well Star, a centrally-located trauma one hospital, which leaves the city ill-prepared to deal with “adverse health effects of extreme heat.” A plan focused on addressing the looming climate catastrophe requires Atlanta to increase the use of renewable energy above the current rate of eight percent. West Atlanta Watershed Alliance or WAWA, a Black-led organization located in the Westside of the city, holds the mission to “creat[e] a greener, cleaner, healthier and more sustainable Atlanta” and is hyper-focused on local action. The organization’s programs educate school-age children and their families about nature and how to steward its health by reclaiming access to watersheds and natural spaces as well as by nurturing a relationship with the broader ecosystem. Playing, engaging through culture, and inquiry are part of their educational methodology. Additionally, WAWA works with residents on the Westside to address environmental injustices associated with energy burden and exposure to extreme heat. Part of their research supports residents in creating “self-determined outcomes to solutions” as well as advocating and telling their stories to decision-makers for an environmentally-responsible built environment. Social movements are informal groups of people united against systems of power for a common cause, with one of their foundational principles being an inherent egalitarianism toward all living beings.

### A History of Youth Power

Historically, young people – children to college-aged – were instrumental in social change movements, such as labor rights or civil and human rights movements. Well-known in the South is the 1963 Children’s March in Birmingham, where 5,000 children marched for equality in education. Fire hoses, dogs, and brutal force from police officers met their nonviolent direct action and were covered widely by the media. The media’s coverage of the march showed the brutality toward Black children, eventually leading to the Civil Rights Acts. To justify their demands, another student civil rights group, the Committee on Appeal for Human Rights (COHAR), wrote a manifesto outlining the systemic problems faced by their communities. The letter – published in the Atlanta Constitution and the New

York Times – was a successful way to gather support, despite being vilified by Georgia Governor Ernest Vandiver. Similarly, The Appeal for Human Rights, written and signed by representatives from the Black colleges and universities in Atlanta, calls out their “dissatisf[action]” at both the “existing conditions” Black people lived in and “the snail-like speed” with which authorities were addressing those conditions. The Appeal also outlined students’ demands in the following areas: education, jobs, housing, voting, health-care, public accommodations, and law enforcement. And they not only acknowledged that the state failed to provide for their rights and privileges of citizenship, but that the state failed to live up to its definitions of being a democracy and a Christian nation.

These student leaders of the Atlanta Student Movement, COAHR, and Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), all headquartered in Atlanta, were brilliant, as evidenced by cooperative methodologies designed and initially implemented through nonviolent direct action. SNCC – organized to build up local leaders and to address their own local issues – was formed under the direction of civil rights leader, organizer, and strategist Ella Baker. It sustained a national direct action organization that coordinated protests to address inequalities: sit-ins, freedom rides, voter registration projects, leadership training seminars, and walk-outs. SNCC made advances on voting rights and strategized for Black participation in civic duties as structured by the Constitution’s 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments. The Atlanta Student Movement consisted of Black college students from Black colleges in the Atlanta University Consortium (AUC) including Morehouse, Spelman, Morris Brown, Clark College, Atlanta University, and the Interdenominational Theological Center. Formed in 1960 after the first student sit-in in Greensboro, North Carolina, Lonnie King and Julian Bond were the initial organizers. Students organized and implemented direct action techniques to desegregate public accommodations, transportation, and other vital public social spaces. The “Fall Campaign” was a series of sit-ins, kneel-ins, and boycotts of churches, movie theaters, hotels, and restaurants and began with protesting lunch counters and dining halls at Rich’s department



store in the heart of downtown Atlanta.

## Young People as Civic Actors

Gen Z and younger Millennials are forced to evaluate, “What does it mean to push toward a just society?”, “Who gets to participate in society?” and “Who gets to hold power?”. These questions are essential in Atlanta: the most inequitable city in the United States, where the wealth gap between the wealthiest and poorest people is the widest, making a rise in wealth or change of economic status nearly impossible. The American Dream is a value-set or marketing ploy that posited the idealization of nuclear family, single-family house types, and car-centric mobility, yet today, 71 percent of adult Americans under 30 either do not believe in or are uncertain that the American Dream is a reality. The impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, stagnating wages, lack of affordable housing, and an increase in the cost of higher education stem today’s activism and contributes to a feeling of deep loss of a quality of life that was known to their parents and past generations.

These generational shifts parallel long-lasting, historical challenges pushing against entrenched power based on wealth, class, gender, and race to oppose exclusionary practices and policies. There is a continuous thread from voter education during the civil rights movement of the 1960s, to the Voter Education Project (VEP) of the same decade, to the New Georgia Project – developed and funded by the ongoing work of Stacey Abrams and Nse Ufot. The New Georgia Project practices “radical inclusion” by using relevant culture, creating affirming gathering events, and pioneering voter education tools.

