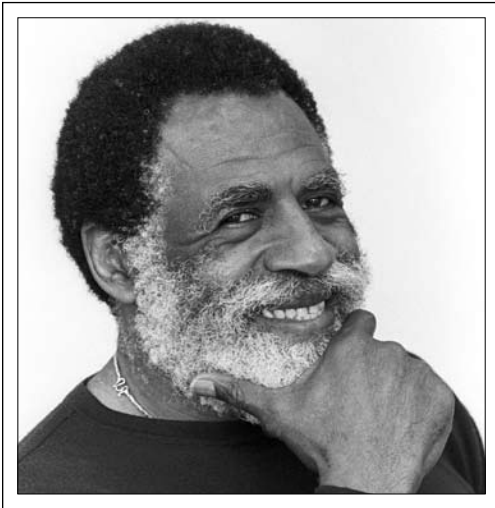


Arnold Perkins

Connecting Youth to their Communities



Arnold gets support from youth during a ropes course in 1990.

As director of the Koshland Civic Unity Awards Program from 1988 to 1992, Arnold Perkins was dedicated to engaging with young people and nurturing youth leadership in the Koshland communities. Working with Retha Robinson, who was then his assistant, and Kathy Sloane, a teacher, he launched the Koshland Youth Fellowship Program (KYFP).

Sponsored and mentored by Koshland Civic Unity Awardees, the Koshland Youth Fellows began the nine-week program with a two-day

retreat and ropes course, during which they learned about each other and how to work as a team. Tuesdays through Thursdays the Youth Fellows rotated through 3-week field placements in the nonprofit, government, and private sectors, earning \$200 a week. The program did not recruit just the cream of the crop – the program included everyone from young people who had children, to a homeless student, to a person whose father was one of the assistant superintendents for the San Francisco Unified School District. Their connection to each other began with their geography as residents of the same neighborhoods, and grew from there.

The Youth Fellows began and ended their weeks convening at The San Francisco Foundation offices to meet various professionals and explore career options. The youth also had classes in financial literacy, reading, and critical thinking. They kept journals, set goals, made budgets, and discussed their work experiences.

The program introduced the students to two campuses: they toured the San Francisco city and county jail in San Bruno where they talked with the prisoners, and they visited the University of California at Berkeley where they investigated college life with one of the vice chancellors. On a daily basis, the program imbued the youngsters with an understanding of how their decisions and choices impacted which campus they would attend.

Teaching the students about the natural environment and their relationship to it was also a central element of the KYFP. Each year the students toured a sewage treatment plant, went kayaking on the Bay, and spent a week at the Headlands Environmental Camp. As a reunion, the group spent a long weekend each winter at the Yosemite Institute, snowshoeing and cross-country skiing.

Arnold Perkins believes those journeys were a critical component of the program. “We wanted

them to think of the wholeness of life. We wanted them to understand that everything has life. Rocks are alive, they expand, they contract, and they roll off the mountain. We are one part of the environment, we’re not masters of the environment, and we’re not rulers of the environment.”

A critical question raised by the KYFP was how do you enrich a community that has allowed you to be enriched? Part of each student’s commitment during the course of the year was to work with his/her mentor and devise a plan for how he/she would contribute to his/her neighborhood. The youth then often worked together to do such projects as work at Glide Memorial Church serving Thanksgiving dinners, or host a children’s Halloween party at a community center.

This remarkable program ran for four years and was later replicated by the Faiths Initiative, beginning in 1997.

In summing up the mutual benefits of the Koshland Youth Fellowship Program for both The San Francisco Foundation and the youngsters who participated, Arnold Perkins said, “It is something that every foundation ought to have as a practical way of knowing what’s going on in the street. These young people speak a different language than we do. Their lives are much different than our lives, their values are different. And we make judgments about them but we don’t understand who they are. We don’t listen to them.”

“I think it was one of the brilliant programs of The San Francisco Foundation because it wasn’t just giving other people money to make changes; we actually changed lives. Our youth became lawyers, doctors, teachers, and nurses. Many of the youngsters would not have gone on to do the great things that they have done. I think to this day, if you ask anyone of them, they’ll tell you that summer and that year made a difference in their lives. It was an outstanding program!”