



# THE CHARLESTOWN BRIDGE

CONNECTING OUR COMMUNITY

## COUNCIL MEMBERS BRING TEEN ISSUES TO THE TABLE

Alexandra Bowers

City Hall is a place most of us visit only when we get a marriage license or fight a parking ticket. For two local teens, though, it's part of their routine. Twice a month "Jay" O'Brien and Caitlin Gallarelli, members of the Mayor's Youth Council, attend council meetings at City Hall.

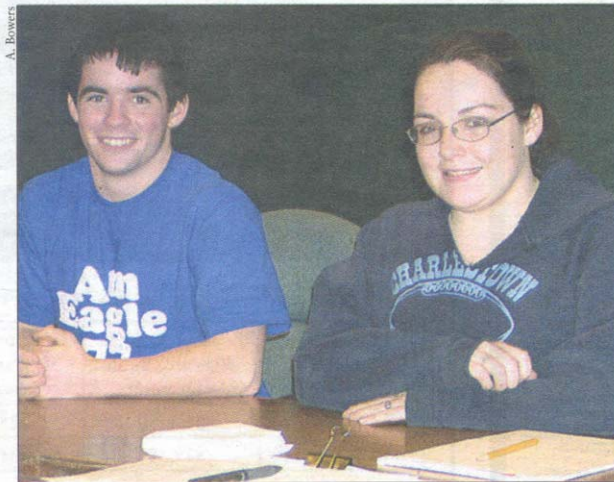
Mayor Thomas Menino began the Mayor's Youth Council 11 years ago as a way for Boston teens to have a voice in local government.

"I always believe that young people should get involved to help them understand government a little better, so they won't have the cynical approach that so many people have," said Menino.

Charlestown's two council members bring a high level of community involvement to their roles as council members.

Jay became interested in the council because of his older sister, Caitlin. "She was a representative from Charlestown," he said. "She used to come home with projects she was working on."

Caitlin first heard of the council through the Charlestown Boys & Girls Club. She was encouraged to apply by several staff members, especially by Beth Goldberger, director of the BGCB at the time.



James O'Brien and Caitlin Gallarelli, Charlestown residents and members of the Mayor's Youth Council.

Council members bring their own individual experiences to bear on what they choose to highlight at the council. For Caitlin, it means participating in efforts outside the council that are important to her. "During the February vacation I was invited to be in a council of teenagers with Beth [Goldberger] and others, to answer questions about the drug issues," said Caitlin. "It was basic questions like what drugs do, how they affect day-to-day lives and what it's like to walk down Main Street."

Her conversations with local leaders help identify how kids are drawn into drugs and how to create different programs that steer them to a different way of life.

Jay has been involved in initiatives that involve teen safety issues and substance abuse. And during the fall elections, he worked on the "Get out the Vote" efforts, registering new voters and directing them to the correct polling station.

The impact on local leaders has been significant. "The Youth Council can look at programs and say what works and what doesn't work. It's something like a focus group," said Patty McMahan, director of the youth council. "[Local leaders] saw that [the students] asked intelligent questions and were able to give amazing ideas on how to meet the needs of young people."

One project began when the council realized that a lot of kids have bank accounts and credit cards, but they don't always understand how to manage their money. The council worked with the Mayor's Office of Consumer Affairs to publish a "Consumer Tips for Teens" pamphlet informing kids about their financial rights and responsibilities.

Council members also help staff Youthline, a service that matches resources with young people. Programs can be looked up by neighborhood or by issue, and can range from local CPR classes to finding a sailing program. It is available weekdays from noon – 8 p.m.

Another initiative grew out of the number of calls to the Youthline about jobs. Council members developed Job Tips, a one-stop information center for teens interested in finding jobs. Job Tips advisors tell young teens to think about what careers they're interested in and then volunteer in that field to gain experience can lead to a summer job. They give older teens help with their resumes. This effort led to the creation of Resume Tips, a manual that goes through all the steps in crafting a resume.

One of the problems council members face is getting information about youth opportunities out to the public on a large scale. All council members talk with their peers at school and at home, and post news and information in places kids hang out.

Caitlin keeps her peers up to date on the latest news at the Charlestown Boys & Girls Club, while Jay finds that the Charlestown library is a good place to get the word out because a lot of kids go to the library after school to do research. "I gave Resumé Tips to a couple of kids, then the next day I saw two other kids with the information," said Jay. "Once you give the information, it keeps transferring."

The council also takes advantage of technology through the Boston Youth Zone Web site. This site provides "one-stop shopping" for teens interested in any of the 3,500 educational, health and sports-related, and after-school youth programs available in Boston, both during the school year and in the summer. This site has the biggest database of its type, said Sara Walsh, a supervisor at Mayor's Youthline.

Council members attend regular meetings with local leaders, especially the mayor. "I meet with the council every six weeks," said Menino. "It's great input for me to listen to them. It also gives kids experience with federal and state agencies."

Each year council members make a trip to Washington in the spring where they bring issues that affect teens to the attention of national policy makers. This year council members discussed substance abuse and voting. In past years members have met with Attorney General Reno, Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer and President Clinton.

Council members help organize and publicize the City of Boston "Youth Summit," a one-day event in late summer or early fall that serves as part pep rally, part performance venue and part program fair.

The Mayor's Youth Council has been rewarding to both teens as a window into the daily business of government and the way that multiple points of view can improve the quality of life for everyone. "There are programs all across the board across the city," said Jay. "If you're interested, there's something available for you."