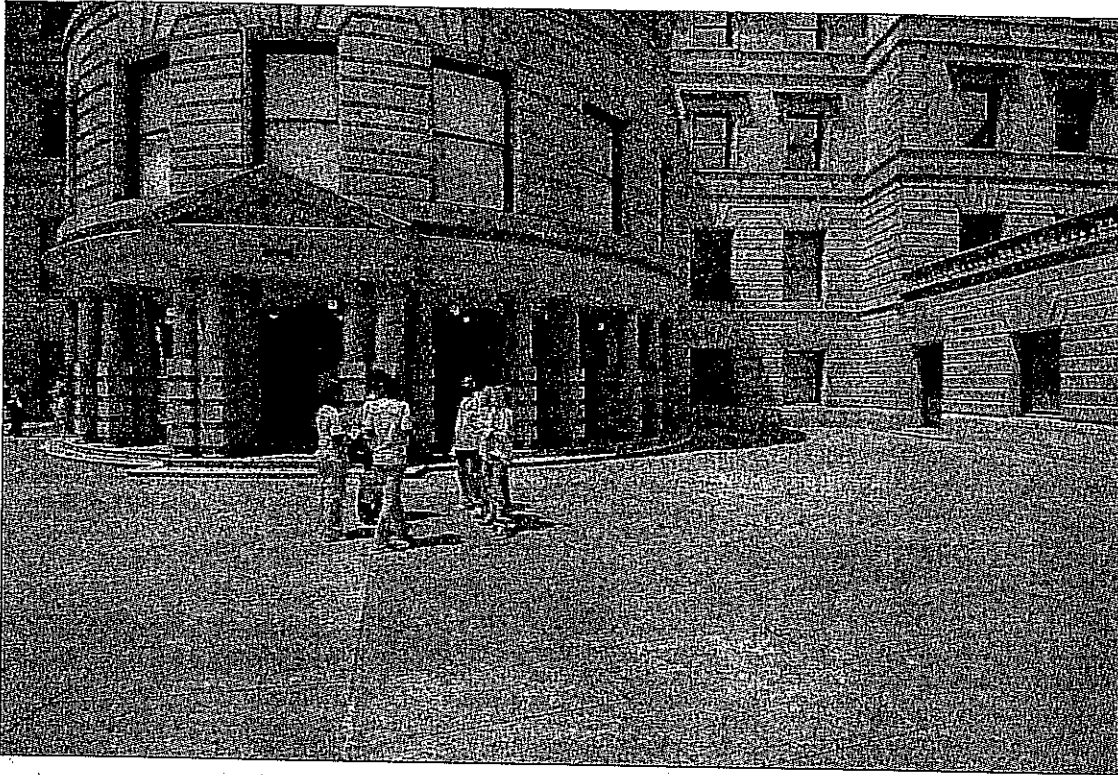


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[BACK STORY By Erin Hoover Barnett]

## Lead teens to issue, they just might drink

Call it The Big Disconnect. Most young Oregonians say they are concerned about social issues and many actually do community service. But get involved in politics? Why bother. Vote? Well, I meant to. Name our U.S. senators? Um...

Somewhere between youthful idealism and civic action is a chasm of disenchantment and apathy, say civics teachers and leaders who met in Portland in June. And that doesn't bode well in a state where only 39 percent of registered voters cast a ballot in the May primary, the third lowest statewide primary turnout in 40 years.

"Yoo hoo! Democracy doesn't

just happen," says Marilyn Cover of the Classroom Law Project, which teaches youth participation in democracy and co-sponsored the June civics conference. "We've got to be willing to not be asleep at the wheel."

Yet two recent surveys — one of 800 high school upperclassmen and the other of 200 18- to 24-year-olds — also suggest that young people do invest in civic life when teachers make government real for them.

Myquiela Johnson, for example, had never been in City Hall before she started in the City Corps program at North Portland's Open Meadow

Alternative School. Until then, her experience of government was a dull instructor who taught from a book and then tested memorization skills.

Last week, Johnson, 18, and four classmates gathered outside City Hall for some final guidance from their teacher, Ari Alberg. Then, dressed in blue City Corps T-shirts, they strode between the marble pillars, through the carved wooden doors and into the Lovejoy Room on the second floor. Johnson took out her notes. Alberg had told her to slow down when she spoke. So she practiced quietly aloud.

Soon, in walked several Water Bureau staffers and City Commissioner Randy Leonard, who's in charge of the Water Bureau. The students formed a line, each introducing themselves and shaking Leonard's hand. Then they took turns presenting their solutions to a



PHOTOS BY FREDRICK D. JOE/THE OREGONIAN

**ABOVE:** City Commissioner Randy Leonard shows off his gift from sisters (front to back) Crystal and Elizabeth Brenneman, Daniel Smith, Myquiela Johnson, and (mostly hidden) Cassiopeia Conley. The Open Meadow students are in City Corps, a federally funded civics program

**LEFT:** City Hall is an extension of the classroom for Open Meadow Alternative School students who came to give a presentation to city officials. Many civics teachers at high schools large and small are trying to make government feel relevant to young people.

problem the bureau had outlined: getting young people to conserve water.

Daniel Smith, 17, focused on a conservation activities day.

Crystal Brenneman, 17, emphasized "scary statistics" about water over-use.

Her sister Elizabeth Brenneman, 16, suggested punchy, not patronizing, ads.

Cassiopeia Conley, 20, pushed hands-on projects such as building a Bull Run watershed model.

When it was Johnson's turn, she described the "No Water Boot Camp," where participants spend a day with little water.

"Our objective is to teach the kids why it's in their interest to conserve water now," she said, speaking slower and more clearly than in her first rehearsal.

Leonard applauded their work. Then he turned to a pet issue: Bull Run, which supplies Portland's water. The students had hiked in to the watershed.

Leonard told them their generation has to protect Bull Run from logging and grazing. The students listened, his soliloquy discouraging dialogue. A Water Bureau official wondered if young people would rally around the threat to salmon if the watershed is damaged. But he struggled to frame the question in a way that the students could respond to.

Finally Elizabeth Brenneman bridged the gap. She said young people want first to understand how maintaining the water supply affects their lives. Then they can absorb and care about the threat to fish.

Everyone relaxed a little.

"This is good stuff you guys are doing," Leonard told them. "Makes us think."

And the students let Leonard into their club, presenting him with a City Corps T-shirt. ■

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