Here are three examples of how Gen Z and Millennials show up as civic actors to address societal issues they perceive as threats to a collective future. The role of seasoned leaders is to recognize their approaches and methodologies as valid, concede space for exchange and expansion toward new practices, and support a transition to these leaders.

### 1. Collective Community Circle

One organization that fully represents this notion – Collective Community Circle –

holds that all members are welcome to come as they are and build a community. One aspect of how Collective Community Circle forms community is by hosting a so-called “circle time.” Circle time is non-transactional, centers on collective needs instead of individual concerns, and uses practices that promote nurturing self-care within a community format. Intentional and strategic use of rituals helps to organize communities based on values-alignment across branding, programs, and people, leading to a complete network or system. How Collective Community Circle models the valuing of active inclusion and authentic participation through their design of gathering spaces and experiences is powerful, creates safety and visibility, and is effective at building community.

### 2. Civil Bikes

Last summer, Civil Bikes held its first stand-alone bike camp for young people ages 11 to 14. During the first day, campers set the tone for the week: a person’s identity became a point of connection – an opening to explore and understand. They bonded across ages, races, and genders and extended care to one another by sharing food, helping, and sitting together during lunch. Young people are gifted at recognizing difference as a superpower and express high emotional intelligence and social responsibility by not excluding people just because they are not part of their social group.

Working with young people between the ages of 12 and 24 as a social worker offering alternative learning environments, culturally-based literacy programming, mental health counseling, discussions on Black heritage and local history, and investigations of art, public spaces, and the built environment has been a privilege. Students aged 12 to 24 express deep wisdom, are more likely to speak from their hearts, and are uninhibited about their honest thoughts and feelings.

During Civil Bikes tours, middle and high school students tend to listen and ask questions. Centering alternative transportation demonstrates that young people have personal power as expressed through verbal communication. As a result, the knowledge and ideas they share with the group tend to be less inhibited, uncensored, and inspiring. Students use



the power of public history to make meaning about the environment and historical content they may not discuss in school.

The power of bicycling as a life skill cannot be understated. Riding is one avenue to improve health and wellness – a physical and social connection missing in most communities – as well as a form of climate-conscious transportation. Bike camps and tours become alternative learning environments and incubators of innovation. They provide an excellent space for different learning styles to interact and appreciate one another, offer a place to engage with or explore surroundings, and provide a social network that can co-create meaning about the world. With the in-person, face-to-face nature of bicycling, these forms build skillsets necessary for leadership: negotiations, communication, situational thinking, and collaboration. Today with easy access to digital communities through smart devices such as mobile phones, video games, social media, and all types of chat groups, the in-person element makes a difference. Physical human connection and action taken in the built environment creates and makes positive social change possible.

Young people are savvy and, to a degree, understand the history and the social, cultural, political, and economic dynamics at play. As a generation, Millennials and Gen Z are quick to give voice to conversations adults find too complex or challenging. Their openness to nuance, the story of others, recapitulation of the collective, and embracing our collective humanity allow preservation to be an umbrella term for the collective whole.

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### 3. Stop Cop City Movement

The Stop Cop City Movement is a popular movement and has grown substantially since January 2023, when Tortugueta Perez was killed by police forces, including agents from several jurisdictions. As an abolition movement, Stop Cop City is multipronged and includes preschool to high school-age students and their parents, college students, and adults across the lifespan. The movement brings awareness to a police training facility under development on top of a former prison farm and the last large forest in Atlanta, the Weelaune Forest, and a waterway, Entrenchment Creek. Unlike past impactful movements, such as the civil rights movement of the 1960s, Stop Cop City includes many leaders, organizations, long-time and relatively new activists, artists, journalists, and people who use social media, video, mutual aid, and all sorts of organizing tools. Like many civic and civil actions, this group is standing to protect the rights of marginalized groups of people, primarily low-wealth and middle-income Black communities.

### In Conclusion

To understand what leadership is becoming, these inclusive and growing movements are the ones to join and watch to access the strategies and methodologies put into use. If we want to know how to be effective at engaging and activating young people, more senior leaders and the organizations they lead must stand back and let young people work center-stage, support their values and curiosity about the world around them, and allow them to challenge the systems in place to be the best fit to the society of the future.

### About the author

Nedra Deadwyler is the founder of Civil Bikes, highlighting Atlanta's history, art, and culture. With a family legacy of civil rights activism, she leads diverse groups on bike and walking tours to explore the interconnectedness of the city.



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